Preparing for Food Security in an Age of Limited Natural Resources Part II: Land Use

In order to grow the state’s economy and support access to healthy foods for all Coloradans, the Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council (COFSAC) recommends that the State of Colorado assess and pursue opportunities to more efficiently use our natural resources to increase opportunities for food production. The COFSAC sees opportunities to foster stronger environmental stewardship while creating new opportunities for our food producers to grow more healthy Colorado products to reach more Colorado consumers at prices sustainable for both consumer and producer.

This issue brief is one of three that explores aspects of our natural resources – water, land, and energy – and the steps necessary to balance Colorado’s need for increased agricultural production to feed its growing population and the sustainable use of its natural resources to support production.

Issues Constraining Agriculture and Food Access Today

There are increasing constraints being placed on Colorado’s natural resources that are limiting our state’s ability to grow plentiful, healthy food to feed our residents now and into the future. The availability and affordability of land has become a roadblock to food production in Colorado, especially for young, returning, or small-scale farmers. Land availability and affordability are particularly challenging in or near urban centers and surrounding the resort communities of the Western Slope, where high demand, competing industries, and increasing population drive up land prices.

Decreasing amounts of water available for agriculture and increasing land prices on and near agriculturally viable land limits our state’s ability to grow a bounty of healthy foods easily accessible for our residents. Central to the charge of the COFSAC is to improve healthy food access for all Coloradans—especially for those who currently lack sufficient access. The fact is, not only do many Coloradan’s lack such access—but many currently struggle with accessing and affording enough food to simply feed themselves consistent, healthy meals.

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In 2013, nearly 1 in 7 Coloradans experienced times when there was not enough money to buy food for their families or themselves.


To help ensure food security for Coloradans, especially in the face of a rapidly increasing state population, it is important to evaluate how we might use our agricultural resources more efficiently. In this section, we review a variety of approaches that merit further investigation of how land can be used more effectively to ensure adequate access to food for Colorado’s population while supporting the viability of gardening, farming, and ranching in Colorado.

Many cities and counties throughout the state are experimenting with ways in which they can incentivize agricultural uses on both public and private lands. Other western states have also begun to remove tax burdens or support tax incentives to allow for more agriculture, especially in and around population centers.

**Land for Agriculture: An Overview of Possibilities**

Communities across Colorado have become increasingly attentive to their role in promoting a resilient food system that advances economic development, environmental stewardship, and health equity. Many local governments are now working through zoning code updates and comprehensive planning processes to institutionalize a vision for local food production that supports community health and vibrancy.

Additionally, there has been a dramatic increase in local food policy councils in the past five years – with approximately 16 in Colorado. Such councils typically include community residents as well as members from across the food system – representing producers, distributors, anti-hunger, nutrition, local government, and more. With these councils, there are strong new advocacy voices at the local government level to research, advocate for, and implement local land use policies that support a variety of models of food production.

There are many land-based (supply-side) strategies that could help local governments promote the production of healthy, locally produced foods. Strategies that could be advanced in Colorado include:

- **Conservation easements:** Federal conservation tools, such as conservation easements on agricultural lands, protect such lands from development.
- **Public lands:** The preservation of county open spaces can and are often used to support, integrate and promote working farms and ranches.
- **Land trusts:** States can help move farmland into land trusts that specifically protect working agricultural lands and provide incentives to transfer land to young or beginning farmers.
- **Policy planning:** Many city or county comprehensive plans include strong language around agricultural land preservation that can be enhanced or adapted to include language around community food production and distribution.
- **Tax Incentives:** Local governments can support local gardeners, ranchers and farmers seeking to purchase land through continued or enhanced tax incentives for lands used for food production purposes.
- **Long-term leases:** Local governments can offer longer-term leases to producers or allied organizations that support growing food for the community.

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Local Trends in Land Use and Food Production

Use of Public Lands for Food Production
- Arvada has identified available public lands as potential sites for supporting local food production through community gardens, small farms, and orchards, while taking the burden of maintenance off of the city’s hands so the public benefits from lower agency costs.
- Fort Collins is exploring the development of a farm incubator on Fort Collins Natural Areas’ land.
- Boulder County leases 25,000 acres of its County Open Space to farmers, most of which is in irrigated cropland.

