

VALLES CALDERA NATIONAL PRESERVE

GENERAL MANAGEMENT PLAN / DEVELOPMENT CONCEPT PLAN

PUBLIC COMMENT SUMMARY SEPTEMBER 2023



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From May 8 through June 9, 2023, the National Park Service (NPS) held a public comment period to receive feedback on preliminary ideas and concepts under consideration as part of a general management plan / development concept plan for Valles Caldera National Preserve.

To keep the public informed of the planning process and announce opportunities for public involvement, a news release was issued on May 8. The news release also informed readers on how to learn more about the project, including initial ideas and concepts under consideration, and how to submit comments. The public meeting schedule and informational materials were also posted on the park's [Facebook page](#) and the [project website](#). The project website and all informational materials were available in both English and Spanish.

NPS staff held one virtual presentation and three in-person open house events to provide members of the public an opportunity to learn more about the planning effort and initial concepts under consideration, as well as how to submit comments. The virtual presentation was held on May 17 and was recorded and made available on the [project website](#). Three in-person open house events were held: May 22 at Misión y Convento in Espanola, NM; May 23 at El Zócalo Plaza in Bernalillo, NM; and May 24 at the Walatowa Visitor Center in Jemez Pueblo, NM. A total of 71 people attended the virtual and in-person events, and the recorded public meeting saw an additional 173 views. American Sign Language interpreters were available at the in-person open houses, and closed captioning was provided for the virtual presentation.

The National Park Service received 169 correspondences, with a few being a variation of a comment form distributed by the New Mexico Wild organization. Correspondences provided constructive feedback that will help the National Park Service develop long-term direction for resource protection and visitor experiences at the Valles Caldera National Preserve. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the most common opinions and suggestions, and the following report summarizes the full breadth of comments.

Comments expressed both support and concern about nearly all aspects of the preliminary concepts. While some commenters would like to see an expansion of visitor access, others caution the National Park Service to keep in mind the human impacts to sensitive resources when considering new access, roads, and facilities. Some commenters would like to see additional backcountry access and extended open hours. Other commenters cautioned against any expansion to the road network. Many commenters were interested in new trail opportunities, as well as maintenance for trails with downed trees. Commenters noted the need for accessible trails and facilities. While bicyclists are interested in new biking opportunities, some were concerned that areas determined eligible for wilderness designation would eliminate popular routes. However, all others who mentioned wilderness and wild and scenic river assessments wrote in support of these designations.

Commenters shared a range of activities that they enjoy in the park, including hiking, biking, fishing, hunting, and sightseeing. Commenters also suggested new or enhanced activities, including camping, night sky viewing, guided tours, additional ranger-led programming and interpretation, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing. Some commenters were

concerned with the potential negative impacts associated with camping, such as noise and light pollution, ground disturbance, and trash. Commenters noted the Sulphur Springs area contains resources that would be valuable to allow visitors to access but also noted the need to be sensitive to neighborhood concerns about traffic and congestion.

Commenters generally supported the concept of a visitor services area near NM State Road 4 (NM 4), as they believed it would be convenient, cost-effective, and least impactful to resources. In regard to the frontcountry road network, commenters supported improvements to existing road alignments and did not favor new road alignments due to potential environmental impacts and high costs.

CORRESPONDENCE ANALYSIS

The National Park Service collected public comments on the initial phases of the general management plan / development concept plan to understand public perspectives on the issues the bureau is aiming to address, as well as preliminary concepts and ideas. NPS personnel read every correspondence received and analyzed the comments. Some ideas were expressed by multiple commenters, while some were unique to an individual. The content of the comments, rather than the number of times a comment was received, will be used by the National Park Service to make informed revisions to the preliminary ideas and concepts presented.

During the public comment period, the National Park Service received 169 individual correspondences through the Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website and comment cards completed at public meetings. Comments were received from people residing in 18 states. Figure 1 displays the geographic distribution of public comments that were submitted. This comment report summarizes all public comments received during this comment period.

In addition to general public comments, the National Park Service received letters from official representatives of the following organizations:

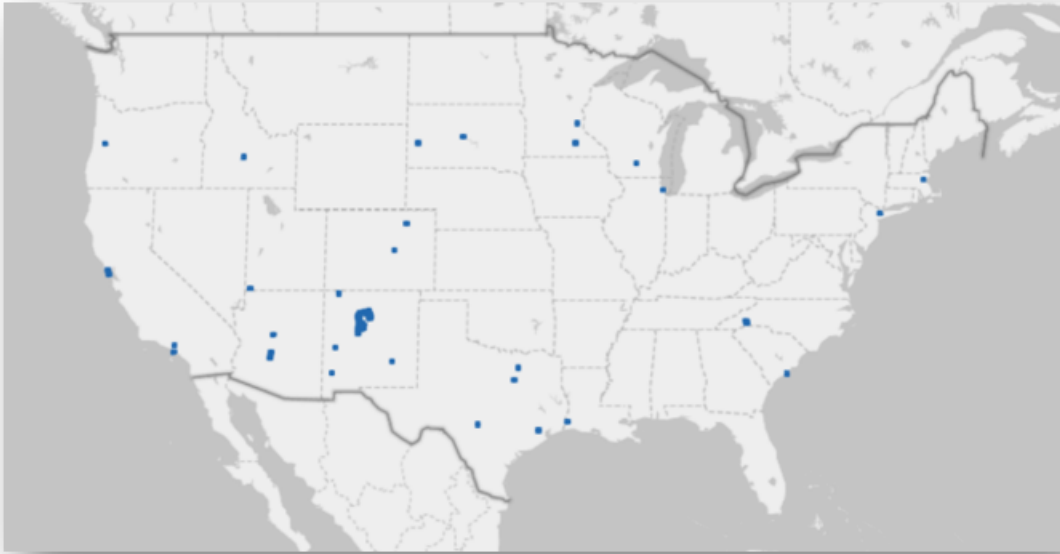
- Back Country Horsemen of New Mexico
- Caldera Action
- Bike Santa Fe Steering Committee
- Elk Valley Property Owners Association
- New Mexico Wild (Note that the National Park Service received a few form letters following content suggested by New Mexico Wild.)
- Northern New Mexico Horseman's Association

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following definitions are used for the associated terms in this document.

