

# High Country News

For people who care  
about the West

## **An experiment in privatizing public land fails after 14 years**

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It is no secret that some state legislators in the West want to boot federal land management agencies from their states. They argue that agencies like the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service cost too much and are too detached from local values, and that states could make money by running our vast open spaces like a privately owned business.

The Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based libertarian think tank, is of that opinion and has developed models to replace federal agencies with private interests. What many people don't know is that Congress implemented one of the Cato Institute's ideas in 2000, on the 89,000-acre Valles Caldera National Preserve in New Mexico. For some critics of the federal government, this was the experiment in land management that would signal the end of the BLM and Forest Service in the West.

The Cato experiment in New Mexico, however, failed, chewed up by the friction between monetizing the "services" that landscapes provide — recreation, timber, grass, wildlife — and fulfilling citizens' expectations for public access and protecting natural resources. For example, New Mexicans had very little tolerance for paying high fees to visit public property that had already been paid for using federal Land and Water Conservation Fund dollars.

The Valles Caldera experiment began after a Texas oil family expressed interest in selling its large property atop a dormant volcano near Santa Fe. A reluctant Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., agreed to federal ownership, but only if the property was not managed by traditional federal agencies. The Valles Caldera Preservation Act, which was passed in 2000, was designed to create an alternative model of management.