

Valles Caldera looks to future as national park

December 23 2014, by Susan Montoya Bryan

The management experiment at Valles Caldera National Preserve is coming to an end as the National Park Service prepares to take over the 140-square-mile property in northern New Mexico.

The transition is among dozens of public land measures squeezed into the half-trillion-dollar defense bill signed by President Barack Obama on Friday, but details about how things will change at the preserve remain unclear.

The Park Service is taking on Valles Caldera and numerous other properties at a time when the agency is struggling with more than \$11 billion in deferred maintenance at existing parks and monuments and is looking to boost entrance fees at parks across the nation to generate more revenue in advance of the agency's centennial.

Can the agency afford what amounts to its largest expansion in nearly four decades?

U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn says no. The Oklahoma Republican said Friday on the Senate floor that expanding the park system was "a disastrous idea" and that the nation's existing parks were falling apart.

Since Congress already authorized the new parks, Park Service spokesman Jeff Olson said Monday the agency's job now is to find money within its existing budget as it investigates what resources will be needed to get the parks up and running. Those needs will be reflected in

next year's budget request.

Olson said the challenge of adding seven new parks in eight different states is "part of what we do. We're in the business of preserving special places for people to enjoy."

At Valles Caldera, the transition is expected to take six months. An interim budget is due in 90 days.

The preserve is home to vast grasslands, the remnants of one of North America's few super volcanoes and one of New Mexico's most famous elk herds. It's also held sacred by Jemez Pueblo, a Native American community fighting in federal court to reclaim the land.

The federal government bought the property from land grant heirs in 2000 with the goal of operating it as a working ranch while developing recreational opportunities for the public. It was something conservationists and members of New Mexico's congressional delegation worked decades to secure.

After 10 years of management by a presidentially-appointed board of trustees, the government's management experiment failed to become financially self-sufficient, and supporters began pushing for the Park Service to take over.

Under the Park Service, they argued, the preserve would have access to the resources needed for its protection and for the desired public access.

While Park Service officials say their job is to protect Valles Caldera and the new parks for future generations, the agency has acknowledged it's facing a large backlog of maintenance projects and equipment shortages.

About 90 percent of all paved roads in the park system are in fair to poor condition, 28 bridges are considered structurally deficient and more than one third of trails—about 6,700 miles—are in poor or seriously deficient condition.

At the same time, visits are up and the agency is dealing with more traffic and congestion.

Valles Caldera Executive Director Jorge Silva-Banuelos had his first meeting with regional park officials last week to discuss a master plan for trails at the preserve. Opening the property to more hiking, biking, snowshoeing, hunting and fishing was already in the works and Silva-Banuelos hopes that continues under the new management.

Valles Caldera's science and education teams were also on track to complete a full inventory of all plant and animal species on the preserve. Silva-Banuelos said ensuring the science continues will come down to the Park Service developing a funding strategy.

"It really is to me one of the most impressive landscapes in the Southwest, something that almost looks out of place," he said. "It's awe-inspiring and I think it has the potential to really bring together a lot of communities around the goal of protecting it and seeing that it has a positive future going forward."

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Citation: Valles Caldera looks to future as national park (2014, December 23) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-12-valles-caldera-future-national.html>

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