Correspondence—A correspondence is the entire document received from a commenter. It can be in the form of a letter, written comment form, note card, or other written communication on the plan to the park.

Comment—A comment is a portion of the text in a correspondence that addresses a single subject or issue. It could include such information as an expression of support or opposition to the use of draft strategy, a suggestion for a potential management strategy, or additional data regarding existing conditions or key issues.



Correspondences by Location

| | | | | | |
|----------------|-----|---------------|---|----------------|---|
| New Mexico | 141 | Minnesota | 2 | South Carolina | 1 |
| California | 4 | New York | 2 | Louisiana | 1 |
| Texas | 4 | Utah | 1 | Illinois | 1 |
| Arizona | 3 | Massachusetts | 1 | Oregon | 1 |
| Colorado | 2 | Wisconsin | 1 | Idaho | 1 |
| North Carolina | 2 | South Dakota | 1 | | |

FIGURE 1. GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF CORRESPONDENCES

COMMENT SUMMARY

Four questions were posed to commenters to provide targeted feedback on the preliminary concepts. These questions included:

- How do the various concepts the park is considering help your ability to access different locations or improve your overall experience? How might they hinder your access or experience?
- How do you feel the management ideas and development concepts being considered provide activities and experiences you would enjoy? What activity or experience is missing and why should it be considered?
- What specific steps could the National Park Service take to improve your experience or protect resources at any of the following locations: Cabin District, Banco Bonito, Sulphur Springs, the Valle Grande District, Valle San Antonio, Valle Toledo, Valle Jaramillo, and Redondo Meadows?
- What do you like or dislike about the preliminary management ideas and development concepts the park is considering? Do any aspects of these initial ideas raise specific resource concerns?

In the summary that follows, comments are summarized by categories falling under each of the four questions. In addition, comments that are outside the scope of this planning effort are briefly summarized at the end of the report. Those issues may be addressed by the National Park Service in future efforts.

QUESTION 1: ACCESS AND OVERALL EXPERIENCE

How do the various concepts the park is considering help your ability to access different locations or improve your overall experience? How might they hinder your access or experience?

Expanding Access

Expanding access was a major theme raised by commenters. One commenter indicated they would enjoy deeper access into the park without a requirement for four-wheel drive or high-clearance vehicle. Commenters were interested in additional access to trails and viewing opportunities and connections to trails outside the park. Commenters stated that much of the future visitor use should be concentrated in the Valle Grande District.

Representative Quotes

“I would favor public roads being built to a higher standard (i.e., not requiring high clearance or 4WD and being passable even in wet weather.”

“It would be good to ensure trails on the preserve could link with trails at Bandelier National Monument and the adjacent national forest lands.”

“Opening up the Valle Grande District will help expand public access in a positive way.”

“The overall concepts work well, building a network of roads gravel or otherwise is costly and a concern, keep cars limited to the Valle Grande District.”

Limiting Access

Some commenters preferred reduced access or keeping access at current levels and locations. There were also some concerns about impacts to the environment from construction, road, and facility updates. Commenters noted that with additional access, there is potential for human-caused impacts to resources. Commenters expressed concern that increased human access would negatively impact wildlife, including disruptions to wildlife behavior patterns.

Representative Quotes

“My preferred vision would include fewer visitors with a more intimate quality experience where visitors and scientists could interact and communicate and the Preserve was truly used as an outdoor laboratory that promotes public understanding of complex ecological concepts”

“Limit vehicle access and traffic to areas that are visible from any trails or backcountry locations. Vehicle traffic will be a major obtrusion into the wild nature of the landscape and will detract from the experience the park is trying to create.”

“Vehicle traffic has long been a major distraction to the scenic beauty and wildness of the park, and will continue to be a major detraction to it if expanded access is created.”

“I believe the construction of the road will disrupt the wildlife in the area”

“Camping in the backcountry is a bad idea because of the risk of fire. You can't trust everyone to fully extinguish their fires.”

“More infrastructure to accommodate more people affects wildlife behavior, water quality, increase in wildfire risk ect. I . . . feel that current access and infrastructure is adequate. Many of the proposals including campgrounds, increased vehicle access and more buildings would be detrimental to my overall experience”

Backcountry Road Network

Several commenters asserted there is no need to expand the backcountry motorized road network beyond existing. Commenters expressed concern that expanding public motorized access and the addition of new facilities would cause impacts to areas that currently see very little human use, including negatively impacting the wild and natural aspects and the feel of the park. Some commenters supported extending the backcountry road network to include public access through Sulphur Canyon. Some commenters noted that the road through

Sulphur Canyon is rough and would be better suited as a four-wheel drive road or that only bike or hiking access should be allowed. Commenters also expressed concern that allowing a loop experience through the park would reduce the wildness and opportunities for solitude in the northwest area of the park.

Representative Quotes

“I do not support extensive vehicle corridors and want few roads in VCNP. Roads provide access for too much human use, erosion and sedimentation, non-native invasive plant species and animals species, noise, light pollution, and other unacceptable impacts that are detrimental to living and non-living things.”

“An additional concern is the increased vehicular traffic on the backcountry roads. I do not support vehicular access increases in any sections of the park, especially if those roads are not upgraded to also feature a shared-use path for peds and bicycles. The Sulphur Canyon route is particularly troubling. Vehicular access to the San Antonio Springs has already resulted in damage to the springs”

“I’m not a fan of the backcountry road going through Sulphur Canyon. While neat, that does open the park up to a big maintenance expense and turning the park into a drive-through park.”

“Sulphur Canyon Road: This is a rough road. Consider opening for 4 wheel drive high clearance vehicles and mountain bikes and hiking access only. That way the public could do a loop drive, hike or bike a loop trail.”

