

Sunday, June 21, 2009

No Simple Solution for Preserve

By [Dave Menicucci](#)

The Valles Caldera National Preserve continues to swirl in the vortex of controversy. Last month the preserve's Board of Trustees selected a grazing proposal designed to provide multiple benefits to the preserve and the community. The project's goal is to identify the best genetic makeup to maximize cattle performance in high elevations. It held promise for broad-based public acceptance because the project is led by New Mexico State University and includes the Jemez Pueblo and the New Mexico Beef Cattle Performance Association, a local industry group dedicated to enhancing grazing productivity.

Instead, the plan has engendered strong negative reactions from two significant, but dissimilar quarters — the Northern New Mexico ranching community and environmentalists.

“The Valles Caldera has not been a good neighbor,” declared Moises Morales, who lives in Canjilon, a mountain community south of Chama. As a rancher he complained that the structure of the preserve's 2009 grazing program effectively excluded him and his neighbors from the grazing proposal competition.

“First,” he said, “they expected unreasonably high grazing fees. Second, they wanted a minimum of 500 head and no one family ranch or even groups of ranches in this area have that many cattle. So thousands of people in this area ended up with nothing.”

In contrast to the ranchers, the Wild Earth Guardians (formally Forest Guardians), an environmental group located in Santa Fe, opposes large-scale grazing on the preserve. Their proposal to graze five cows for a flat fee of \$50,000 was rejected by the Valles Caldera Trust, even though it might have yielded the highest net revenue.

“We'd like to see the preserve adopt a restoration agenda that includes prohibiting grazing along all of the preserve's streams and certain watersheds,” said John Horning, Wild Earth's executive director. “We're willing to put our money

where our mouth is.”

Reconciling these vastly different positions is challenging, but Lorenzo Valdez, a Rio Arriba cattle grazing permittee, has a plan.

“We believe that we can collaborate with the Valles Caldera to help restore the grazing pastures in our allotments, which are being invaded by noxious weeds and hampering grazing,” he said. “We’ll need limited grazing on the preserve’s northern perimeter areas to allow grass seed growing on our lands to mature. Then we’ll bring the cattle back to our land and let them push the seed into the ground with their hooves. The grass will then grow strongly against the weeds.”

Valdez added that “the impact on the preserve’s current operations will be minimal but will benefit the local ranchers. We are talking about six to seven weeks of preserve grazing and only a few hundred head at a time. And we’ll repair fences on the preserve to keep the cattle out of the rivers and valleys.”

“The plan has potential from a scientific point of view,” said Bob Parmenter, the preserve’s chief scientist. But he cautioned that the noxious weed problem is complex and that a complete solution might not be possible with this approach. “But I would welcome their written proposal,” he added.

Pat Torres, of the County Extension Service in Santa Fe, knows about Valdez’s plan and agrees with Parmenter. “We’ll provide whatever expertise and support that we can,” he declared.

Morales supports Valdez’s plan, but envisions more. He said that he and his neighbors, like the Indian peoples, “have hundreds of years of historical and cultural attachment to much of the public land in and around the preserve.” Morales claimed that many in his community desire to reclaim some of the public lands, such as the preserve, “which came to them in historical land grants and were unfairly taken from them.”

While the response from the authorities has so far been somewhat muted, he warned that the fight has just begun as they “are circulating petitions for action from New Mexico’s congressional delegation.”

Valdez’s plan may encounter headwinds navigating through the preserve’s hierarchy and may already be rejected, at least for this year. In an e-mail from Terry McDermott, the preserve’s communication director, wrote that Executive Director Gary Bratcher’s position is that “we already have a grazing program selected through the RFP process. If (the Northern NM ranchers) want to submit a proposal for consideration next year they can do so. ...”

There are ardent supporters of the preserve’s current grazing program. One of them is Anthony R. Armijo, a Jemez livestock producer and coordinator of the pueblo’s participation in the current project.Â

“We are providing cow-calf pairs to utilize the preserve’s excellent forage resource, rest and restore the Pueblo’s range and agricultural lands, and improve our cattle management and marketing through NMSU support,” Armijo said, adding that

he believes that this grazing program “is in the best interests of the Jemez Pueblo people who have a profound cultural and religious connection to the Valle Grande landscape. We are grateful for the cooperation.”

Manny Encinias, who developed the project and is managing it for New Mexico State University, said that it is a distinctive approach that will benefit many people, including the northern New Mexico ranchers. “Our goal is to provide information to high-elevation beef producers about how to gain maximum profitability from their herds,” he explained. “To do this we will bring in cattle — including bulls, heifers, and cow-calf pairs — from various locales so that we have a representative sampling to study. We don't expect to have all the answers by this autumn, but we hope to begin correlating performance with certain stock groups. It is unique and has grand implications on the sustainability and profitability of the commercial cattle producers in the region.”

Tom Ribe, director of Caldera Action, a Valles Caldera watchdog group, posits a potential long-term solution. “We feel strongly that the highest and best uses of this Preserve will be in environmental restoration, quiet recreation, science, and education. We see opportunities in environmental restoration both within the preserve and on nearby Forest Service lands that will provide new jobs for rural New Mexicans, including current livestock grazers.”

The Valles Caldera National Preserve, with its alluring grassy valleys and fish-laden streams is juxtaposed against complex and sometimes conflicting legal objectives regarding grazing. It has become a political battleground with no easy resolution in sight.

Menicucci, a retired Sandia Laboratories research engineer, now works as an energy consultant and is a freelance writer and fishing guide.

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