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Access Issue at Valles Caldera

By Dave Menicucci

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Controversy has dogged the Valles Caldera National Preserve since its inception. But a resolution may finally be at hand. On June 25 Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall issued a press release asking the National Park Service to study the feasibility of converting the Valles Caldera into a National Park Service Preserve.

Currently the Valles Caldera is public property managed by a board of trustees, with each member appointed by the U.S. president. If this conversion were realized, it would eliminate the trustees and related staff and replace them with a professional, public-land administrator.

This change could solve the primary source of controversy: public access. Access to the Valles Caldera has been restricted in large part to maximize revenue by assessing relatively lofty usage fees for hunting, fishing, hiking, grazing and other activities and uses.

If the existing 18 NPS National Preserves are used as indicators for what to expect, then Valles Caldera fees would be substantially reduced, access procedures will be simplified, and recreational activities will be expanded.

An NPS Preserve is different from a National Park or Monument. The NPS Preserve concept was designed by Congress to protect the natural environment of specific public lands while allowing traditional uses of those lands to be continued in some form. Hunting, for example, is usually not allowed on a National Park or Monument, but is not uncommon on a Preserve. Grazing, too, is allowed on preserves, as are fishing, hiking, biking and a wide variety of other uses.

Carol Sperling, chief of Interpretation and Visitor Services at the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve near Alamosa, Colo., said each preserve follows NPS regulations to tailor itself to the individual location. She said that at the Great Sand Dunes Preserve, "visitors are allowed to enjoy the experience for a fee of \$3 per adult per week."

The Mojave National Preserve in California was developed on these principles, explained Dennis Schram, a preserve official. "We worked

with the public to develop appropriate uses for our 1.5 million acres," he said. "Cattle grazing was traditional, so we allow it. But we balanced that need with other uses, such as hunting, hiking and camping. We have few complaints."

Caldera Action, a Valles Caldera watchdog group, advocates the National Park Service model. "The National Park Service oversees the most scenic, culturally important and sensitive public lands in this country and they adeptly manage millions of visitors a year," said Tom Ribe, executive director. "They are ideal to manage the Caldera."

But there are other management possibilities. Jude McCartin, a spokesperson for Bingaman, said that "although the senators specifically asked the NPS to review the Valles Caldera, all other options are on the table." She explained the NPS study is only intended to identify potential administrative or legal obstacles involving a transfer of management to NPS.

There are at least three other options for reorganizing and managing the Valles Caldera: the National Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service and a modification of the existing management model.

Bill Keleher, past chair of the Valles Caldera Board of Trustees, believes that the existing management model might work if the self-sufficiency mandate were removed. According to current law, Valles Caldera must be financially self-sufficient by 2015. This requirement clouds nearly every decision, especially those involving access, as the managers endeavor to maximize revenue from every visitor. Access restrictions would ease if this mandate were eliminated.

The National Fish and Wildlife Service is another candidate manager. They would operate the Valles Caldera as a National Wildlife Refuge. NFWS' publically stated mission is to "conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people." They operate more than 540 refuges throughout the country, seven of which are in New Mexico. The best known is Bosque del Apache near Socorro. Each refuge hosts a range of activities including wildlife viewing, education, hiking, fishing and hunting.

The U.S. Forest Service is another management possibility. The service currently manages the Valle Vidal, near Las Vegas, N.M., as a Special Management Area. It is about the same size as the Valles Caldera, and public access is free for a myriad of uses.

Interested citizens should send comments to their congressional representatives and prepare to provide testimony at upcoming public

hearings and meetings, which will be scheduled sometime within the next few months.

The acquisition of the Valles Caldera in 2000 was a triumphal accomplishment of New Mexico's congressional delegation. But its management model has failed to deliver the intended results. Clearly New Mexico's two senators have decided that a fundamental management change is needed. The question yet unanswered is exactly what kind of management model should be implemented.

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