“We like the idea of driving Sulphur Canyon road but this needs to be limited to a few vehicles to maintain the solitude of this beautiful, remote location.”

“Allowing people to drive through Sulphur Canyon (one-way) will make a lot more trails accessible to hikers.”

“Do not extend vehicular access on the Sulphur Canyon Rd. beyond Sulphur Springs. Do allow cars to park near Sulphur Springs.”

“I believe it would be prudent NOT to have a loop road connecting the sulphur springs to valle San Antonio and then to the valle grande. My experience of the park would be harmed by this road expansion because I prefer a more wild and undisturbed area. Please reconsider any improvements in the northwest corner of the preserve. It is so beautiful as it is and there are no particular reasons to grant more road access over there.”

“I am absolutely thrilled about the general road plan for the park that allows access to so much of the park, yet it is still manageable and minimal. The new road concept allows people to access South Mountain, El Cajete, Abrigo, Valle Grande, Jaramillo Creek, Obsidian Valley, Cerro La Jara, Jemez River, Sulphur Springs, and Redondo Meadows easily is truly wonderful.”

Frontcountry Road Network

Commenters supported moving the backcountry gate to a location beyond the Cabin District. Some commenters supported rerouting the entrance and Cabin District roads to improve visitor experience and resource protection, while others supported improving the existing roads as a lower cost alternative with fewer environmental impacts. Multiple commenters mentioned concern for construction or road widening impacts to old growth trees and the spread of invasive plants such as reed canary grass. Commenters not in support of rerouting the roads noted the potential for impacts to wildlife such as elk.

Some commenters would prefer to keep the roads gravel (versus paving) to encourage road users to travel at an appropriate speed for the area, particularly in the Cabin District. Some noted dust may pose an issue with increased usage. Some commenters supported paving the frontcountry roads. Multiple commenters discussed the costs and impacts to plowing the Cabin District road year-round and suggested seasonal access to the Cabin District. One commenter suggested the use of speed bumps in areas of where prairie dogs or other wildlife are present.

Representative Quotes

“Allowing access to the cabin district without a permit is good as there is hiking from there and it lessens the demand for backcountry permits.”

“In building out front country infrastructure, we urge NPS to consider all options in construction of parking areas to avoid the removal of old-growth trees, which provide ecological benefit, nesting habitat, and erosion control - for example, incorporating existing trees into parking area design in the Cabin District.”

“I’m concerned about the impacts of construction on the elk population of the Jemez Mountains and within the VCNP, and I’m also concerned how construction or expanding road alignments would impact or require the removal of some of the old growth trees in and around the Cabin District. The VCNP should try to minimize the impacts of the development plan on these resources.”

*“A reroute of the main entrance road that would place the entrance road along South Mountain and to the cabin district will have serious impacts on the daily activities of Rocky Mountain elk (*Cervus canadensis*) in Valle Grande. This route would not only have impacts on the daily movements of elk, but could present an increase in elk-vehicle collisions, putting visitors, employees, and wildlife at risk and stretching thin law enforcement resources at Valles Caldera.”*

“Also, do not build a road behind the Cabin District. It would require removing healthy trees. For an unobstructed view of the Valle Grande, one need only cross the current road.”

“Location of the Main Entrance Road: of the options presented, my preference would be to move the existing road alignment (option 2).”

“I like the road re-route option closer to South Mountain and behind the Cabin District and History Grove.”

“Shrinking and removing the existing entrance road would allow the ground to heal, while keeping enough of its form to allow for multi-use activities, such as horseback riding, hiking, and biking—nonetheless, I want to emphasize the importance of removing the existing road to restore the Valle Grande, its views, and enable these recreational opportunities. Failing to do so would effectively just create two roads into the Valle Grande, which is both aesthetically and environmentally unsatisfying.”

“Provide defined parking for visitors in high traffic areas, such as the cabin district”

“I suggest that the NPS consider seasonal administrative use of the cabin district, while using their existing headquarters in Jemez Springs during the winter months. This would alleviate the burden and expense of trying to create a year-round access point to the Cabin District, while reducing impacts to the Historic buildings and District, along with the natural resources.”

“A paved road passing by the existing visitor center to the cabins is great.”

“The reasons for paving main roads make sense, but I would hate to see an increase in high speed traffic or more roads generally.”

“Glad to hear the road paving is happening, just hope there is a way to slow traffic without making it difficult to plow (ie speed bumps might be hard).”

“Most mountain communities prefer dirt/gravel roads, and are irritated when summer users demand pavement.”

“Not paving the roads is preferred to paving current roads unless dust becomes a problem with increased visitation.”

“A new visitor center should be located as close to NM 4 as possible on the present entrance road. The road to it and parking should be paved. No other roads in the Preserve should be paved.”

“Should NPS pave roads, which I strongly disagree with, it should nonetheless stay on the existing alignment as it is the most practical area to place a road and the existing road will cause the least amount of additional resource damage (when compared to an entirely new 6-mile entrance road.”

*“I prefer Option 1 to pave and widen the existing road in the Valle Grande. It might be a good idea to add speed bumps in several areas where prairie dogs are numerous. If Option 2 is built as shown it will go through an area where the invasive reed canary grass (*Phalaris arundinacea*) is growing and spreading out*

into the meadow and down the river. Seeds will be gathered by construction equipment and will spread this noxious weed to other areas.”

“The idea of placing a visitor center farther in on a new road (base of Redondo) would be too far from the highway to be useful to most of the public and would impact a wild area with major construction.”

Shuttle

Some commenters suggested a shuttle system within the preserve to reduce negative impacts to resources and as a way to mitigate negative impacts to neighbors along Forest Road 105 (FR 105). However, one commenter did not support shuttle service into the backcountry. In addition, one commenter discussed a garage that was built specifically to store electric shuttle vehicles for Valles Caldera National Preserve and was concerned that a shuttle program was not being considered in the plan, even though funding was used for shuttle program development.

Representative Quotes

“May need to develop a shuttle system between visitor services area and lodge to reduce impacts.”

