

West Rim ranch preserves more acreage

By **Andy Dennison**
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A fourth and final parcel on Wolf Springs Ranch has been protected from development, bringing the total under conservation easements to about 2,900 acres.

Facilitated by the Taos Land Trust, this latest move on the 3,500-acre ranch west of the Río Grande Gorge effectively will keep a large tract of highly visible rangeland from subdivision or development forever.

"It's essentially two miles in either direction along the highway (U.S. 64) from our entrance," Tony Benson said Tuesday (Jan. 5). "It protects both woods and rangeland."

Since he bought the former Kirby Ranch in 1991, Benson has put more acreage under easements than any other single landowner in Taos County, according to the Taos Land Trust. By comparison, the next-largest easement is 670 acres around Lama.

Four parcels on Wolf Springs Ranch, totaling 2,881 acres, are under conservation easement on the west side of the highway, and another 576 acres that allow for several future home sites, if desired, Benson said.

"If 100 years from now, they have to sell a few 40-acre home sites to keep the ranch going, that's what we wanted," he said.

When Benson bought the century-old cattle ranch, it was being marketed as a sub-



Submitted photo

Seen from near the Wolf Springs Ranch house, this acreage has been put in conservation easement with the Taos Land Trust to protect it from development.

Wolf Springs Ranch's first conservation easement to the Taos Land Trust came in 1999.

division or destination resort development property, according to Ernie Atencio, executive director of the Taos Land Trust.

When a landowner grants a conservation easement to the land trust, he or she gives up some rights to development on

the property in order to preserve its natural characteristics. The easement accompanies the land during any future transactions.

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1999. In addition, Benson and his neighbors have worked on rangeland restoration projects, including shifting the vegetation from invasive sage back to native grasses.

Since acquiring its first conservation easement 20 years ago, the Taos Land Trust has permanently protected more than 23,000 acres of scenic open space, productive farmland, wildlife habitat, riparian areas and historic sites.