Enterprise Development for Urban Agriculture
- Colorado is already one of just a few states that have adopted “Agriculture Enterprise Zones”. The program is specifically geared to agricultural processing and manufacturing activities that would seek to add value to raw agricultural products. The State will be revisiting the Statewide Enterprise Zones program in 2016, which provides an opportunity to expand and enhance the Agriculture Program to include urban areas and more types of food production enterprises. City of Fort Collins (2015). Urban Agriculture Land Preservation Efforts Draft.

Integration with Comprehensive Plans and Encouragement through Definitions
- Promoting natural resource conservation: Aurora has integrated goals related to food access and community gardens into the “sustainability” section of their comprehensive plan.
- Defining Urban Agriculture: A City of Wheat Ridge ordinance made several revisions and necessary clarifications in the City’s zoning code regarding what is included in community-based agriculture, thus allowing urban gardens, farmers markets, and produce stands in any zone district.

Permission for Local Enterprises through Zoning Code Changes
- Year-round growing infrastructure: Fort Collins has adopted regulations that exempted hoop houses (temporary, covered tunnels that allow for cold-weather food production from building permit requirements.
- Gardening Centers has adopted an ordinance allowing community gardens in all zones, and included several policies encouraging household gardening practices in their Comprehensive Plan.
- Backyard livestock: Several communities continue to develop or revise ordinances to allow for a certain number of backyard chickens and even goats on residential lots, such as Colorado Springs’ allowance of 2 dw and dairy goats.

Grower Incentives through Allowance of Additional Income Streams
- Residential Sales: The City of Denver passed a zoning code amendment that allows residents to sell their homegrown, fresh produce right at their homes without having to shoulder transportation or other marketing fees.
- Agritourism: Boulder County made a land use code amendment that now eases policies and procedures for several uses on lands used for food production including farm to table dinners, on-farm sales, commercial kitchens, parking, and more.

Conservation of Agricultural Lands
- On May 8th, 2015, the Colorado State Legislature passed Senate Bill 206, which allows a landowner with a larger parcel of land to earn up to $1.5M in Colorado tax credits in a single year (previously the maximum credit was $375,000). A landowner with a smaller parcel of land will get up to an additional $25,000 in tax credits to help offset the increased transaction costs.
- Buyers will be able to purchase the credits they need because more tax credits will be available each year. These tax credits can be sold for cash so they can help farmers pay off debt, invest in equipment or livestock, or help pay for college tuition.

Conservation for Food Producing Farms
- The Trust for Public Land, Colorado Open Lands, and the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition are working to convert the 58-acre former Polston Elementary school property on the Rio Grande River into the Rio Grande Healthy Living Park with a focus on local food production and outdoor recreation that promotes the scenic, agricultural and recreational heritage of the San Luis Valley. The plan includes a conservation easement and a trail easement on the property.
How It Can Work: Examples from the Field

**Conservation Easements for Working Lands**

Randy Rusk still lives and works on the Custer County ranch where he was born in the late 1940s. Rusk Ranches, now a four-generation ranch, worked with the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust to place a 1,600-acre conservation easement on the family ranch in 2002, and quickly followed that with an additional 8,400-acre easement surrounding it in 2003.

The Rusk family now raises and sells grass-finished beef direct to consumers in the Front Range through Prime Time Beef Company. The Rusks view conservation easements as critical to supporting their ranching operations and ensuring their sustainability for years to come. Protecting their lands from development is a source of pride for Randy Rusk and the family continues to commit to conservation by donating 10% of their beef sales to the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust, which has worked with 270 farm and ranch to conserve over 450,000 acres of agricultural land in Colorado over the past two decades.

**City Land for Food Production**

In 2012, the City of Arvada purchased a 15-acre lot through park development fees that they could not afford to develop entirely for recreational purposes. The City decided to issue two leases on portions of the property - to support local food production through; 1) community gardens, and 2) a small farm, all while taking the burden of maintenance out of the city’s hands.