“Maybe a shuttle would alleviate some of the disturbance that is bound to occur to residents along FR105.”

“Do you have electric shuttles available to the public? I’ve seen these at the Grand Canyon and thought they were an exceptional way to administer a park.”

“Plus shuttles and other access options for those who cannot bicycle.”

“A garage was built specifically to house electric shuttle vans purchased for “transporting public visitors from the Preserve’s entrance station to other areas of the Preserve” (Valles Caldera Environmental Assessment EV Garage Shop) including trail heads.”

“My main concern is that U.S. Department of Transportation and Federal Transit Administration funds, under the Paul S. Sarbanes “Transit in the Parks” program were used to build permanent infrastructure for a shuttle program that is not being planned for in this document.”

“A shuttle bus into the backcountry would be terrible.”

Time of Day Access

Many commenters noted an interest in extending the park’s opening and closing hours, for example, from dawn to dusk, to allow for night sky viewing, or to allow 24-hour access. Commenters noted that the current hours limit use, for example, by reducing the trail distances visitors can hike.

Representative Quotes

“Please increase the hours of access. Summer hours should be extended into spring and fall. Even better, a dusk to dawn policy mirroring Bandelier would be logical and user-friendly.”

“I am excited to see overnight opportunities included in the plan. I would love to have the opportunity to have extended, multi-day adventures in the park.

“It would be helpful if the operating hours were extended even on just two fixed days of the week (midweek and Saturday?). If they were extended on specific days, one could plan activities around those days.”

“The hours for driving vehicles into the backcountry should consider being greatly expanded. It is very difficult to drive to the Valles, drive to the backcountry, do an 8+ mile hike (slow hikers here who love to wander) and get out of the gate by 6 PM.”

Backcountry Access

Many commenters mentioned that the number of vehicles allowed in the backcountry should be expanded. Commenters mentioned some visitors drive around for a few hours, while others stop in one location for a longer period of time, for example, to fish or hike. Other commenters mentioned that backcountry access should remain as it is.

Representative Quotes

“Do allow more than 35 vehicles into the backcountry. Allow people to obtain permits at the entrance station.”

“Allowing more vehicles at one time into area, say 70 instead of 35, would improve my ability to access the preserve.”

“I am pleased to see a reconsideration of the 35 vehicle limit for backcountry access. I think this should be raised, but not too significantly. (For example, I think 100 vehicles would be too many.)”

“The limit of only 35 daily backcountry permits needs to be better justified, given the huge area involved, and the diversity of visitor uses. In the meanwhile, the Preserve should make sure that all 35 permits are issued every day, without losing many to unused Recreation.gov reservations. If unused permits are available to local visitors, while Recreation.gov permits favor distant visitors, then this may provide a better balance.”

“Keep cars limited to the Valle Grande District. And keep the 35 cars in the backcountry until the public pushes a change.”

“I do not support additional road work or permitting to allow more than the current 35 vehicles per day beyond the cabin district. In essence, I don’t support

so much development as to make the park overrun with sightseers and vehicle traffic. It's not a big park!"

"The 35 car limit to the backcountry is appropriate. No need to expand the road system."

Trail Access

Commenters felt the development of official trails and maintaining existing trails would drastically improve the park, and they noted the need for trail markers in some locations. Commenters would like to see trails better maintained, particularly regarding downed trees. Commenters noted that mountain peak access through official trails would be beneficial. Commenters also mentioned a need for access to bathrooms and drinking water at trailheads.

Commenters mentioned the importance of the Cerro La Jara Trail, which offers an easily accessed and short-distance hike for visitors. One commenter encouraged the use interpretive signage along Cerro La Jara, History Grove, Sulphur Springs, and the Valle Grande boardwalk. Some would like to access trails and groomed cross-country skiing trails in the winter. Some commenters mentioned concerns for safety and user conflict on multiuse trails, while other commenters supported multiuse trails.

Representative Quotes

"Incorporate well defined trails and signage, along with defined parking areas with attractive barriers to keep people and vehicles off sensitive areas."

"I support a trail to the top of La Jara and the current plans for trails of different use options (hikers only, hikers and horses, hikers and horses and mountain bikes)."

"I have been to all the peaks in the Park except Redondo (access to which I have been given permission by my family relationship at Jemez Pueblo), but getting to any of them has been a battle through logging debris and other downed timber. Some actual trails to the peaks would be nice."

"In the past I have enjoyed biking the many trails and am glad they will still be available and maintained. It's an impressive amount of work to maintain those trails considering all the downed trees from previous fires and wind events."

"More trails throughout the park are needed with signage and interpretive areas."

"More maintained and official trails would drastically improve the park. If trail markers could be deployed to help people navigate them would also be helpful in time as the park becomes more popular"

“I think if any improvements could be made to access, I would suggest only adding more trails through the back country, and maintaining the trails the currently exist, many of which are nearly impassable due to downed trees.”

“In general - more permanent bathroom facilities with water out in the back country, close to the public roads”

“Clear and open the old logging and mining roads that have been left unkept for decades. Clearing downed trees would go a long for all users while limiting access to areas during the Elk calving season.”

“I would like to see increased winter access and support some areas of groomed trails for cross country skiers and separate trails for snowshoers (e.g. around La Jara).”

“The general public would benefit greatly from more public-level scientific information in the form of self-guided maps and signs along trails and roadways and pulloffs with signs. So much of the scientific outreach value of the park could be enhanced this way (e.g. Cerro La Jara has such a cool scientific story, so adding to the availability of readily-accessible, public-level information would benefit greatly)”

“They also have some ideal interpretive and experiential potential for trails like Cerro La Jara, History Grove, Sulphur Springs, and the Valle Grande boardwalk.”

“I love the Cerro La Jara trail as that will be a prime activity for most visitors that is accessible and manageable in a shorter amount of time. It is also a site where visitors can experience quality examples of most of the park's stories and resources.”

“I think we could do more for winter type recreation such as cross country ski trails and signage.”

