

***Editor's note:***

*In Jan 2000 the US Congress approved the acquisition of the Baca Location Number 1 in the Jemez mountains. In doing so it created the Valles Caldera National Preserve and tasked a board of trustees to manage it as a working ranch, a grand experiment in public land ownership with multiple objectives designed to serve the community. The Preserve's primary mandate is to be financially self-sufficient—operating completely free of government subsidies—by 2015.*

*The Preserve is 7½ years into the effort and today we begin a series of articles to assess its progress. We begin with an examination of the goals in the Valles Caldera Preservation Act of 2000 and discuss how different interpretations have hampered progress. Upcoming articles will discuss the Preserve's accomplishments, its resources and liabilities, and the plans that are evolving to meet the emerging challenges.*

## Goals of Valles Caldera Still at Issue

By: D Menicucci, Special to the monitor

The federal acquisition of the Baca ranch in 2000 and the subsequent creation of the Valles Caldera National Preserve was an exemplary accomplishment by the New Mexico congressional delegation. Operating in a political environment of growing hostility toward increased federal land holdings, they secured congressional approval by creating a government corporation and tasking it to achieve a self-funded operation on the Preserve by 2015.

Initially, the concept was for the Preserve to maintain the profitable activities of a working ranch—which it had been since the early 1800s—and augment them with revenue-producing public recreational activities, such as hunting and fishing, as well as a forum to educate the public. The founders also envisioned the Preserve as an outdoor scientific laboratory where novel game and land management practices could be tested.

Theoretically, these goals are generally complementary and have equal weighting with the overarching objective of self-sufficiency. However, a careful reading of the Preserve's founding legislation finds "self-sufficiency" referenced six times. It is also clearly defined as the time when the Preserve's self-generated revenues meet or exceed its operational expenses.

Failure to meet the self-sufficiency objective would result in an uncertain future for the Preserve. The legislation specifies that upon failure and termination of the Trust the land would be absorbed into the Santa Fe National Forest. However, William B Keleher, a Valles Caldera Trustee, is not so sure. "Anything is possible if this goes back to Congress in 2015 with less than a self-sufficient operation."

Not everyone agrees about the overriding importance of the self-sufficiency goal. Jeff Bingaman (D, NM), speaking through his press agent Jude McCartin, sees a broad, integrated goal. "Self-sufficiency was not the primary purpose for bringing the VC into public ownership" he says. "Public access, recreation, stewardship of resources, and conservation are equally important." He emphasizes that the "financial bottom line should not be the primary way to measure success of the Valles Caldera."

Pete Domenici (R, NM) stresses that Congress and President Clinton supported the creation of the Preserve with the stipulation that it would be free from the government dole in 15 years. Pete and his staff are concerned that even in a Democratically controlled Congress there is scant support for long-term government subsidies of the Preserve. They point out that this experiment has existed for 50% of its allotted time but self-generates less than 20% of its budget.

Clearly the Preserve presents the scientific community with unique opportunities for studies in biology, archeology, geology and other fields. For wildlife biologists especially, this vast and lightly used territory provides a rare opportunity to conduct controlled experiments in a totally natural setting.

Without careful management, these scientific activities could potentially conflict with the objective of building a self-sustaining business. Steve Bell, Pete Domenici's chief of staff and one of the architects for the VC legislation, concurs that scientific endeavors have great value, but he believes they should be carefully measured to avoid interference with revenue-generating resources, such as the elk herd or grazing opportunities.

Bell points out that the Preserve was for many years a profitable working ranch and "the real experiment is whether it can be operated as such under a government corporation."

These differing views have left Jeffrey Cross, the Preserve's Executive Director, somewhat cautious about how to proceed. This uncertainty has slowed progress and watchdog groups, such as the Valles Caldera Coalition, have been sharply critical.

Although the Coalition is no longer a functioning entity, their website remains and contains many interesting documents including a pointed letter to the NM congressional delegation. Last February they released a Report Card on various facets of the Preserve's operation. (<http://www.vallescalderacoalition.org/>). Most of the grades were low enough to rouse any parent's ire, including a D- for progress toward the goal of financial self-sufficiency.

The self-sufficiency issue is further complicated by some who suggest that non-revenue-producing benefits from the Preserve, such as resource stewardship, should be valued alongside financial ones and that they might justify an ongoing government investment.

Cross, who has been on the job for a little over a year, recognizes the difficulties facing the organization. He is working to create a staff that can respond to the challenges and many people praise his efforts. "But I need clear definitions from the board on the goals and associated policy," he says. "They are working on it," he quickly adds.

Keleher is blunt as he sums up the situation. "Our most important objective is financial self-sufficiency," he says. "Without it we will cease to exist and then all the goals are irrelevant."