

VACA FOREST RESERVE

Utilizing a Forested Land for long term Economical Gains



This trend in the Vaca F.R can be reversed and everyone can win.

A Technical Paper

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Background

The Vaca Plateau was designated a forest reserve in 1991. The total acreage was estimated at 52,000 acres on the SI. The reasons behind its declaration included: to maintain adequate stock of renewable natural resources for sustainable use by local communities and contribute to the national economy. As well as for watershed protection, especially for the Mollejon Dam.

The SI of 1991 included a “save and except” clause taking into account previously given out leases. By 1995, a Forest Department inspection noted that there were 33 different agricultural clearances. The objective was to identify all leases granted so that any further leasing could be prevented.

By 2003, Minister John Briceno, signed a Forest Reserve (Consolidation) (Amendment) Vaca Forest Reserve Order, thereby amending the schedule. The acreage of the Vaca Forest Reserve was left as approximately 40,375 acres. Approximately 11,625 [22%] acres were excised with the objective of providing badly needed land to farmers from the buffering communities including Benque Viejo del Carmen, San Jose Succotz and Arenal. The excised area was made away from the Macal River in order to ensure that the Mollejon Dam remained protected from erosion and sedimentation.

Actual Condition

Today agricultural clearances still continue and this will affect the dam infrastructures. Fourteen new clearances were documented during September 2007. The two photos below are recent excisions made in the forest reserve and found nearby the Macal River.



Agricultural clearances by De la Fuente



Agricultural clearances by unknowns

The following photos are those of the two dam sites, which depend solely on a healthy watershed. Already the Chalillo Dam has suffered much sedimentation as a result of the top soil that has eroded from the Mountain Pine Ridge hills after the outbreak of the bark beetle which destroyed the Pine forests.



The Chalillo Dam on the Upper Macal River

Mollejon Dam found in lower Macal River

Recommendations

After reunions held on the 7th and 17th of September, and site visits [both on ground and aerial] conducted during the months of August and September 2007 among Mr. Kendall Mendez, the Forest Department and Lands Department personnel, and Friends for Conservation and Development staff, the following recommendations are being tabled with the understanding that the Vaca Forest Reserve is a portion of land in the Cayo District with the potential for generating long term economical benefits for rural Belizean consistent with the vision of the Government of Belize.

1. Set up a standing committee, chaired by the Forest Department to analyze more in detail the actual conditions of the Vaca Forest Reserve, as well as see to it that all the interests are considered and key recommendations undertaken. The committee should include Mr. Kendall Mendez, Lands Department, Agriculture Department, farmers and other stakeholders.
2. Revisit the Vaca Forest Reserve eastern boundary line, where approximately 14 plots are being farmed. A ground reconnaissance is required to identify acreage farmed and de-reserve that strip of land applying the minimum standard. Any other area farmed near the river should be completely halted and the persons removed from the site by Forest Department personnel.
3. De la Fuente family is found 1.5-2 km inside the reserve boundary and near the river, grid 02814328-1871134. The only option for them to stay on the area should be through a special condition provided by the Forest Department. Conditions applying to them should include: use of the

land that has been cleared and no more expansion permitted; serve as custodian and informants to the Forest Department of any illegal activity; provide support for development of a ranger patrol post in the area, and conduct sustainable farming methods.

4. Strictly prevent at all times any new incursions in the forest reserve, particularly, those activities nearby the river through signage, education, patrols and monitoring.
5. Institute more presence in the area through a co-management agreement with stakeholders in the area or through a long term concession. By doing so new incursions can be reduced
6. Create a first ever Community Forestry program that incorporates sustainable livelihood strategies thereby diversifying local economical opportunities such as tourism and apiculture.
7. Support the over 70 members of the Cayo Honey Quality Cooperative Society for use of the reserve, thus promoting economical benefits for buffering community members.
8. Encourage BECOL to support community initiatives that protects the forest such as community nurseries and reforestation schemes in areas that have been denuded.
9. Demarcate the boundaries of the Vaca Forest Reserve through the assistance of stakeholders.

The above recommendations have the purpose of minimizing the agricultural incursions, strengthening the regulatory agencies role, providing support to the rural farmers, diversifying economical benefits, safeguarding important national infrastructure and generating local constituency support - by doing this all parties can be on the winning side.

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