“I do not support multiple-use trails. My experience with mountain bikes and horses is I am scared to death by the approach and passage of bikes and nearly get hit by them or I must walk through horse manure and urine, which I do not like.”

“Same with the main multi-use path from the main entrance to Garita; amazing!”

Bike Access

Commenters suggested creating premier biking experiences, and some suggested this could be in conjunction with reducing options for vehicle access. One commenter recommended increasing access to bikes through rentals. Commenters noted the potential positive impact

that increased bike use and reduced vehicle use could have on road maintenance and the environment.

Commenters were also worried about loss of some bike trails if the park determines areas are eligible for wilderness designation. Some commenters do not want the well-established bikepacking routes in the northern part of the park eliminated. Many commenters mentioned hoping to maintain access to San Antonio Creek and hot springs for bikers as they are popular use areas. Some commenters agreed that some routes may be better suited for hikers but expressed the wider roads should stay accessible to bikes. Commenters also suggested shared use paths along roads. Comments also discussed e-bikes, with some commenters disapproving of their use, other commenters raising potential ADA concerns without them, and another commenter excited about the opportunity for pedal-assist e-bikes on vehicle roads.

Representative Quotes

“The Valle Caldera main preserve is perfectly suited for bikepacking and light mountain biking. Rather than creating yet another American-style drive-thru park, why not think more creatively and position the park as the premier cycling destination in the NPS system? You could have bikes for rent and borrow, plus shuttles and other access options for those who cannot bicycle. The bicycles would have a much lower impact on the roads, leading to less maintenance costs, and would have much lower impact on the environment, including eliminating noise, water and air pollution caused by vehicles.”

“The Caldera is huge and many of us love to bike through it from the main entrance all the way to the San Antonio hot springs. Limiting portions of the trail to hiking only would kill this crowd favorite.”

“In particular, we are concerned that Wilderness Designation may cut off irreplaceable bikepacking routes in the north section of the park, including the Valle Toledo and Valle San Antonio sections. Losing bicycle access to these areas would require significant reroute or even abandonment of well established bike packing routes.”

“Please do not close access for bikes on the trail out of the NW corner of the park. It has been proposed to make this a hiking only trail, but many people use this to access San Antonio creek and hot springs. Making this section of the park hiking only would hinder access greatly.

“Each of the preliminary Wilderness unit boundaries exclude bicycling access to existing trails. For example, the proposed Valle San Antonio unit would cut off a segment of the Great Divide Mountain Bike Route (GDMBR). This would exclude bicycling visitors from the VCNP and force the re-routing of an epic backcountry cycling route. The proposed Valle Toledo unit would cut-off VC09, which parallels a natural gas pipeline, and is part of a recommended bicycling loop on VCNP maps.”

“I would love to see more single track developed for mountain biking including potential options for multi-night bike packing with semi-designated camping area.”

“I am thrilled to hear that there is support for pedal-assist e-bikes on vehicle roads.”

“I do note that there seems to be an attempt to restrict e-bikes as well? I believe this situation has ADA implications from the perspective of disabled individuals who have diminished lung capacity who use an e-bike to access locations.”

“If you do decide to allow e-bikes, rules should be in place about how much power they have and noise. I'd hate to see them turn into motorcycles being allowed on biking trails.”

“We are against any e-bike access to non-motorized trails. We feel this would open the door to all motorized vehicles in the future to our wilderness areas and non-motorized accesses.”

Equestrian Access

Commenters' opinions varied about equestrian access and use in the park. Some commenters were concerned about the spread of invasive species through horse traffic, feces, trail damage during use, and pollution. While some commenters opposed equine use in the park, others appreciated the efforts for equestrian access. One commenter had concern that the plan may limit equestrian access.

Representative Quotes

“We appreciate the idea of 117 miles of trails and also appreciate 41 miles for hiking and riding horses.”

“The plan only shows one trail that is available for equestrians. This and the limitation on the number of vehicles permitted daily suggest very limited access to an important opportunity.”

“I also support evaluating and improving legacy logging roads for recreational use as unpaved hiking/equestrian/biking trails.”

“I am concerned about horse use since it can introduce and spread non-native invasive plant species (NNIPS). Research has shown that horse trails are more damaging and cost more to upkeep than hiking trails.”

“Horses cause more trail damage than bikes, introduce microbial contaminants from their feces, etc. If restrictions were being considered I would advocate limiting equestrian traffic to established roads where terrain damage could be minimized and biological contamination contained to a surface more isolated from other native flora and fauna.”

“Our specific resource concerns are the number of trails open to horses. Horse hooves can severely damage the trails in muddy conditions and they leave horse poop everywhere on the trails.”

QUESTION 2: ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES

How do you feel the management ideas and development concepts being considered provide activities and experiences you would enjoy? What activity or experience is missing and why should it be considered?

Recreation and Interpretation Ideas

Commenters noted a range of activities they would enjoy in the preserve, including horseback riding, walking, hiking, hunting, photography, snowshoeing, auto touring / sightseeing, cross-country skiing, bird watching, wildlife viewing, fishing, attending ranger talks, biking, and camping. Some commenters offered support for the proposed boardwalk trail along NM 4.

Commenters also made some recommendations for activities and interpretive experiences. Commenters recommended group and guided tours (such as horseback tours), wheelchair-accessible trails, picnic tables, amphitheater for ranger talks, astrophotography and dark sky opportunities, vista view pulloffs on roadways, educational exhibits, interpretive panels, and bikepacking opportunities. Some commenters would like to see single-track mountain biking trails. In addition, a couple of commenters did not want to see snowmobiling in the park, as snowmobiling would disturb the park’s natural qualities. Commenters mentioned a concern for impacts to flora and fauna from snowmobile use. One commenter mentioned a concern for how these vehicles may impact wildlife behavior during the winter months.

Representative Quotes

“I am a senior citizen and particularly interested in walking/hiking, X-country skiing, bird watching, ranger talks, and camping. I like the of the boardwalk trail. In the past, I have enjoyed programs and activities, such as the Storyteller Festival and trips on archaeology and geology.”

