



USDA Forest Service
National Forest System
Briefing Paper

Date: July 5, 2006

Topic: Carson National Forest (Valle Vidal)

Issue: In 1982, 101,794 acres of land (Valle Vidal) was donated to the Federal Government, administered by the Carson National Forest. Due to the timing of the donation, management direction for the area was not included in the Carson Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan), which was implemented in 1986. The 1986 Forest Plan decision noted that future environmental analysis will be used to decide management direction for Valle Vidal, and appropriate management prescriptions would then be incorporated in the plan. A decision on how Valle Vidal is to be managed has not yet been incorporated in the Carson Forest Plan and the area continues to be managed using a 1983 Multiple-Use Area Guide.

In June 2002, the Forest Service received an expression of interest to lease 40,000 acres of the eastern portion of Valle Vidal for coalbed methane development. Before any National Forest System lands can be leased, the Forest Service must conduct a leasing analysis to determine which lands are administratively available. The Forest Service decided in May 2004 that a Forest Plan amendment is needed to establish the natural resource goals, objectives, standards, guidelines, and desired conditions, prior to considering Valle Vidal for leasing. Any subsequent leasing analysis would follow after the amendment process is completed.

Background: The scoping process for the proposed forest plan amendment was initiated on June 14, 2005 with the publication in the *Federal Register* of a notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS). The proposal to amend the Carson Forest Plan to incorporate management direction for Valle Vidal, consistent with the National Forest Management Act and the National Environmental Policy Act, was publicly circulated in the summer of 2005.

Over 50,000 people commented on the proposed amendment through a variety of methods - form letters, post cards, individual letters, petitions, e-mails, and phone calls. A majority of comments related to gas leasing on Valle Vidal, however approximately 125 letters did provide relevant comments pertaining to the proposed Forest Plan amendment. From these comments, significant issues were identified and used to generate alternatives. The interdisciplinary team is in the process of finalizing the alternatives to be considered in detail. It should be noted that since the purpose and need for the proposed amendment is not to determine whether Valle Vidal should be made available for leasing, no alternative will address gas development in this forest planning process. A comparison of alternatives (including the proposed amendment) and an analysis of effects on the human environment – physical, biological, social, and economic will be included in the EIS. The draft EIS is scheduled for public comment in late-summer of 2006. A final EIS should be completed in early 2007.

Other Events Related to Valle Vidal: Outside of the forest plan amendment process, several actions associated with Valle Vidal have occurred. In January 2006, the NM Water Quality Control Commission designated the surface waters within Valle Vidal as Outstanding National Resource Waters (ONRWs) in accordance with the Clean Water Act. This designation disallows any new or increased discharges to ONRWs or to their tributaries that would result in lower water quality. The alternatives being developed for the Valle Vidal Forest Plan Amendment EIS

acknowledge the ONRW designation and provide management direction to comply with the policy.

On May 31, 2006, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson filed a petition with the Secretary of Agriculture in support of protecting the State's inventoried roadless areas identified in the 2000 Roadless Area Conservation Final EIS. In addition, the petition formally recommends Valle Vidal to be added as a roadless area with the same protection as the other inventoried roadless areas. It is not known at this time, whether the Governor's petition will be accepted and, if so, what the implications would be on the management of Valle Vidal. The Carson National Forest is presently conducting a roadless inventory in Valle Vidal. If any roadless areas are identified, specific management direction will be included in the alternatives for the Valle Vidal Forest Plan Amendment EIS.

On June 21, 2006, the House Resources Committee approved a bill, sponsored by U.S. Representative Tom Udall, for consideration by the House which would withdraw all of Valle Vidal from applicable mineral laws. Senator Jeff Bingaman has sponsored similar legislation in the Senate Energy Natural Resources Committee, but it has yet to reach the floor of the Senate for a vote. The Carson National Forest is currently in the process of incorporating management direction for Valle Vidal into its forest plan, which is not considering any decision related to energy or mineral development; therefore this action does not affect the current EIS process. A subsequent leasing analysis would be affected if the Valle Vidal Protection Act is passed by Congress and signed by the President.

Key Points

- The draft EIS for the Valle Vidal Forest Plan Amendment is scheduled for release in late-summer of 2006.
- A final EIS and subsequent decision is scheduled sometime in early 2007.
- Any decision on leasing Valle Vidal will be made through a separate EIS, after the Forest Plan amendment is implemented.
- Management direction related to ONRW designation of Valle Vidal's surface waters will be included in the decision for the Valle Vidal Forest Plan Amendment.
- The Valle Vidal Forest Plan Amendment will include a roadless inventory and management direction associated with any identified areas.
- The proposed legislation currently being raised in Congress to withdraw Valle Vidal from applicable mineral laws would not impact the forest planning process presently underway.

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