

## More Support Needed to Push Otero Mesa Drilling Moratorium

For more than five years, the debate over drilling in Otero Mesa has been waged in the press and on the ground. For many it has been a fight about protecting the largest and wildest Chihuahuan desert grassland remaining on our federal public lands from the ravages of oil and gas development.

Recently, more awareness has focused on the vast quantities of fresh water that lie just beneath Otero Mesa, in what is known as the Salt Basin. Conservative estimates generated by the U.S. Geological Survey, Interstate Stream Commission and Sandia National Labs say that enough fresh water in the Salt Basin to supply 1 million New Mexicans for 40 years. This is a lot of water that must be preserved for the future quality of life of southern New Mexicans.

In late April, 200 people showed up to a public forum in Alamogordo to learn more about the wilderness of Otero Mesa and the water potential of the Salt Basin. This was not a group of rabid environmentalists, rather it was a cross-section of the community—ranchers, sportsman, housewives, retirees, and citizens from Ruidoso, Capitan, Carrizozo, and Las Cruces.

What came from that meeting was a strong determination by the people to see a three-year moratorium put in place to stop any oil and gas development while state and federal agencies continue to study the large Salt Basin aquifer.

It makes absolute sense for the federal government to put the breaks on and be prudent when it comes to our future water supplies, especially given all of the cases of groundwater contamination due to oil and gas drilling.

In 2005, a report was released by the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, which documented 1,400 cases of groundwater polluted by drilling operations.

Preliminary reports of the Salt Basin show that the Recharge areas of the Salt Basin are generally vulner-

able to the introduction of contaminants. The Basin also contains areas of rapid groundwater movement, which can make the entire system vulnerable to the rapid spread of pollution.

In February, Governor Richardson secured \$1 million to study the aquifer of the Salt Basin and has repeatedly asked that Otero Mesa be protected. This spring, Senator Bingaman, Senator Domenici, and Congressman Udall wrote letters to the Department of the Interior and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) requesting a moratorium on any oil and gas drilling and leasing in Otero Mesa. This bipartisan leadership clearly demonstrates that New Mexico's fresh water is more important than a few days worth of oil and gas.

However, on June 1, the Bush Administration rejected the unprecedented bipartisan request for a moratorium by our congressional delegation. This is a slap in the face to New Mexicans, Senators Bingaman and Domenici, and Congressman Udall.

The Bush Administration is out of touch with the needs of New Mexicans, and the Congress and local elected officials that represent them. There has been a groundswell of support for deferring oil and gas activity at Otero Mesa. In addition to the delegation's letters supporting a moratorium, the Doña Ana County Commission passed a resolution supporting a moratorium.

Please contact Senators Bingaman and Domenici (see contact info page 3) and urge them to add a legislative moratorium amendment to the New Mexico Aquifer Assessment Act of 2007. The act, if passed, would study several aquifers in New Mexico, including the Salt Basin to determine water recharge rates,



Flattop Winds grasslands (Photo by Nathan Newcomer)

the relationship between surface and sub-surface water flow, and the vulnerability to contamination. However, there is nothing legally preventing the BLM from moving forward with its oil and gas leasing program in Otero Mesa. This is why a legislative moratorium is paramount if we are to fully study the Salt Basin aquifer under Otero Mesa.

For more info, contact Nathan Newcomer, NM Wilderness Alliance (843-8696, nathan@nmwild.org)

—Nathan Newcomer

## Chaco Gas Wells Halted, but County Pursues Paving

On June 6, Cimarex Corporation officially tabled its proposed gas wells south of Chaco Culture National Historical Park, saying it had indefinitely postponed its exploration on the leases granted to them by the New Mexico State Land Office. Cimarex will seek compensation from the state to cover what it sees as a potential loss in income from its decision not to drill. Public pressure from many groups including the Sierra Club, the Chaco Alliance, and the San Juan Citizens Alliance was instrumental in halting this disastrous venture. San Juan County, however, has not backed off its ill-fated desire to pave the remaining 13 miles of gravel road into Chaco. Although some County Commissioners support improvements other than paving, the tenaciousness of County Commission Chair James Henderson appears to have triumphed, and the County will begin an Environmental Assessment (EA), which will include the paving option. San Juan County has produced no supporting evidence, but it continues to use safety and access as reasons for paving.

A quarter of a million dollars will be used to do the EA, thus invoking important National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) standards. But Rep. Tom Udall (see contact info page 3) should call for an extensive Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), not simply the less thorough EA. He must also be urged not to grant any more federal money for this project, and to support low impact improvements to the road like good signs, good fencing, and better maintenance instead of paving. Please send emails to San Juan County Commissioner James Henderson (hendersonj@sjcounty.net) and Federal Highway Administrator J. Don Martinez (johndon.martinez@fwaha.dot.gov) in support of an EIS and against paving. Public meetings may begin this summer as part of the NEPA process. Visit [www.dont-pave-chaco.com](http://www.dont-pave-chaco.com) for meeting times and updates.

—Anson Wright, Coordinator, Chaco Alliance

## New Group Steps in Behind Valles Caldera Coalition

With summer greening the Valles Caldera National Preserve, a new group has formed to advocate for the wild, natural, and cultural values of the Preserve and appropriate public access to this 89,000-acre gem of public land. Our new, to-be-named-in-June organization has a board of directors that includes steering committee members from the former Valles Caldera Coalition. Our 501(c)3 status is pending, and we invite vigorous participation from all who share our awe of and concern for the Valles.

Here are the mission and vision guiding our work:

**Vision:** Inspired by the majesty of the Valles Caldera, we envision the restoration and protection of its unique natural and cultural heritage, so that present and future generations can experience the sense of wonder that comes from individual discovery in this ecologically and culturally significant landscape.

**Mission:** Our organization fosters active citizen participation in the restoration, protection, and appreciation of the Valles Caldera National Preserve, for the long-term benefit of the place itself, the American public, and visitors from around the world.

Meanwhile the Board of Trustees of the Valles Caldera Trust is finally beginning formal, long-range, preserve-wide resource management planning at the Preserve. Rather than complete a comprehensive plan for the Preserve as many have long advocated, three separate National Environmental Planning (NEPA) processes will occur, led by "Forage Management" (addressing grazing by elk and cattle, and other uses of

the grasslands). This will be followed by "Public Access," (addressing recreation, education and research), and "Forestry," (addressing forest and fire management).

An open house in mid-June launched the forage/grazing planning process. Anyone interested in elk and cattle at the VCNP can now express their views formally to the Trust's board and staff. This is a critical opportunity for shaping the troubled cattle program at the Valles as well as elk management. We now have a chance to address serious water quality and woody plant reproduction problems at the Preserve as well as economic aspects of cattle grazing. Contact the Trust's Natural Resources Coordinator Marie Rodriguez (661-3333, mrodriguez@vallescaldera.gov, the public outreach coordinator for Public Access planning specifically (mary@maryorton.com, or our organization (info@vcc.org).

Three new Trustees officially joined the Valles Board of Trustees at a public meeting in mid-June in Los Alamos. Appointed by President Bush, they are Stephen Henry (Fish Wildlife and Recreation), James D. Range (Conservation), and Edward R. Tinsley (Financial Management). The next public board meetings are scheduled for September 6 in Jemez Springs and December 11 in Santa Fe public. These meetings offer opportunity for direct public comment and oversight.

For more information, contact Tom Ribe, President of the "new Coalition" organization (690-0305), and Vice-President Tom Jervis (info@vcc.org).

—Tom Ribe