

Valles Caldera ponders next phase of direction, management

By: Dave Menicucci, Special to the Monitor

The grandeur of Valles Caldera National Preserve is mesmerizing as the first rays of dawn slowly envelope the great misty meadows. But as the sun rises and the work day begins the controversy over the direction and management of the Preserve continues to churn.

The question is an old one—how to balance resource protection and scientific endeavor with the needs of a business. After seven and a half years the Board of Trustees, the management, and the public continue to debate exactly how to proceed.

The problem originates in the enabling legislation, which sets out seemingly conflicting goals. There is a business goal—the Preserve is to become self-sufficient by 2015. It also declares the “exceptional” value of the scientific resources on the Preserve and a need to preserve them.

How one weights these two objectives leads to differing views about progress.

According to Steve Bell, Senator Pete Domenici’s chief of staff, there is frustration in this senator’s office at the slow pace of developing the Preserve into a working ranch, one based on private sector business principles.

Other are also frustrated, but for different reasons. Marty Peale, former coordinator of the Valles Caldera Coalition, a watchdog group, declares that “if this experiment is, in fact, about treating management of public resources as a private business, including proprietarily withholding information and curtailing public involvement in critical decisions, then I’d feel betrayed.”

Frank Gladics, a Domenici advisor on the Senate Energy and Water Committee explains that the Valles Caldera is an experiment, but not a scientific one. “The real experiment is whether this public entity can become a self-sufficient business and still retain most of the features of a public preserve.”

The Preserve’s Board of Trustees has been grappling with this problem for over a year, including many hours of executive session, private work meetings where the board members could study and analyze an array of information and delve into details in a way that is not possible in public.

There has been some public criticism of these private work sessions, but Tracy Hephner, the board’s chair, believes they were productive. She says that the board’s approach is “fully consistent with the law, and allows the needs of the public and science community to be balanced against the financial goals.” She trusts that science-based adaptive management, which the board adopted as its operational guidance, is essential to success.

The goal of science-based adaptive management is to develop optimal management action relative to the resources and visitor experience and to allow managers to adapt to changing conditions, with special emphasis on preventing irreversible impacts. The key to adaptive management is a good design, monitoring to measure what you are doing, and feedback to help perfect it.

Jeffrey Cross, the Preserve's Executive Director, has embraced adaptive management, and is helping his staff understand its benefits. "Adaptive management is not new," says Cross. "It is used successfully on private and public properties throughout the world." He believes it is ideally suited to the Preserve.

However, Bob MacPherson, a retired scientist with an extensive business background cautions that 'commitment' is only the initial step. "Adaptive management should be used when you have a specific set of plans for activities on the ground," he says. "Plan design and measured data provide the basis for your decision process that follows management action in creating or running programs at the Preserve. I don't see any plans yet."

The board and Cross admit that the planning process has been too slow. The board has recently developed a strategic planning document that can be found at the Valles Caldera website (http://www.vallescaldera.gov/about/trust/docs/Trust_GAOResponseLetter06-11-30.pdf). This provides the basis for subsequent science and business planning efforts.

Cross says that Bob Parmenter, the Preserve's chief scientist, has recently completed a science plan. Parmenter is also preparing budget information that will be input to a business plan, which Cross says will be developed with the help of a consultant. Both plans will appear on the Preserve's website when they have been approved and cross-linked with one another to insure compatibility and consistency.

The Preserve's management concurs that overall progress has lagged. However, Cross explains that he must move at the pace allowed by NEPA, the National Environmental Policy Act. "For example," Cross says, "if I decide to open up the Preserve for more activities I need additional parking. To build parking space requires a host of time-consuming NEPA studies." NEPA regulations, which basically require scientific observation, measurement, analysis, and modeling of proposed actions, do not apply to private property.

Science based adaptive management holds promise to productively integrate the diverse needs of science, business, and public access on the Valles Caldera. Only time will tell of its success.