



New Mexico Audubon Council

Representing Four Local Chapters of the National Audubon Society in New Mexico
Conserving and restoring natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and
their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity

August 13, 2012

Marie Rodriguez
Valles Caldera National Preserve
P. O. Box 359
Jemez Springs, NM 87594

Email to Marie Rodriguez <mrodriguez@vallescaldera.gov>

Dear Ms Rodriguez:

The New Mexico Audubon Council is a 501(c)(3) volunteer organization representing the four chapters of the National Audubon Society in New Mexico. We are dedicated to the long-term conservation of birds and other wildlife and the habitat they depend on. We represent over 4,000 members in New Mexico. Our members recreate and watch birds at the VCNP and have an abiding interest in the management, protection, and access to the Preserve.

The Valles Caldera National Preserve (VCNP) has been designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by Birdlife International after nomination by Audubon New Mexico for its unique mix of high elevation grasslands, forests, and riparian areas. Breeding and resident bird populations at the VCNP IBA include birds on Audubon's WatchList such as Lewis's Woodpecker, Flammulated Owl, Williamson's Sapsucker, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Virginia's Warbler, and Grace's Warbler.

We have reviewed the Public Use and Access Plan Draft Environmental Impact Statement and submit the following comments as part of the official record on the Trust's current Public Use and Access Plan Draft Environmental Impact Statement (PAUP-DEIS).

The PAUP-DEIS states that provision for operations and maintenance facilities is incorporated into all the alternatives for visitor facilities (PAUP-DEIS p 4-18). We applaud the removal of these activities from the historic district—Baca Ranch headquarters. However, we believe that co-location of these activities with the visitor center is inappropriate and that the need for solar and van-charging facilities would best be met by a separate facility out of public view. We note that there is no analysis or mention of this or any other option for these facilities in the PAUP-DEIS.

- We believe that Alternative 2, the Banco Bonito minimal development, is not adequate for the public's access and use of the Preserve. Further, we believe that improvements necessary to use

VC07 for access into the Preserve would be cost prohibitive and would unnecessarily impact the solitude and character of the Preserve.

- We are pleased to see the attention paid to renewable energy sources to provide power to the visitor facilities and shuttles and acknowledge the difficulties in siting that this entails. Our proposal to separate the visitor center and logistical/maintenance activities is a recognition of those difficulties.
- We agree with the premise that the view of the Valle Grande should not be encumbered by visible facilities and that dust from traffic on the Preserve roads, particularly from private vehicles, is a further encumbrance on the viewscape.
- We strongly encourage the VCNP staff to plan for very limited private vehicle access to the VCNP. The special qualities that much of the public finds attractive at the Preserve are the quiet, the good chance of seeing variety of wildlife, and the sense of wildness that persists in the place despite past uses. All of these qualities can only be maintained by limiting motor noise, and the intrusion of vehicles to the interior of the Preserve. The VCNP has a sense of quiet and solitude that is a rare experience for people today.

Private vehicle access to the Preserve may be appropriate for hunters for game retrieval (providing they stay on established roads), groups, and for the handicapped who need special provisions. Ranchers tending cattle should have access only with carefully considered limits. Otherwise a shuttle system expanded on what the VCNP now provides would serve the public well. These shuttles could be adjusted to protect nesting wildlife, elk habitat or other environmental concerns such as road conditions that could lead to stream pollution or road damage. In the future, electric vehicles could be used to further limit noise and pollution;

- We agree with the use of planning visitor projections of about 120,000/ year. This seems like an appropriate level of visitation given visitation at Bandelier and the more remote location of the Preserve.
- In light of access, hiking possibilities, solar aspect, visual impact on rest of the Preserve, with trees and large rock outcrops, we believe that alternative 3-A, the Entrada site with minimal private vehicle access to the interior of the Preserve should be the preferred alternative. This site also supports greater opportunities for pedestrian access to the Preserve directly from the site;

We thank you for the opportunity to comment on this EIS and hope that our comments will be helpful as you move forward with greater public access to the VCNP.

Sincerely,

Judy Liddell, President
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Albuquerque, NM 87111