

Testimony to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee On S. 3452, the Valles Caldera National Preserve Management Act

**Testimony by Jeremy Vesbach
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Chairman Jeff Bingaman, ranking member Lisa Murkowski, and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today. I'm Jeremy Vesbach, Executive Director of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation (NMWF), our state's oldest and largest sportsmen organization. NMWF was founded in 1914 by the famous sportsman/conservationist Aldo Leopold, and helped lead the way to restoration and sound management of our big game herds and other wildlife species that we enjoy today. NMWF today represents over 10,000 hunters and anglers.

I am here today to testify in support **S. 3452**, the Valles Caldera National Preserve Management Act introduced by New Mexico's Senators, Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall.

The Valles Caldera is one of America's most unique and spectacular landscapes. It is one of only 3 supervolcanoes in the United States and the oldest of the three. Only the Yellowstone supervolcano is larger and Valles Caldera has often been referred to as "New Mexico's Yellowstone." If you ever go there you will quickly realize that this is an accurate description of this beautiful landscape and national treasure.

In addition to its unique geology, the Valles Caldera also has a long and valuable cultural history that continues today, and this great valley is of keen interest to hunters and anglers due to its outstanding elk herd and high mountain trout fishing. For generations upon generations hunters have found success and inspiration in the Valles Caldera, and hunters and anglers everywhere celebrated when the land was purchased by Congress and protected for the people in 2001.

However, at that time Congress also put in place at the Valles Caldera an experimental management system based on the Presidio in San Francisco, California. Under this experiment, Valles Caldera is managed by a wholly owned federal government corporation (the Trust) overseen by a board of political appointees, known as the Board of Trustees and charged with maximizing revenue to cover expenses. Very quickly, those of us who hunt and fish learned, perhaps earlier than other members of the public, that this system was not going to work for the average citizen.

The first hunting season in 2002 was highly anticipated as the first chance the general public would ever have to go hunting in this jewel of the west. But that

anticipation quickly turned sour for local hunters when the trust announced it would be charging access fees of \$10,000 to \$12,000 for some of the bull elk hunts. All the other bull hunts were to be raffled where some individuals could buy hundreds of dollars worth of chances, getting much higher odds to hunt than those citizens of average means.

Never before had we seen a plan to charge hunting access fees on public land that would exclude 99 percent of the people from hunting. Never before had we seen preferential treatment for those of greater financial means to get the best hunts or better chances for hunting on public land. Not only did this strike hunters as unfair, this was a marked departure from the basic American tenet in the North American Model of Wildlife Management that wildlife belongs to the people, and hunting opportunity in our great Nation is equally available for all our citizens.

If hunters were disillusioned early, the rest of the public was soon to follow. Today while neighboring Bandelier National Monument hosts approximately a quarter of a million visitors per year, Valles Caldera—an equally spectacular place—hosts just 17,000 annual visitors. Access fees for a half-day of fishing are substantially higher than other public lands. Yet, despite these low visitor numbers and high access fees, the budget appropriated from congress each year is still nearly \$1 million higher than comparable public lands that serve a much greater visitor load. Local businesses are missing out on the expected economic benefits, citizens are frustrated with the lack of access. Furthermore, the priorities of the Board of Trustees have fluctuated greatly as new political appointees take the reins. When I or other members of the New Mexico Wildlife Federation are out tabling at hunting or fishing shows or talking with local hunters, one of the most frequent issues raised by hunters and anglers was the need to change the system at Valles Caldera—and not let any other public lands be managed this way.

After that first experiment in 2002, where the Trust charged ultra-high access fees to hunt on public land, some astute leaders at NMWF determined that it was actually a violation of state law—and NMWF was able to stop that system, but only temporarily.

In 2008, under more pressure to raise money, the Trust presented a new plan to the State Game Commission in which it would charge \$7,500 or more for elk hunting access fees on the best hunts. Following a massive outcry from hunters, our State Game Commission refused to cooperate with the plan. The Trust then went to our state legislature in 2009 and tried to change state law so that they would be able to charge these exclusive access fees. The state legislature rejected this proposal, but it was disturbing to many of us that an experimental and wholly owned federal government corporation, overseen by presidential appointees and funded by congress, had tried so hard to change New Mexico state law regarding wildlife.

