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Valles Caldera Will Fail Without a Different Approach

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The Valles Caldera National Preserve is one of the crown jewels of New Mexico's Jemez mountains. Its scenic vistas are stunning and its array of wildlife is abundant and captivating.

But like an August thunderstorm, trouble is brewing over the Preserve as its managing board of trustees struggles to produce sufficient earned revenue to pay for its operations, a critical stipulation in the 2000 founding legislation. If the Preserve is not self-sufficient by 2015, the property will be absorbed into the National Forest, a course that would destroy its unique character and waste the \$100 million of taxpayer money spent on its purchase.

Presently, earned revenue produces less than 20 percent of the operational costs at the Preserve. The remaining costs are funded from an annual Congressional appropriation, usually an earmark.

Managed outdoor activities such as hunting, fishing, and hiking produce most of the Preserve's earned revenue. Other sources include sales of trinkets, donations, and limited grazing.

The troubling reality is that these revenue sources are nearly fully capitalized. Hunting, which produces 50 percent of revenue, is controlled by the New Mexico Game and Fish Department and cannot be significantly increased. Fishing revenue has consistently declined since its inception. Other programs, such as tours, are inherently expensive and are net consumers. Cattle grazing, a principal activity in the days of private ownership, produces less than 10 percent of gross revenue and cannot be expanded due to potential impacts on other programs, water quality, and wildlife.

Without transforming the Valles Caldera into a fully

commercialized operation—one containing hotels, stores, and golf courses—few other resources can be exploited. Fear of this kind of commercialization was a driving force for bringing the land under government control.

The fundamental problem lies in the founding legislation. The Valles Caldera National Preserve's management model is based on the Presidio, an old Army fort in San Francisco. The Presidio's organization was created in 1998 and its managing board of trustees is tasked with developing a self-sustaining operation by 2013. According to the Presidio's 2007 final report, "operating costs have been covered by earned revenue since 2004..."

However, the Presidio is a poor model for the Valles Caldera. The Presidio consists of 1,100 acres, about 1 percent of that of the Valles Caldera. Yet it contains more than 4 million square feet of rentable office and residential space. Importantly, the Presidio resides in San Francisco, thus it has a ready supply of tenants and visitors.

While this public land management model is flourishing at the Presidio, it is failing at the Valles Caldera, and it is producing a burgeoning group of frustrated and angry people. Many fear that without fundamental changes, this precious mountain property will be lost.

Better management models exist for the Valles Caldera. Eighteen National Park Service Preserves currently exist. These National Preserves have many characteristics of a National Park except that hunting, fishing, and extraction activities are allowed.

Most of these Preserves are located adjacent to National Park properties, improving the efficient use of management resources. They are funded by the government, but they collect entry and special-use fees, which offset operational expenses. Some of these preserves retain advisory boards to deal with special challenges and situations.

The Valles Caldera is ideally suited for designation as a Park Service Preserve. It has some common boundaries with Bandelier National Monument. As part of the Park Service system, it would be regularly funded rather than relying upon uncertain earmarks. Some of the existing programs, such as hunting, fishing, and science could continue essentially unchanged. But with Park Service experience and oversight other programs might be expanded to meet the public's demand for increased access. Also,

the existing Valles Caldera Trust would be converted to a non-partisan advisory committee.

Most importantly, the requirement for self-sufficiency—a dubious and probably unattainable objective—would be eliminated, thus purging the consternation that currently envelopes the community.

To initiate the process, congressional hearings should be held in Northern New Mexico to air and record public concerns. A feasibility study should follow, one conducted by the National Park Service with assistance from an independent group of citizens. If feasible, the Valles Caldera should be converted to a Park Service National Preserve.

For eight years the community has patiently waited for the Valles Caldera to attain a sustainable existence, one that embraces the broad needs of the property owners—the public. The current operation is destined for failure and the time has come to consider a more appropriate approach.


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