

# A Quarter Century to Make History:

## The Wolf's Return to Colorado

Views expressed here are those of the authors and are provided to offer information and further discussion on the Rocky Mountain Wolf Project.

To no avail.

That was the outcome of 25 years (1993 to 2018) of hard work, good science, and professional activism to convince the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to restore the gray wolf to western Colorado under the Endangered Species Act. Similar efforts at the state level met a comparable fate.

Western Colorado is vast, encompassing more than 17 million acres of federal public wildlands—lands managed for conservation—that support abundant native prey. The region could easily support a robust, self-sustaining wolf population that would serve as the arch-stone connecting the species from the High Arctic to northern Mexico. Nowhere else in the world does such an opportunity exist to connect a large car-

nivore's distribution across a continent

Inexplicably, the USFWS never applied professional scrutiny to the possibility of restoring wolves to Colorado, and by 2013, institutional disinterest in the idea was the agency's official and resolute policy. Faced with federal stonewalling, wolf advocates returned to pushing for engagement at the state level.

In 2004, Colorado's Division of Wildlife had empaneled the Wolf Working Group, a stakeholder group tasked with providing recommendations to the agency regarding management and, arguably, recovery of wolves. Although overrepresentation of livestock interests on the working group scuttled support for reintroduction, the final report voiced a desire for wolves to

“roam freely, wherever they find sufficient habitat and prey.” Nonetheless, active restoration efforts gained no traction.

### Carpe Diem

Given that advocates had spent more than 20 years building the scientific case for wolves in the Southern Rockies and had done their due diligence with the federal and state agencies, only one option remained to effect recovery in the region: direct democracy. To advance that future, advocates created the Rocky Mountain Wolf Project (RMWP) in 2014 and the Rocky Mountain Wolf Action Fund (RMWAF) in 2019. The RMWP coalition engages Coloradans about co-existing with wolves, disseminating science-based information to cultivate enthusiasm for the species. RMWAF was a political organization committed solely to securing passage of a 2020 ballot proposition to reintroduce wolves.



By MIKE PHILLIPS & ROB EDWARD

Advocates were aware of longstanding, widespread support for returning wolves to Colorado (greater than 70 percent in multiple polls). Buoyed by that support and sufficient private funds, RMWAF succeeded in engaging Coloradans about wolves, while RMWAF focused on developing a wolf restoration ballot proposal. Drafting a legally sound, strategically sensible bill is no small task, but wolf advocates ultimately produced draft legislation that would prove to be a watershed event in wildlife conservation.

The measure establishes wolf restoration as an aspirational goal, leaving the details to the technical expertise of state biologists. It requires Colorado's Parks & Wildlife Commission to develop a plan to restore and manage wolves based on public input received during statewide hearings and the best available scientific, economic and social

considerations; begin reintroductions by December 31, 2023; and assist ranchers in preventing and resolving conflicts involving wolves and livestock. The proposal further mandates the Colorado General Assembly to make necessary appropriations to fund wolf restoration and adopt other legislation, if needed, to facilitate restoration.

Never Giving Up

By early summer 2019, the Colorado secretary of state had certified the proposal submitted by RMWAF for petitioning and christened the measure Initiative 107. Colorado law required citizens to gather—within a breathtakingly brief period of six months—124,632 valid signatures in support.

Through summer and fall, volunteers and paid petitioners collected signatures from Coloradans of all stripes. By the December 5 deadline, RMWAF submitted a whopping 215,370 signatures—far more than needed for validation. In early January 2020, the Secretary of State certified Initiative 107 for the ballot and renamed the measure to Proposition 114.

The success of the petition gathering triggered an effort by state legislators (see link below) to craft legislation that would have been even more robust than Prop 114. Dubbed SB 121, the bill appeared to have enough support in the Colorado Senate and House of Representatives to ensure passage. After Governor Jared Polis signaled his inclination to sign the bill, and just as it was about to have a first hearing, the coronavirus pandemic struck, scuttling all “non-essential” legislation for the session.