The Trust has retained the plan to charge ultra-high access fees for a portion of the elk hunts and there are ways that the Trust could implement these exclusive

hunting fees without state approval. In fact the Trust's "Revenue Enhancement Plan" also involves construction of a 20-unit luxury hunting lodge on our public land that would only be available for those able and willing to pay the exclusive access fees.

The Trust's revenue enhancement plan also included other massive developments of the Valles Caldera, much of it geared towards a lower number of very high-paying visitors. Despite public outcry, the Trust said it would move forward with the plans. This is the point when the Trust presented a choice for the American People: either move forward with a plan to commercialize one of our great national treasures and make it a playground geared towards an elite few, or change the management system entirely.

Today, the only other type of hunting currently allowed on Valles Caldera is wild turkey hunting. On nearly half of the turkey hunts on Valles Caldera, the Trust is charging almost \$2,000 each for our citizens to access their own public land to go turkey hunting. Unfortunately, there is no state law to stop this. **S. 3452** will end this system of preference and exclusiveness on Valles Caldera.

Imagine if this model were applied to other of our nation's great treasures, and only those of the greatest financial means were able to enjoy the best opportunities on our great publicly owned places? This is not what our public lands are for, and understandably our State Senate nearly two years ago passed a memorial on a vote of 32-3 with overwhelming bi-partisan support, asking our congressional delegation to look at three options for new management at Valles Caldera—the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the U.S. Park Service—and transfer management of the Valles Caldera over to the professional natural resource agency best designed to fit all the unique needs.

NMWF strongly supported this approach and asked that whichever agency turned out to be the best choice for Valles Caldera, that hunting and fishing opportunities be guaranteed to continue and be brought within financial reach of the average citizen to enjoy with their family. Those of us most familiar with Valles Caldera believe that hunting is an absolute necessity and integral to the overall management and health of the land, in addition to its cultural value. **S. 3452** recognizes these realities. It guarantees that hunting and fishing shall continue, and will restore this land to the people—all the people.

I believe our Senators have approached this question in a deliberative, open and fair manner over the past two years and have come up with the only logical conclusion for the future management of Valles Caldera.

Hunters, anglers and professional natural resource managers have asked that hunting and fishing be mandated to continue and **S. 3452** guarantees that.

Citizens are clamoring for more opportunity to experience the Preserve, but are also saying loudly and clearly "don't let it be over-run," and, "don't let it be loved to

death.” Citizens are extremely concerned that the Caldera could be destroyed by over-use. The National Park Service (NPS) is best equipped in New Mexico to provide appropriate “people management” to protect a place with incredibly high visitor demand from over-use while also opening it to one and all. The NPS is already managing large numbers of visitors at Bandelier National Monument, which shares a common border with the Valles Caldera.

The cultural and geological history of the Valles Caldera is unique in the world. Citizens want to see the science and education programs, a positive legacy started by the Trust, to be expanded. Citizens want interpretive work on the Valles Caldera ready to serve visitors and explain the unique natural and cultural heritage of the Caldera. All these demands fit best within the mission of the NPS, which is already doing this same type of work at neighboring Bandelier National Monument and can expand and share resources from Bandelier.

The National Park Service Preserve is a model that has been applied in many states since 1974, most recently at the Great Sand Dunes National Preserve in Colorado. The approximately 18 NPS Preserves around the U.S. provide a model we have investigated and we agree is a good fit for the variety of needs that must be met at the Valles Caldera.

For all these reasons I believe that Senators Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall have made the only logical and appropriate choice for the people of New Mexico and the nation to fully experience, enjoy and protect this great national treasure. It is time to put Valles Caldera fully in the hands of the people, while ensuring its value for future generations. I urge Congress to pass **S. 3452**.