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Jemez gov speaks out

Joshua Madalena opposes park service control of Valles Caldera

By Dave Menicucci

Jemez Pueblo – Speaking at a meeting of the Valles Caldera Board of Trustees at the Jemez Pueblo Community Resource Center Wednesday, Joshua Madalena, tribal governor, stated his opposition to converting the Valles Caldera National Preserve to a National Park Service Preserve.

He criticized a National Park Service report about the feasibility of acquiring the preserve for not having properly considered the Pueblo. “We have been worshipping on these lands for thousands of years,” he said, “and we want assurance that we will continue to have access to our traditional sacred grounds. The report did not address our needs.”

His opposition to a management change was explicit. “We oppose the proposed change of management,” he said emphatically. “We want to maintain our excellent working relationship with the Valles Caldera Trust regarding access to our lands.”

The governor also questioned the process for studying the transfer of the preserve to the National Park Service and expressed displeasure with New Mexico’s congressional delegation. “This was not right,” he said. “These are our lands and we are disappointed in Sen.

Bingaman and Sen. Udall for not consulting with us during the study.”

The Valles Caldera National Preserve, especially the Valles Caldera Board of Trustees, has been at the vortex of controversy for many years, but public pressure for change has recently escalated.

The majority of the discontent centers on a provision in the federal legislation for the preserve to show progress toward self-sufficiency by 2015. This financial pressure has compelled the Trust to consider experimenting with various revenue generating programs. Some of the ideas, especially those that conflict with public access and recreation, have been unpopular.

In response, in June 2009, Bingaman and Udall asked the National Park Service to study the feasibility of acquiring the Valles Caldera as its 19th national preserve. The Park Service released their report late last year.

One of the most contentious issues on the preserve has been commercial cattle grazing. The cattle interfered with other activities when they wandered into recreational areas, such as riparian zones.

Last summer, however, the trustees contracted with New Mexico State University and Jemez Pueblo to conduct a scientifically based grazing program with a relatively small number of animals. An important goal of their program was to improve cattle breeds for high-altitude locations.

Governor Madalena praised the program and expressed concerns that it might be stymied under the Park Service. He said that the “The Board of Trustees has worked with us productively to meet our grazing needs. We believe the program should continue under the existing management arrangement.”

Jude McCartin, a spokeswoman for Bingaman acknowledged the Pueblo’s position and promised to respond. “We will reach out to tribal leadership and schedule consultations as soon as possible,” she said. She added that the “needs of all the tribes will be addressed before any action will take place relative to the Valles Caldera.”

Caldera Action, a watchdog group, has been leading the effort for change. Tom Ribe, the executive director for the group, said he appreciated the governor’s concerns. “Our position is that the Pueblo of Jemez has a profound connection to the landscape of the VCNP, one that is recognized in the statute creating the preserve. We understand and support that connection. We are very concerned that the Pueblo of Jemez was not adequately consulted in the development of the NPS study. Caldera Action has always maintained that the Pueblo of Jemez is a very important stakeholder of the preserve.”

Jeremy Vesbach is Executive Director for the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, a non-profit organization that focuses on sportsmen’s interests on public lands.

He was also in agreement with the governor. He said that although the federation has been outspoken in favor of a change of management at the preserve, his members are “not interested in pursuing a solution that is contrary to the desires of the pueblo peoples, whose needs are important.”

The Board of Trustees continues to oppose the conversion of the preserve to Park Service control. They released a statement during the meeting that said, in part, that the Valles Caldera’s current land management should be maintained. However, they stipulated “Congress must provide the statutory changes necessary to achieve the goals originally anticipated.” One of the most important changes is that financial self-sufficiency be redefined to provide for a “reasonable substantial operating cost recovery while balancing the concerns and interests of the public.”

Located on the western edge of Los Alamos County, the Valles Caldera National Preserve is a land of many uses, multiple interests, and deep passions. The latest row is another in the series of skirmishes that has punctuated the discussion about this public property since its inception.