

# **Wildlands Network**

## **NEWS RELEASE**

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## **Colorado ranch owner anticipates wolf's return**

### ***Evidence says endangered critter may already be on his land***

*DeBeque, Colorado* — A DNA test of scat samples is all that remains before a western Colorado ranch owner knows for sure if wild wolves are present on his land.

Paul R. Vahldiek, Jr., majority shareholder and CEO of The High Lonesome Ranch, a mixed use landscape sprawling across Colorado's west slope northeast of Grand Junction, awaits results of the DNA test as the final piece of evidence needed to confirm wolf habitation. One of the ranch managers and an expert wildlife tracker have already reported actual sightings of wolves, and positively identified tracks and howling on his vast acreage.

Committed to conservation of private lands and wildlife, Vahldiek has been working for several years to determine the baseline ecology of the ranch. To further that work, the rancher hired landscape ecologist and large carnivore specialist Cristina Eisenberg to study predator-prey relationships on the land, which was believed to be wolfless. Vahldiek hoped to complete these studies prior to any natural recolonization of wolves. Much to his and Eisenberg's surprise, it now appears that the storied carnivore has already taken up residence on the property.

Asked about evidence for wolf presence on The High Lonesome Ranch, Eisenberg said, "Wolf sightings, tracks, howling, and other wolf sign gathered over the past eighteen months suggest likely wolf presence, pending DNA analysis results."

Vahldiek first became interested in the role that wolves play in regulating healthy landscapes when he attended a talk by Eisenberg given at the Boone and Crockett Club's annual conservation meeting at the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch. Her presentation made him realize that The High Lonesome Ranch's approximately 300-

square-miles of deeded private and permitted BLM lands might be likely habitat for natural wolf recolonization.

“It seemed logical to me, based on what happened in Yellowstone National Park, that keystone species like wolves might have a positive effect on biodiversity and restoring the health of aspen groves on this property,” notes Vahldiek. His interest in the ecological benefits of keystone species led him to attend further meetings on large landscape-scale conservation convened by the international conservation group Wildlands Network, and he recently became a member of that organization’s board of directors.

Wildlands Network’s mission to reconnect and restore wildlands across North America to allow continued movement of wide-ranging species inspired Vahldiek to pursue an even larger, more visionary goal. While he remains committed to conserving his ranch and abiding by the laws and regulations pertaining to any new wolf inhabitants, Vahldiek also is committed to conserving this landscape as a key wildlife linkage within what Wildlands Network calls the “Western Wildway,” a 5,000-mile-long stretch of plateaus, canyons and mountains between Alaska’s Brooks Range and northern Mexico’s Sierra Madre.

Michael Soulé, an internationally known conservation biologist also serving as Wildlands Network’s president, is clear about the value of Vahldiek’s efforts to recognize the ecological importance of wolves. “The return of wolves to Colorado would be proof that safe landscape connections are key to maintaining critical, keystone species in the West,” says Soulé.

Vahldiek, with scientific assistance from a science team lead by Eisenberg, Soulé, and wildlife ecologist Roger Creasey, says he hopes to work closely with his neighbors and with the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) to create a sustainable, science-based wolf management plan that will allow recovery for any wolves that choose the ranch as home. Vahldiek and his science team recommend that any wolf management plan enacted by CDOW include realistic financial incentives and technical assistance for the ranching community in order to ensure minimal wolf-livestock conflicts.

Vahldiek says he understands that The High Lonesome Ranch must learn to live with these newfound inhabitants and knows that, while controversial, wolves will likely improve the health of the flora and fauna of this ecosystem.

Wolves that naturally migrate to Colorado from Wyoming would be federally protected as endangered species and could not be relocated, removed, or killed. Wolves have been absent from Colorado since they were completely exterminated by federally-funded bounty hunters by the 1940s.

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