

## Valle Vidal water heart of proposal

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When the Carson National Forest accepted the Valle Vidal from Pennzoil in the 1980s, the agency did its best to coax back to health the high-mountain landscape that was grazed and logged to exhaustion.

Decades later, Amigos Bravos, a Taos-based water conservation organization, is trying to get the U.S. Forest Service to center the ongoing restoration of the Valle Vidal unit of the Carson — especially its meadow wetlands — in a “once-in-a-generation” management plan.

“The Forest Service will be incorporating the Valle Vidal into the forest plan in some form or another during this planning process,” said Rachel Conn, projects director for Amigos Bravos. “This proposal is about ensuring that it is incorporated in [a] way that protects and enhances the values that have made the Valle Vidal a beloved part of the Northern New Mexico landscape.”

The proposal, submitted Feb. 14 (as a “valentine for the Valle Vidal”), asks the Carson to establish a “special geographic area” for the Valle Vidal, a 100,000-acre stretch of meadows, conifer forests and headwaters for native trout near the border between New Mexico and Colorado. The special designation would “maintain current management practices and highlight the importance of restoration to create landscape resilience,” according to a news release from Amigos Bravos.

Specifically, the proposal offers suggestions for managing wetlands, wildfires, motorized vehicles, range for grazing and logging and mineral development.

“The 1986 forest plan asserts that a separate environmental analysis would be needed for Valle Vidal to establish a management framework. Subsequent efforts to amend the Carson forest plan and incorporate specific management direction for the Valle Vidal were attempted in 1986 and 1992, but ... the Carson National Forest [was directed] to discontinue the effort in 1993. The current forest plan revision process finally offers an opportunity to establish management direction for the Valle Vidal,” reads a letter submitted with the proposal from Amigos Bravos and Trout Unlimited.

“We are thankful that [Amigos Bravos has] taken the time to develop such a thoughtful plan, but we’re still early in the process,” Kathy DeLucas, public information officer with the Carson, told *The Taos News*.

“We have received similar comments from other citizens as well, and this will be taken into consideration as we develop the [forest management] plan and potential alternatives,” DeLucas said, noting the proposal is considered a public comment.

The Valle Vidal has a long history of human use. Old logging roads lattice the landscape from when the timber industry stripped the area of its old-growth forests. And for many decades, cattle were dense on the landscape, affecting streams and wetland habitats.

Since the Carson took over the Valle Vidal, many of those roads have been closed and work done to rehabilitate the waterways. The area has also become a crown jewel of public lands in Northern New Mexico. Elk hunts in the unit are truly once-in-a-life opportunities.

While recreation is how most people experience the wilderness firsthand, research has shown how the Valle Vidal is also important to the communities downstream because of the “hydrological function” of its wetland habitat.

“Wetland jewels,” a description Amigos Bravos has used, not only provide critical habitat for aquatic invertebrates (bugs) and fish, but they also sequester carbon and discharge water into streams throughout the drier months of the year after snowpack has thoroughly melted.

The proposal names two wetland complexes in the unit — McCrystal Creek and Vidal — totaling 26,900 acres.

The proposal also requests a “forest-wide Wetland Jewels Management Area” that would include eight wetland complexes in addition to the two in the Valle Vidal. Creating that other level of designation “will ensure the unique aquatic resources these areas possess are protected and restored.”

In addition to Amigos Bravos and Trout Unlimited, the New Mexico Wildlife Federation, New Mexico Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, Rivers and Birds, The Wilderness Society and the Backcountry Horsemen of New Mexico also signed onto the proposal.

Furthermore, Conn said the proposal incorporates suggestions from the Valle Vidal Grazing Association, Vermejo Park Ranch, Quivira Coalition and Bobcat Ranch.