

Valle Caldera Livestock Plan Draws Fire

By Dave Menicucci, Special to the Monitor

New controversy has erupted over a long-standing issue at the Valles Caldera--cattle grazing. Last month trust officials announced that 2000 head of cattle will be managed on the preserve this summer. This is four times the number that grazed last summer and the most since the late 1990s, when 5,000-8,000 head of cattle roamed Dunigan's private ranch.

Gary Morton, of Las Vegas, NM, captured the award. He and the preserve are in final negotiations, but the fundamental agreement requires a baseline payment of \$56,000. Additional bonus payments will be based on animal weight gain.

Morton will cooperate with preserve scientists in collecting a broad range of data to help assess the impact of the grazing on the preserve. These data include cattle movements, effectiveness of various management techniques, impact of grazing on forage quantity, and the resulting effect on other ungulates.

The award was met with skepticism from Caldera Action, a local watchdog group that has been dubious about cattle grazing. "Cows pollute water, destroy stream structure, and damage fisheries while impacting birds and mammals," said Tom Ribe, its chair. "Valles Caldera streams already are out of compliance with state standards and this will worsen that problem."

Ribe claimed that that Morton does not appear to have a legal obligation to keep the cows out of the creek. "Last year the preserve had serious problems on this front."

Jeffrey Cross, the preserve's executive director, disagrees. "Mr. Morton has developed an excellent plan," he said. "Morton's people will manage the herd at all times. The preserve will supply another person to work with them part-time."

Protection of the stream's water quality will be a priority for the preserve, explained Dennis Trujillo, the preserve manager. "We have a new fishing program for the East Fork this year and it is in our best interests to insure that the water in that stream and the Rio San Antonio is not negatively affected." He promised that preserve scientists will be heavily involved in monitoring the cattle's impact.

Morton emphasized that his contract calls for careful herd management and protection of stream beds. He and two of his employees will essentially live with the cattle throughout the summer. "I believe we'll demonstrate that cattle can not only graze the land without environmental damage, but can actually improve the forage." He explained that some grasses are more productive when they are eaten down and that cattle hooves can help implant seeds into the earth. He also believes that grazing will improve feedstock for elk, which prefer the fresh shoots that grow after cattle munch down the tall tufts.

However, anti-grazing sentiment is deeply ingrained in some segments of the community. WildEarth Guardians (formally Forest Guardians) responded to the preserve's RFP with a proposal to compensate the Valles Caldera \$35,000 to refrain from grazing.

The bid was rejected. "The Guardians' proposal was scored against the evaluation criteria just like the others," said Cross. "They simply did not score as high as the winning proposal."

WildEarth Guardians director John Horning “was disappointed but not surprised” by the rejection, which he believes is based on flawed concepts of the preserve’s purpose. He promised to follow-up to understand exactly how the proposal was handled.

Ribe believes that the rejection was an error. “They will most likely lose money on the grazing program this year as they have every year. The Guardians’ offer would have had positive environmental impacts,” he explained. “The fact that the VCNP took the Morton proposal shows they feel obligated to graze even though the "working ranch" concept in the enabling legislation does not require it.

In actuality, the legislation specifies in section 103(b)(5) that one of the preserve’s purposes is to provide for sustained yield management for “domesticated livestock grazing...” Bill Keleher, the trust’s chair, goes further. “I believe the trust has a congressional mandate to graze cattle on the preserve,” he said.

Cross corroborated Ribe’s concern about the profit potential from this year’s livestock program. He promised to carefully monitor all of the costs, including those involved in the procurement and planning process, and to conduct a professional accounting. “We’ll issue a report with complete detail,” he said.

Controversy aside, visitors and bystanders will see 2000 grazing cattle on the preserve this summer. The results, due this fall, should prove to be both interesting and informative.