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Land of the people

By Dave Menicucci

For the Journal

“The possibilities are endless,” Tom Ribe exclaimed as he peered over the fence into the Valle Grande, the largest of the grassy valleys in the Valles Caldera National Preserve. “With the possibility of the Park Service assuming management, we are on the cusp of taking this property back to the citizens who own it.”

Ribe was pondering the possible changes if the Valles Caldera, currently under an experimental management system, is converted to a National Park Service preserve. It would become the country's 19th preserve, and most users would recognize substantial operational differences.

“Access will be significantly increased, fees will be reduced or eliminated, and activities will be expanded,” Ribe said. “But resources will continue to be protected.”

The prospects for change are good. Ribe and a burgeoning team of associates have been working with the N.M. congressional delegation to engender this change. Last June, Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall asked the National Park Service to assess the feasibility of managing the property as a Park Service preserve. The results of the study are due this fall.

Jeremy Vesbach, executive director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, has been working with Ribe and believes that the Park Service would likely expand outdoor sporting activities while simplifying access rigmarole. He explained that “hunting and fishing on the Valles Caldera would be placed under the complete control of New Mexico's Department of Game and Fish. It would become a typical game management unit.” This means, for example, that grouse, waterfowl and other game hunting will be possible, where now only elk and turkey are hunted.

Vesbach is most excited about the prospect of fair access.

“The current elk lottery system will almost certainly be replaced with the state's simple draw system that will give all citizens an equal chance to hunt,” Vesbach said.

The lottery system currently used to select hunters for the preserve seemingly favors more wealthy citizens, those with the ability to buy a large number of lottery chances.

A Park Service preserve is managed differently from a national park or monument, both of which have pre-defined rules for public use. Leslie Doobie, chief of interpretation at the Big Thicket National Preserve near Beaumont, Texas, explained.

“Flexibility is built into the law to allow a Park Service preserve to be tailored to the community's needs and to generally conform to the historical uses of the property,” Doobie said, adding that Park Service personnel are “merely caretakers” and their job “is to make the preserve accessible to the public while protecting resources.”

At Big Thicket there are no entry fees, but access is supervised and activities are policed to prevent resource degradation.

Big Thicket was the first park service preserve to be opened, in 1974, and Maxine Johnstone was there when it was conceptualized in 1964. She is still involved.

“Thicket was a great deal of work because it was the first,” she said, but she predicted “that the Valles Caldera's conversion will go much smoother.”

Smoother, that is, if the people in New Mexico do their homework now.

“We developed a workbook containing a description of all the desirable activities for Thicket,” Johnstone said. “We had it ready the day the Park Service assumed control and they used it. It helped to ensure that we got what we wanted on our land.”

One likely improvement over the Valles Caldera's current management will be its operating hours. In the summer months the preserve is open seven days/week during daylight hours.

But some activities, such as fishing, must end by 3 p.m. each day — the middle of the day's prime fishing period. Under the Park Service, fishing hours could be expanded to dusk.

In the winter, the Valles Caldera hours could be extended from weekends-only to a seven-day-per-week operation, accommodating snowshoeing, winter camping and cross-country skiing, all of which are now generally disallowed when the preserve is closed. Camping is not allowed on the preserve at any time.

Hiking is another popular activity that could be expanded. To walk the interior trails, hikers now must reserve a slot, pay a fee and check into the preserve, and are then limited to certain areas.

At most national preserves, such as Big Thicket, hikers may enter

the preserve at a time and place of their choosing and can select the areas that they wish to hike.

Michael Grady, an officer with the New Mexico Mountain Club, the largest hiking organization in the state, has publicly lamented the cumbersome process for accessing the preserve.

“The public must be afforded less restrictive access to the Valles Caldera,” he said.

But he agrees that the Park Service must apply “some prohibitions” to protect sensitive zones.

Ribe invites comments, questions and concerns about the change process. Most important, he wants suggestions.

“The preserve belongs to the people,” he said, “and we want to ensure that it is configured to their needs.”

Ribe's email is info@caldera-action.org.