“I have enjoyed the Valles Caldera as a hiker in the spring, summer and fall and as a x-country skier and snowshoer in the winter.”

“I would like to see increased winter access and support some areas of groomed trails for cross country skiers and separate trails for snowshoers (e.g. around La Jara).”

“Increasing accessibility to the park would be a tremendous benefit to recreational outdoors folks. Allowing for more access to snowshoe, trail ride and hike would allow for many more people to enjoy what the Caldera has to offer.”

“To keep vehicle presence down maybe have some tours where several people get in ONE vehicle with a tour guide to see the further reaches of this great place.”

“I generally drive into a park and do auto touring, picnicking, and day hiking, but I don't camp or visit the backcountry. I like that the concepts open up vehicle access deeper into the park, and also that they allow for improved trailheads.”

“Please do not consider making snowmobiling an option for the Preserve. It would pre-empt the consideration of wilderness areas and worse - it would significantly degrade the visitor enjoyment of the natural resources (due to the noise) and degrade the solitude of the Preserve for the self-guided.”

Campgrounds

Many comments liked the idea of including campgrounds in the plan, as this would provide opportunities for increased access to the park. Commenters suggested a hiker/biker campsite and a group camp site. Commenters mentioned concern over loud noises from generators and suggested providing electrical hookups to eliminate the need for generators. There was also some concern about environmental impacts, including impacts to sensitive areas and resources, from campers. Commenters recommended the National Park Service closely monitor those impacts. Some commenters were concerned that campgrounds lead to resource damage, increased staffing requirements, fire safety issues, and garbage. One commenter specifically raised concerns for South Mountain and Cerro Piñon, stating campgrounds could disrupt wildlife behavior and create light pollution, and cited concerns for limited staffing and potential for resource damage. Commenters noted that human waste, trash, and fire rings may be left behind by campers. Some commenters were concerned with camping and paved roads in Banco Bonito, as the area contains archeological resources.

Representative Quotes

“I like the idea of a camping option. I am “local”; so would not likely take advantage of such a resource, but I am asked constantly if there are places to tent-camp in the VCNP.”

“If a traditional group campground is installed in Banco Bonito (probably the best place for it, due to current road access and existing development), please consider electric hookups for all sites. The use of generators by RV campers completely destroys the outdoor experience of others due to the great noise.”

“Concerning opening up a public vehicular access point to Banco Bonito. Access on a non-paved road with no camping facilities would be good idea. This area is known to be very dense in archaeological sites.”

“A campground would be a nice feature inside the park perhaps somewhere farther in preserve where traffic from hwy 4 cannot be heard.”

“The campgrounds located near South Mountain and Cerro Pinon. They will change wildlife behavior, induce light pollution, result in resource damage, and place additional demands on the already limited LE department (department of one for the foreseeable future given the hiring freeze).”

“The proposal of frontcountry campgrounds (and for that matter, backcountry campgrounds) only add to the night sky experience at Valles Caldera and broaden access to the stars as the sky only gets darker the further into the backcountry you go.”

“The building or improvement of roads, trails, and camping must avoid sensitive areas and resources.”

“The proposed camping sites area would likely to increase impacts in the designated areas, and should be limited in number.”

“Many of the campers that come up here leave tons of garbage, feces, glass bottles, leave campfires burning and damage the trees, etc”

“Car-based primitive camping results in areas getting trashed, with an overabundance of fire pits and the remains of human waste. Just look in the national forests. Developed campgrounds with defined parking areas, bathrooms, and a water supply are better.”

Dark Sky

Many commenters mentioned the park’s dark sky designation and requested access to experience the park’s dark sky for various activities, including stargazing, scientific use, and an astronomy program. Other commenters suggested the planning materials should note the park’s dark sky resource and opportunities.

Representative Quotes

“The one big activity I think is missing is a dedicated astronomy program. The Valles is a Dark Sky site, it is not trumpeted enough and currently facilities / access don't exist to allow easy sky observation late at night. The opposite of the Full Moon walks that lasted much later in the night for Milky Way core observation (Summer Months)”

“Let me in the park after hours for see this dark sky park. Not just for the limited events they have had in the past.”

“More Dark Sky access and programs.”

“The idea of having a dark sky certified park with no access after dark is very sad. People should be able to enjoy this park after dark and be able to take advantage of this lack of light pollution.”

“Would like to make sure that you maintain dark skies at location for stargazing.”

“There's no mention in the plan of VCNP's Dark Skies designation, nor a way for the public to take advantage of those skies that are away from highways and roadways with car lights at night.”

QUESTION 3: AREA IMPROVEMENT

What specific steps could the National Park Service take to improve your experience or protect resources at any of the following locations: Cabin District, Banco Bonito, Sulphur Springs, the Valle Grande District, Valle San Antonio, Valle Toledo, Valle Jaramillo, and Redondo Meadows?

Wilderness Eligibility and Wild and Scenic River Eligibility

Many commenters supported wilderness and wild and scenic river designations. Commenters suggested consolidating some of the wilderness areas to create larger contiguous areas. As noted in the “Bike Access” section of this document, some commenters were concerned that wilderness designation would reduce biking opportunities.

Representative Quotes

“Delighted to see that the planning process includes identifying Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River possible designations.”

“Advocate for Wild and Scenic designation for all rivers and creeks which would have far reaching consequences for the whole watershed. Recommend Wilderness designation for all the zones considered or consolidate several contiguous zones if appropriate.”

“The further development of hiking trails, designation of wilderness areas and back country camping will all enhance the visitor experience while supporting the mission of the Preserve; to enhance and maintain habitat biodiversity, limit disruption of animal behavior and plant habitats necessary for the maintenance of a healthy Preserve, and provide a unique human experience.”