With a $170,000 grant from JeffCo Open Space, the city built a 15-car reclaimed asphalt gravel parking lot on the site and used $50,000 to build a garage with a cooler, wash station, and shelving so the space could support a farm stand. For the gardens site, the city received 75 applications in less than two months for access to garden plots, and with planning support from Denver Urban Gardens the families developed the site together with city staff. For the farm enterprise, the city developed an RFP for a farm manager to farm three acres and maintain an on-site farm stand and CSA.

The city is learning how such arrangements can be a win-win – the city is documenting a decrease in landscape maintenance costs for the city on the site and a notable increase in local food production and sales. The city followed on this initial success by issuing an RFP to farm open space at the Majestic View Nature Center, and the county contributed additional funds for infrastructure at the site. The city has identified at least eight other city-owned lands that could be farmed. The city next plans to formalize this practice into policy through their planned updates to the Parks & Open Space Master Plan.

Photos courtesy of the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust.
Recommendations

Colorado has many opportunities to conserve natural resources while supporting its agricultural economy and the production and sale of more, healthy Colorado products into underserved markets. Opportunities include state regulatory action, enhanced academic research, and statewide partnerships that align goals of environmental stewardship, agriculture, and food security.

Across all recommendations, efforts should be encouraged that identify and manage food safety implications, reclaim resources for production that are underemployed (rather than competing for resources that are already fully utilized in other sectors), research yield and cost implications for farmers and ranchers, and, facilitate the policy changes that may be necessary to lower the barriers to adoption of new models. Opportunities for the state to explore further include:

Additional Research:
- Continue to encourage and support innovative ideas, research and education to help mitigate water, land use and energy issues at the local and state level. The tripartite mission of research, teaching, and community-based extension uniquely positions CSU, along with their peer Higher Education Institutions such as the University of Colorado, to apply site-specific, science-based solutions that will protect, sustain, and improve our use of our natural resources.

State Partnerships:
- Explore means for expanding Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO)\(^7\) land investment resources that target working farms and ranches integrated into protected and conserved lands. Among other accomplishments, GOCO funds have already been used to protect more than 1 million acres of open space in perpetuity, much of it including agricultural lands.
- Support the implementation of GOCO’s 2015 Strategic Plan goal area to “develop a new land acquisition program that targets the acquisition of urban open space and urban agricultural properties that currently do not fit within the criteria of GOCO’s current Open Space or Local Government Land Acquisition programs.”
- Assess the potential for the State of Colorado to promote or incentivize land trusts that prioritize working farms and ranches and require or strongly incentivize succession planning to other farmers or ranchers.

Regulatory Amendments:
- Support a proposal to create or pilot an Urban Agriculture Enterprise Zone, which could enhance and expand Colorado’s existing successful Agriculture Enterprise Zones with criteria that ask communities to evaluate the economic outcomes from these incentives. Such a program could revalue urban land dedicated to production, similar to a California statute passed in 2013. California Assembly Bill 551 (AB 551)\(^8\) lowered the property tax burden for “land owners of vacant, unimproved or otherwise blighted lands for small-scale production of agricultural crops and animal husbandry.” In enacting the law, the California General Assembly gave municipal governments the power to pass ordinances allowing these contracts between landowners and potential urban farmers.

Leveraging Resources:
- Work with state and local partners to take advantage of unprecedented investment in sustaining our natural resources while feeding a growing population: In spring 2015 the USDA made available $332 million in financial and technical assistance through the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) of the NRCS to help productive farm and ranch lands remain in agriculture and protect critical habitats.

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\(^7\)GOCO invests a portion of Colorado Lottery proceeds to help preserve and enhance the state’s parks, trails, wildlife, rivers and open spaces. GOCO’s independent board awards competitive grants to local governments and land trusts, and makes investments through Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Created by voters in 1992, GOCO has committed more than $825 million in lottery proceeds to more than 4,500 projects in all 64 counties without any tax dollar support.

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The COFSAC charge is to advance recommendations that strengthen healthy food access for all Coloradans through Colorado agriculture and local food systems and economies.

For more information see www.cofoodsystemcouncil.org.

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