Undaunted, RMWAF refocused attention on developing a statewide campaign to pass Prop 114. Two formidable political coalitions immediately formed in opposition—one allied with ranching interests and one allied with both ranchers and hunters. While both were effective at casting Prop 114 in a

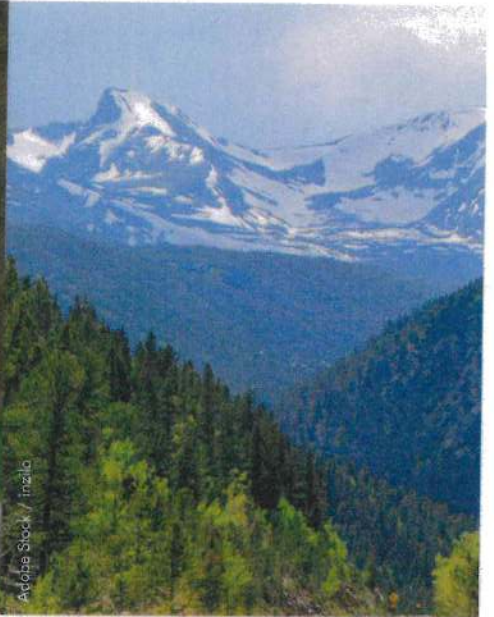
“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

—Margaret Mead

negative light, and while they effectively outspent the bill's proponents nearly three-to-one in the last weeks of the campaign, the opposition came up short.

On November 3, 2020, with more than three million votes cast, Prop 114 passed by 1 percent. Specifically, 1,590,299 Coloradans voted yes, and 1,533,313 voted no.

Passage marked the first time in history that citizens anywhere had used direct democracy to instigate restoration of an endangered species.



Despite the small margin of victory, every county in the state registered significant, if not majority, support. More than 120,000 affirmative votes came from Colorado's lightly populated rural counties—support that should bode well for wolves once reintroduction begins.

If support in rural counties is encouraging, support from the state administration charged with implementing Prop 114 is vital. By early 2021, Colorado's Governor Polis indicated his intention to exercise good governance by dutifully achieving the planning and reintroduction mandates of Prop 114. With a willing administration, completion of the planning process—including public hearings—within 12 to 18 months is achievable and sets the stage for completion of several, if not all, reintroductions well before the end of 2023. The release of 40 to 60 wolves should guarantee a viable population.


### Forever Vigilant

The scientists, conservation professionals and citizen volunteers who

worked so hard to ensure successful wolf reintroduction in Colorado remain at the ready. Now they will help assure faithful execution of the mandate of Prop 114. Thereafter, they will breathe life into a permanent wolf management paradigm that emphasizes peaceful coexistence with wolves. In support of that mission, as it was dissolved the Rocky Mountain Wolf Action Fund donated its remaining campaign assets to the Rocky Mountain Wolf Project ([www.rockymountainwolfproject.org](http://www.rockymountainwolfproject.org)).

Working together, Coloradans of diverse backgrounds and interests will leverage science to build understanding and trust, to the benefit of wolves in Colorado and throughout the Rocky Mountains. Prop 114 was an audacious act of hope, and that hope will now allow wolves to go about their work, bringing balance to Colorado's wildlands and vitality to her elk and deer herds. Most notably, this reintroduction program will serve as a reminder of the wondrous diversity of life on earth—and our undeniable capacity to restore it. ■

### Reference

-  "Colorado Politics.com" article on Colorado SB121: [https://www.coloradopolitics.com/news/sen-kerry-donovan-introduces-wolf-reintroduction-bill/article\\_53977a64-3f06-11ea-8ba3-fb200f3491b6.html](https://www.coloradopolitics.com/news/sen-kerry-donovan-introduces-wolf-reintroduction-bill/article_53977a64-3f06-11ea-8ba3-fb200f3491b6.html)

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