“Conserving large portions of the Preserve by keeping these areas free of motorized and mechanized use (and of high-use hiking trails) is a critical component of the plan. We encourage the NPS to develop an alternative through the NEPA process that would consolidate two or more of the individual Wilderness units into larger, contiguous areas with backcountry zoning. Dividing Wilderness quality lands with corridors of self-guided zoning and improved trails, open to mechanized uses, would have adverse impacts on wildlife behavior and habitat. Providing larger areas of unfragmented Wilderness with backcountry zoning would support wildlife and offset some of the impacts from increased usage and visitation.”

Sulphur Springs Resource Protection and Interpretation

Many commenters discussed the importance of Sulphur Springs and the delicate hydrothermal activity, features, and mud pots that draw visitors. According to commenters, garbage, vehicles, trash, and abandoned homes should be removed and the area cleaned up. Multiple commenters mentioned interpretive signage should be made available, along with boardwalks in delicate thermal areas. Another commenter recommended guided tours as an

option for additional resource protection. Commenters shared concern about potential resource damage from road expansion in the vicinity. A commenter was also concerned about potential wildfires from an increase in visitation due to the abundance of fuels in the Sulphur Creek watershed.

Representative Quotes

“Sulphur Springs is an incredible addition to the park. It is a “mini-Yellowstone” that offers a wonderful opportunity for outreach about hydrothermal activity, the interaction between surface waters and the hot rock below.”

“Sulphur Springs needs to be cleaned up from abandoned cars and homes and restores to a more natural resource.”

“Sulphur Springs: boardwalks, interpretative signage, access other than FR105”

“Sulphur Springs is a geologically unique and extremely sensitive area that has already been badly degraded by unregulated foot traffic around the geothermal features. The area needs to have debris removed (old wood, etc.), and a system of boardwalks built over the surface of the most delicate areas near the mud pots. This would also help protect visitors from accidentally stepping/falling into scalding hot water. Interpretive signage should be installed to tell the interesting history of the area and describe some of the historic structures and uses by various groups. The fact that mud pots even exist in this area is incredible, and these rare features are worthy of protection.”

“Controlled guided tours can help protect these areas, while providing limited access.”

“Sulphur Springs is an excellent interpretation opportunity.”

“Sulphur Springs: After restoring the area, provide road access to site with parking. Interpretive boardwalk and trails. Major trailhead with signs, rest facilities, parking, and roving rangers.”

Sulphur Springs Congestion and Access

Commenters also noted the need to be sensitive to neighborhood concerns about traffic and congestion. Commenters noted traffic congestion occurs at the Sulphur Springs gate, and a small parking lot near the gate would be beneficial for reducing congestion. In addition, multiple commenters mentioned vehicle speed as of concern. There was concern that increased traffic could lead to unsafe conditions and increased dust accumulation on FR 105. Commenters noted that FR 105 is currently primarily used and maintained for residential subdivisions and that it may not be safe for larger volumes of traffic, as it has blind corners and sections that allow only one lane of traffic. Commenters suggested that improvements to the Sulphur Creek roads inside the park should also equate to reconstruction of FR 105 to similar standards.

Representative Quotes

“For Sulphur Springs, the park service should address dust and speed issues through the private community by paving the road and using speed bumps.”

Sulphur Springs FR 105: “Recreational visitors tend to drive faster and combined with local traffic, dust is substantially worse adding to other safety issues.”

“One of the initial development proposals offered is to reconstruct the road, perhaps including a paved surface, from the VCNP boundary to a new parking area and trailhead to be constructed in the old Sulphur Mine area. FSR 105 is inadequate, perhaps unsafe, for existing traffic. Any new developed use on the VCNP that is accessed by FSR 105 which justifies construction of an improved road on the VCNP should require reconstruction of FSR 105 to the same standard.”

“Establishing a parking area at the Sulphur Springs gate would be helpful. Currently more and more users access the VCNP from that gate and there is very limited parking.”

“Do not extend vehicular access on the Sulphur Canyon Rd. beyond Sulphur Springs. Do allow cars to park near Sulphur Springs.”

“Sulphur Springs - We love Sulphur Springs however we feel that limiting access would help maintain its natural and historical uniqueness.”

“We like the idea of driving Sulphur Canyon road but this needs to be limited to a few vehicles to maintain the solitude of this beautiful, remote location.”

“Beyond the cabin district, however, access should be limited to Sulphur Springs, Valle San Antonio, Valle Toledo, Valle Jaramillo, and Redondo Meadows. Controlled guided tours can help protect these areas, while providing limited access.”

“I also really like the additional front-country access to Sulphur Springs, Redondo Meadows, and Banco Bonito. Obviously, each of these areas need thoughtful development to ensure resource protection and fee payment as none need visitors to stop by the main visitor services area.”

QUESTION 4: IDEAS AND DEVELOPMENT CONCEPTS

What do you like or dislike about the preliminary management ideas and development concepts the park is considering? Do any aspects of these initial ideas raise specific resource concerns?

Resource and Wildlife Protection

Some commenters wanted to see more emphasis on protection of resources, especially areas concerning bird and elk breeding and nesting, and conservation of native species, including

beaver, New Mexico meadow jumping mouse, Rio Grande cutthroat trout, Rio Grande sucker, and Rio Grande chub. While some commenters supported a visitor services area, others expressed concern that new facilities would be detrimental to the experience and would be challenging to maintain. Commenters mentioned the death of animals on NM 4 users and suggested a wildlife overpass.

Representative Quotes

“Valle San Antonio - Pursue conservation of native species; beaver, New Mexico meadow jumping mouse, Rio Grande Cutthroat trout, Rio Grande Sucker, and Rio Grande Chub.”

“Manage visitors to protect important Conservation Opportunity Area as described by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. Important bird breeding/nesting and elk breeding/calving areas.”

“A wildlife and visitor trail overpass over NM-4 would help preserve wildlife, protect visitors, and provide a safer and better way to connect visitors between those areas bisected by NM-4.”

“I feel that increased visitor numbers are detrimental to the ecological values of the preserve. More infrastructure to accommodate more people affects wildlife behavior, water quality, increase in wildfire risk etc.”

