

Richard Michael Field
[Redacted address, phone and internet info]

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Mr. Ronald Schmeits
NRA Whittington Center
Raton, NM
VIA Email: raschmeits@bacavalley.com

Dear Mr. Schmeits:

I am writing you to express my deep concerns and anger over the recent loss of a number of long standing competitive shooting events at the NRA Whittington Center. These include the Sporting Rifle Match, the Nightforce 2-Gun Match, The Rocky Mountain 3-Gun, and The He-Man Nationals. These events, all of which are extremely popular and well attended, owe the much of their success to the fact that they are held in the natural terrain of the Whittington Center. The new Executive Director, Josh Adams and Program Director, Ken Mestas have chosen to push these events out of the natural terrain that they absolutely depend on and into what they have disingenuously termed “viable alternate venues”. All of these events either have been or soon will be cancelled due entirely to the loss of their natural terrain venues.

First and foremost, and closest to my heart, is the Sporting Rifle Match. This was arguably the finest regularly scheduled, precision long range shooting competition in the Western United States. The venue, Coal Canyon, was absolutely ideal for this event. Some of the most important attributes of the Coal Canyon site that have made the Sporting Rifle Match successful are:

- The mile long linear setup parallel to Highway 555, consisting of ten different six-target stages allowed ten squads of 5-8 competitors each to engage a huge variety of long range targets safely and simultaneously.
- The nature of the terrain in Coal Canyon along the Canadian River provided the unique ability to set long range target arrays where they were visible from the shooting positions even when the vegetation grew taller in the summer. By shooting across the canyon, where both the shooting positions and the target arrays could be elevated; not only were the targets visible, but the line of sight was above the mirage that so often spoils good long range shooting.
- The two miles of hiking between the various stages of the match provided competitors the practical challenge of carrying their rifle, gear, water, etc. in environment that was similar to what they might encounter while hunting. This demanded that competitors consider carefully what was practical in the real outdoor world and what was needless weight.
- The steel targets were interspersed in the natural terrain which provided the challenge of finding them, then locating them in the rifle scope, and finally

engaging them much in the same way that a hunter must do with game in natural terrain. Additionally, the targets were located at various elevations and positions relative to natural features which required different and sometime challenging shooting positions in order to engage them.

- And finally, the winds in mountain canyons such as Coal Canyon are notorious variable in both velocity and direction. With modern rifles, scopes and laser range finders, good long range shooters seldom miss targets high or low, but rather right or left. It is judging the wind and making the appropriate wind drift adjustments that is the biggest challenge in long range shooting and it is what separates the top shooters. This critical skill is very applicable to hunters as well. The winds in Coal Canyon, with all of the intervening side canyon winds were a large part of what made the Sporting Rifle Match fun and challenging to competitors.

The so called “viable alternate venue” that was proposed by Josh Adams and Ken Mestas has *virtually none* of these attributes. Importantly, it is highly unlikely that 60-70 competitors engaging 10 different target arrays could be arranged in a safe layout at the alternate location even if some of the other essential attributes were to exist. While there is no doubt some sort of long range match could be set up there, there are lots of venues that require far less travel expense that have “some sort of long range match”.

While it is understandable that Ken Mestas, who has never shot competitively, might not understand the importance of the Coal Canyon site to the appeal and success of the Sporting Rifle Match, this fails to explain Josh Adams use of the term “viable alternate venue”. I know personally that Josh Adams has competed in at least one long range, natural terrain match. This begs two important questions: (1) Why is Ken Mestas the Program Director at the Whittington Center? (2) Is Josh Adams simply clueless about the appeal of the Sporting Rifle Match or is he being disingenuous and deceitful in his offering of a “viable alternate venue”? With Josh’s experience, I have to assume the latter.

I understand that the primary reason that these events are being pushed out is to improve the high-end guided hunting opportunities for a select few individuals who can afford their steep price tags. (We have heard a variety of conflicting stories from Josh and Ken regarding their rationale, but it seems this is what is actually driving the decision.) This is wrong on so many levels. Similar guided hunts are offered all over the Western United States. The NRA Whittington Center is one of very few locations where large natural terrain shooting competitions were (at least until recently) both feasible and welcomed. I can’t believe that anyone who understands the mission of the NRA could possibly believe that driving off these very popular events in favor of a few high-end hunts is in the NRA or Whittington Center membership’s best interest.

I seriously question if improving the existing high-end hunts by the excluding these enormously popular shooting competitions from the Whittington Center is financially justified, but I think not. These matches bring in an enormous number of shooting enthusiasts to the Whittington Center that would otherwise probably never set foot on the property. These newer shooting sports are rapidly growing and bringing in new and younger people that the traditional sports can't begin to match. In addition to paying

thousands of dollars in direct revenues to the Whittington Center, the participants in these sports are spending lots of money on both equipment and supplies from many of the Whittington Center's biggest sponsors as well as local Raton businesses.

I believe that this issue has caused great and irreconcilable damage to the relationship between the NRA Whittington Center and the competitive shooting community. While I earnestly hope that these decisions can be reversed at some point in the future, I'm very skeptical that Josh Adams and Ken Mestas will ever be trusted again by these competitors. The outrage that I have seen over this unfortunate turn of events is unlike any I have seen in the shooting community before (except perhaps the Jim Zumbo/AR15 affair). As such, I encourage you to replace Josh Adams with someone who can bring together all shooting disciplines rather than drive them apart. I also encourage you replace Ken Mestas with someone who has both knowledge and passion for all shooting sports.

Sincerely,

Richard M. Field
Life Member, NRA

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