

## **Sangre de Cristo Chronicle Report on USFS Meeting in Taos**

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"National Treasure" -- Forest Service grapples with Valle Vidal future  
Liz Saxe, staff writer

TAOS -- Hundreds of concerned citizens attended the first of several open houses the Carson National Forest will host in the coming months on the Valle Vidal to help gauge public opinion on the future management direction of the unit.

A majority attending the Thursday night, Feb. 10, meeting at the Taos Convention Center supported statements in opposition to proposed oil and gas drilling.

Acting Forest Supervisor Kendall Clark opened the presentations by laying the scene for the long Forest Plan Amendment process ahead. "This is a marathon," she said. "All of us are still gathering at the starting line."

According to Clark, the purpose of amending the forest plan is to provide a "clear management direction for the Valle Vidal." She emphasized the Forest Service has not proposed oil and gas drilling in the unit but that a proposal to drill by El Paso Corporation initiated a mandatory review process.

The Forest Service commissioned a study by New Mexico Tech, which found potential for mineral development in the eastern third of the Valle Vidal unit.

In closing, Clark reiterated, "Our current focus now is developing a vision for the whole Valle Vidal."

Citizens speaking focused on the varied uses of the Valle Vidal and most voiced opposition to oil and gas drilling in the unit.

Joe Torres, president of the Valle Vidal Grazing Association, emphasized the Valle Vidal belongs to the public and should be managed in its interest. "Pennzoil donated the Valle Vidal not to the Forest Service, not to the government, but to the people of the United States. It's not government land, it's your land," he said to applause.

"Certain lands are more important for their scenic beauty than for extracting minerals," he concluded.

Bill Brown spoke for the Coalition for the Valle Vidal, which includes over 100 organizations and 4,000 citizens of Northern New Mexico. Brown said the coalition's position is that the Valle Vidal is a national treasure and should be protected accordingly.

Echoing Torres, Brown declared, "The Valle Vidal should be managed for the benefit of the people ó all the people. It is a grave mistake to exploit this special place for the benefit of the energy industry." He emphasized the value of the watersheds, its potential as a sustainable resource for Northern New Mexico, recreational values and its unique wildlife habitats.

Mark Anderson, program manager for Philmont Scout Ranch, discussed how thousands of Boy Scouts use the Valle Vidal. Every summer, 22,000 visitors, 5,000 participants in Boy Scout training facilities and 1,016 seasonal staff descend upon Philmont. Anderson said this summer, Philmont expects about 2,000 Boy Scouts will visit the Valle Vidal.

The Valle Vidal provides Scouts with unique training and educational opportunities. "We practice 'leave no trace' principles," Anderson said, "What a great place to learn that practice."

Additionally, every Scout who uses the Valle Vidal must volunteer at least 3 hours on conservation projects in the unit. To date, Anderson estimated Scouts have dedicated 69,000 volunteer hours to projects including fire rehabilitation efforts, streambed and watershed improvements and erosion barriers.

Scouts who visit the Valle Vidal have the opportunity to participate in educational programs at three staff camps in the unit, including mountain biking, astronomy, environmental awareness and search and rescue.

According to Anderson, "Our partnership with the Forest Service has been a positive one. The Valle Vidal has become an important part of the Philmont experience." He added, "The chance to see that elk herd is a life experience."

Andy Romero, an avid horseman, described his family's long history as homesteaders in the region and recalled taking his first horse into the Valle Vidal. "I stand here in solidarity with anyone who doesn't want the Valle Vidal drilled," he said. "The area is beautiful ó words can't describe it. We shouldn't be able to put a dollar value on it."

Taylor Streit, an angler, guide and outfitter, argued the Valle Vidal provides unique angling experiences that are becoming harder to find throughout the nation. "The Valle Vidal is still one of the only easy access public fisheries that's good enough to guide on," he said. "It is one of the very few wild and unspoiled areas accessible to the public."

After arguing the values of the Valle Vidal for fishing, Streit added, "The Carson Forest should be commended for its fine stewardship of the land thus far."

David Delling of Renewable Energy Resources, who has worked in the mining industry, provided the lone counterbalance. He spoke to the potential benefits of strictly regulated and environmentally conscious drilling in the Valle Vidal.

Referencing a recent article in The Albuquerque Journal, Delling said money from oil and gas royalties that comes into New Mexico goes directly to public education. "Extractive industries contribute to the New Mexico education system over \$1 million a day," he said.

Delling agreed with other presenters that the Valle Vidal is valuable for a number of reasons. "I believe National Forests are truly Lands of Many Uses," he concluded.

History of Valle Vidal According to forest planner David Seesholtz, the Valle Vidal became public land in 1982 when Pennzoil donated 101,794 acres to the American people. Carson National Forest has been steward of the land since the donation. After an environmental analysis, the Forest Service determined it should pursue a policy of multiple use management for the area.

The special warranty deed for the land conveys all improvements on the land, includes the road easement through Vermejo Park Ranch and includes coal royalties in the area, but does not otherwise restrict land use.

Carson National Forest has a Memorandum of Understanding with New Mexico Game and Fish and Vermejo Park Ranch that emphasizes the diversity and high quality of wildlife and fishing in the unit.

Besides emphasizing wildlife, the multiple use management policy stipulates three to four million board feet of timber may be removed from the unit every year. Additionally, approximately 60,000 acres of coal rights in the Valle Vidal are privately owned.

Seesholtz also outlined the timeline for amending the forest plan. Carson National Forest hopes to issue a Notice of Intent to amend the plan in May, which will be followed by a 90 day public scoping and comment period.

The forest plans to release a draft environmental impact statement in about a year. Another 90 day public comment period will follow. The process is expected to be completed by a record of decision in September 2006.

Finally, Seesholtz addressed the leasing process for public lands. Public lands can be automatically closed to leasing if they are reclassified as a wilderness study area by the Secretary of Agriculture, if they are withdrawn from leasing by an act of Congress or the Secretary of the Interior, or by an executive order. None of these methods have been applied to the Valle Vidal.

The Forest Service may thus consider three leasing options for the unit. The Valle Vidal may be open to development with standard stipulations, with special stipulations, such as regulating surface infrastructure, or it may be closed to leasing entirely.

The Forest Service is planning future open houses in Raton and Santa Fe to provide citizens additional opportunities to comment on the management direction of the Valle Vidal.