

The following is an original version of an opinion editorial by Valles Caldera Trust Board Chairman that appeared in the Sunday, July 26, 2009 edition of the Albuquerque Journal. The passages which were edited and did not appear in the newspaper edition are in **bold** type for your reading convenience.

Valles Caldera Open For Recreation and Comments

By Stephen Henry

Valles Caldera Trust

I want to address certain comments made by Mr. Dave Menicucci in his OP-ED “Access Issue at Valles Caldera”. I have been a member (currently Chairman) of the Valles Caldera Board of Trustees since 2007 and find some of his assumptions differ from mine.

The Executive Director of the Trust, the General Manager of the Preserve, and I recently met with some of our congressional delegation in Washington D.C., to update them on our activities and plans for the Trust. During the discussion with Senator Jeff Bingaman, he stated he wanted to ensure a permanent home for the future budget requirements of the Preserve and would be requesting a National Park Service (NPS) study to assess the potential for inclusion of the Preserve in the National Park System. The NPS report, combined with the General Accountability Office (GAO) audit expected in October, will assist the Senator in determining whether changes to the Valles Caldera Preservation Act are warranted. Senators Bingaman and Udall issued a joint announcement detailing the request for the NPS study a few days after our visit.

Mr. Menicucci states that if the NPS assumed management of the Preserve that “it would eliminate the trustees and related staff and replace them with a professional, public-land administrator”. It is my understanding that when the NPS acquires a new unit it generally integrates the employees of the unit into the NPS in order to execute a seamless transition of operations and ensure that qualified personnel are retained. **The Trust employs a number of dedicated and qualified professionals who will certainly be an asset to any organization that might replace the current management structure should that measure be taken.**

Mr. Menicucci also speculates that the primary source of controversy is public access. I disagree. Visitation on the Preserve increased from about 200 a few years ago to more than 17,000 in 2008. This is an outstanding accomplishment in view of the fact the Trust is required to comply with all the environmental laws and regulations on a property where these had never been addressed. This is an on-going process and will continue to affect visitation growth and activities permitted for some time to come, **regardless of what agency manages the property.**

In point of fact, the Preserve is open seven days per week during the summer season and has been for the last two years. A complete list of activities from hunting and hiking to snowshoeing and mountain biking is available on the Web site at www.vallescaldera.gov. **A daily schedule of multiple activities is also found on the website calendar at (www.vallescaldera.gov/calendar/ViewCal.html).** As for “lofty usage fees”, our access and activity fees are quite affordable and are shown on the Web site.

The Valles Caldera is different from other properties around the United States. It is the hub of a region in New Mexico in need of economic and educational opportunity. The Preserve offers a number of activities to the public at a price which for all activities (grazing, hiking, fishing, hunting, tours, etc.) is fixed at market rate. In addition, the science and educational opportunities offered are unique and growing in reputation. Formal education activities include the VCT/LANL annual science camp for Pueblo middle-school children where the students are involved in ecosystem structure and health and hosting week-long science training programs for high school science teachers from the Northern New Mexico Network of 28 public school districts. **The Trust also collaborates with the Pajarito Environmental Education Center in Los Alamos on their annual Nature Odyssey Program.** The Preserve hosts a wide variety of school field trips from New Mexico’s primary and secondary school systems on topics such as geology, ecology, forestry, anthropology, wildlife management and public land management. Numerous colleges and universities collaborate with Preserve scientists on a variety of programs.

It would appear to me the most contentious aspect of the Valles Caldera is the “financially self-sustaining” mandate in the enabling legislation. This was included in the Act in an effort to allow the federal government to purchase the property but not depend on tax dollars for the costs associated with managing and operating the Preserve in future years.

The traditional income-generating activities for a ranch like the Baca property would have included timber harvesting, big game hunting, and grazing. However, as a federally owned and regulated preserve, these alternatives cannot generate sufficient income to make the Preserve financially independent. To comply with the mandate, additional opportunities must be explored and some require an amount of commercial development that many find unattractive for a preserve setting. To me, this is where the problem begins and the simple solution, if the public so decides, may be to simply remove the “financial self-sufficiency” mandate from the Act and thereby eliminate the need for developmental projects. **The Preserve could continue to recover as much of the operational costs as possible to lighten the burden to the tax payer but not**

to the extent that large development investments be required for revenue generation. Science and education enhancement activities could continue as well as university extension programs like the livestock breeding research program performed by New Mexico State University on the Preserve which will result in greater opportunities for New Mexico and other mountain state cattle producers.

I also urge the public to get involved in this discussion. The Valles Caldera should be an asset to all the owners, stakeholders and interest groups. If changes are to be made, they should be representative of the general public and not just the squeaky wheel.

I also invite you to visit the Valles Caldera National Preserve. We are open seven days a week.

Stephen Henry is chairman of the Valles Caldera Trust board of trustees. He also served 25 years with the N.M. Dept. of Game and Fish and is the former Chief of Southwest Area Operations