Visitor Center

Many commenters supported a visitor center near NM 4, as it would create an easy access point for visitors and utilities and would have limited impact from snow due to its close proximity to the state route. In addition, commenters noted this area offers panoramic views of the Valle Grande.

A few commenters mentioned concerns about building a visitor center near Redondo Slope or the Cabin District due to their proximity to resources sensitive to Jemez Pueblo and proximity to elk migration and other wildlife corridors; they also expressed concern about negative repercussions from increased traffic. Commenters strongly urged against building in this area due to the archeological artifacts in the Cabin District. One commenter mentioned that this area contains wetlands and the history grove, which development of a visitor area may disturb. Commenters mentioned the importance of preserving views from a new visitor center, with one comment specifically expressing concern about large buses impacting views in the Cabin District. One commenter noted that a prior environmental impact analysis for the three visitor center optional locations was completed by the Valles Caldera Trust and that the Cabin District location raised resource protection, safety, and financial concerns.

Some commenters preferred the option of restoring and reusing the cabins as a visitor center area to reduce new construction and building footprints in the park and to provide a historical connection to visitors on entrance. Commenters asked that Rabbit Mountain be considered as a visitor center location.

Representative Quotes

“A visitor center located closer to Highway 4 at the missing cabin location would greatly improve my overall experience because of its closeness to the highway and more fiscally responsible location.”

“The Visitor Center should be located closer to NM 4, either at the site of the Missing Cabin, or closer to the road. However, that shouldn't preclude taking steps to make the cabin district more accessible with other visitor sites and services.”

“With intense winters, it does not make sense to put a visitor center so far from Highway 4. I strongly support the VCNP to create a visitor center near/on Route 4”

“Highly recommend visitor center/services and education center near Highway 4, and/or tucked into the landscape with minimal impact to the view shed.”

“Creating a visitor center near Highway 4 makes the most sense in terms of public access (no 4WD necessary in the winter) and minimal impact to the land and wildlife.”

“Again, I am seriously concerned about Plans 2 and 3 and their potential disruptive impacts on wetlands and historic elk migration patterns. Many visitors will only come to the visitor center and take short hikes in areas adjacent to the visitor center.”

“The idea of placing a visitor center farther in on a new road (base of Redondo) would be too far from the highway to be useful to most of the public and would impact a wild area with major construction.”

“Using the historic structures as the visitor center or developing this area will very much diminish the visitor's experience in that location.”

“It would seem the best place for a visitor center would be west of the cabin district although the front entrance would be desirable as well. I discourage building a visitor center within the cabin district.”

“Regarding the park proposed road and visitor center planning, I would like to see either option 2 or 3 used instead of option one.”

“I prefer option 2, reusing existing structures in the Cabin District. This gives some purpose to the buildings and allows visitors to have some sense of connection to the history of the Valle Grande and Valles Caldera.”

“We also support option#2 for the visitor center to give the full experience and history of the area.”

“Please DO NOT spoil the grandeur of Valle Grande with a “Visitor Center”; full of useless Made in China junk. People don't need 'stuff' or 'snacks' - they need experiences of real places - conversation with knowledgeable ranger/scientist staff - EXERCISE - fresh air - and above all peace and quiet to view the land, animals and sky.”

“An environmental impact analysis was done by the Valles Caldera Trust for a potential visitor center location in all three locations. The cabin district area was eliminated from further consideration due to concerns about financial sustainability, anticipated impacts to resources, and safety.”

“During the Trust years, a suitability analysis was done for Rabbit Mountain for a visitor center, and this seems a good choice given the views and proximity to the highway. However, we note that the Rabbit Mountain site considered by the Trust is now zoned self-guided zone and should be rezoned for visitor engagement. The zoning for this site could be changed to allow consideration for this location. We favor this location.”

Engagement with Tribes and Stakeholders

Commenters also wanted to ensure that tribes and stakeholders are meaningfully engaged in the planning effort. A commenter requested the National Park Service listen to Jemez Pueblo and other tribes regarding plans for Banco Bonito.

Representative Quotes

“It is critical for the NPS to engage in meaningful consultation with affiliated Pueblos and Tribes regarding the array of sensitive and important cultural features of the Preserve's landscape.”

“This is ancestral land to the Jemez Pueblo and other tribes, and I am hoping that NPS is listening to their views on a proposed campground at this location.”

“I am glad that the tribes have input in this and was wondering if there would be a directive concerning their management of these lands.”

OUTSIDE THE SCOPE OF THE PLANNING EFFORT

The following comments are outside the scope of the general management plan / development concept plan and may be addressed by the National Park Service in other efforts.

Trespass Cattle

Many commenters noted cattle grazing impacts the park's resources, including the impact to water and the leftover waste produced. Commenters expressed concern for the impacts cattle have on wildlife.

Reintroduction of Wolves

A couple of commenters mentioned the reintroduction of wolves into the Valles Caldera as an alternative to hunting, with one commenter recommending it as a solution for managing the elk population.

Illegal Motorized Use and Poaching

Commenters noted concern over illegal motorized use and poaching and recommended greater law enforcement coverage in the preserve.

Backcountry Reservation System

Commenters noted reduced access due to having to make reservations and suggested reservations be made available on a first-come, first-served basis, along with other recommendations.

Valles Caldera Rim Trail

Commenters were interested in a caldera rim trail, with one commenter stating that zoning may impact its future development. Multiple commenters hoped the rim trail feasibility study could be completed, in light of the resources that have already been put into the project, including voices from Congress.

Hunting

Commenters supported hunting activities within the preserve, but some noted concerns about hunting access. A few commenters mentioned that hunters received special privileges by taking advantage of camping that is unavailable to the general public. Some commenters raised concerns over why hunting and fishing are not addressed in the plan. Other commenters voiced general support and opposition to hunting.

Backcountry Camping

Commenters expressed interest in learning more about plans for backcountry camping, including equestrian, bike, and hiker backcountry camping. This issue will be addressed in future planning, not in the general management plan.