

DENVER AND THE WEST

As family farms fall, program lifts older, disabled farmers, ranchers

By Joey Bunch

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Disabled Vietnam veteran Dean Wierth feeds his goats in zero-degree temperatures on his small farm south of Hartsel.

Wierth, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, poor balance and vision problems, still takes care of 66 goats — with assistance from Colorado's edition of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 22-state AgrAbility Project. (*Helen H.*

Richardson, The Denver Post)

Dean Wierth continues to tend his herd of goats at 9,000 feet in Park County, but not as he always has. Getting on in years, at 72, Wierth finds his balance and vision slipping away — as was, until two years ago, his livelihood selling meat and fleece. What time was taking away, Colorado's edition of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's 22-state AgrAbility Project

partially restored. With some instruction and vocational-rehabilitation money, Wierth saddles up in an electric cart to get around his 40-acre spread and another 40 acres he leases, distributing hay, collecting firewood and doing routine chores he otherwise would have lost the ability to handle.

What started as tingling and pain in his legs advanced to the point of trading the fields for a rocking chair.

"It's been a godsend," he said of AgrAbility's help. "My balance was just about gone."

Wierth's family is one of 538 in Colorado that have benefited in the past 16 years from the program, jointly run by Goodwill Industries of Denver and Colorado State University.

The federal government has awarded CSU \$720,000 to fund the program for another four years. Goodwill kicks in an additional \$35,000 annually.

The program is shifting into financial-management issues for farmers and ranchers and attracting young people and veterans to agriculture, while sticking to its core mission: helping older, disabled farmers stay on the job as long as possible.

A series of one-day workshops for those interested is planned for Burlington, Lamar, Aurora, Greeley and Sterling. The dates run from Jan. 26 to Feb. 4.

The program is getting added emphasis from parallel trends: vanishing family farms and aging family farmers.

Maintaining family farms is vital to rural communities that are turning into ghost towns, as younger people leave to take jobs and start families elsewhere, President Barack Obama and other national leaders have said.

The average age of those running Colorado's farms and ranches rose two years, from 57 to 59, from 2007 to 2012, according the U.S. [Census agriculture report released](#) in May.

The fastest-growing demographic is farmers and ranchers ages 75 and older. The segment grew by 15.1 percent over that same period. Those age 55 to 64 grew by 11.8 percent.

Those younger than 54 shrank by 16.1 percent.

Headwaters Economics, a Montana-based nonprofit that researches community

development and land management, released a report in December that shows five of the top 10 fastest-shrinking counties in the West are in Colorado — and all are on the farm-rich Eastern Plains.

Specifically, Baca, Kiowa, Cheyenne, Jackson and Sedgwick counties each saw population declines between 15.5 percent and 19.1 percent from 2003 to 2012, [the report found](#).

"Counties with farm-dependent economies are among the fastest-shrinking, as their youngest residents move away and older residents age in place," the report states.

For a variety of reasons, Colorado saw about 17,900 acres of farmland developed for other purposes between 2007 and 2010, [according to the advocacy group American Farmland Trust](#).

That puts a premium on keeping the people doing the work now on the job. And those folks are wearing out.

Hurdles to starting

"If you weren't born on a farm, it's hard to get into it these days," said Gill resident Dusty Franklin, an Eastern Plains farmer all his life.

Gone are the days when a man could make it on a few acres and a tractor, he said.

"You either go big or go home," Franklin said.

That makes raising money to start a farm the biggest barrier to get into farming, according to a study three years ago by the National Young Farmers Coalition.

The [survey of 1,300 young farmers indicated](#) that 78 percent thought raising capital was one of the toughest challenges to getting started, while 68 percent cited acquiring acreage.

As a possible solution to attracting young farmers, apprenticeships were cited by 74 percent of those surveyed.

Veterans are seen as a hopeful solution.

While 4.3 percent of Coloradans were unemployed in October, [the rate was 7.1 percent among veterans](#), according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, compared with a national veterans' unemployment rate of 6.6 percent.

Wierth, a Vietnam veteran, is in the discussion phase of a plan with the South Park Heritage Association and the Wounded Warrior USA Outreach Program to raise \$3.5 million to turn about 3,500 acres of the 29,000-acre Hartsel Springs Ranch into a farm-and-ranch teaching facility for veterans.

Another idea on the table: pairing aging farmers and ranchers with younger counterparts. Ideally, the older partner stays on the job as long as he likes, while the younger farmer works toward taking over the operation someday, said Robert Fetsch, co-director of the Colorado AgrAbility Project and a CSU extension specialist and professor of human development and family studies.

"Most farmers and ranchers don't retire; they just keep on keeping on as long as they can," he said. "Our best course for now is to help them stay active and working, so they can continue to thrive, remain independent and be loyal taxpayers in their communities."

Life on the farm

AgrAbility helped Franklin do just that.

His mother joked that he was born in a hat and boots because he was born ready to work, he said. But at 42, with decades of tough manual labor behind him, Franklin suffers back problems that threaten to end his job as a hay cutter in northeast Colorado.

"I was kind of at the end of my rope," he said. "A few hours on the tractor, and I'd be just about crawling back to the truck to drive home."

In 2012, an AgrAbility occupational therapist went to his farm and analyzed his practices and equipment.

With the help of some state vocational rehabilitation money, Franklin put air-cushioned seats on his tractor, extended side mirrors to cut down on twisting and turning to monitor the cutting, and moved the step-up on his tractor closer to the ground. New hitches made it easier to hook up equipment without wrestling the 50-pound tongue into them.

This year, he cut about 2,000 acres of hay and cornstalks. As much as saving his job, the program allowed him to live his life the way he prefers.

"For most people, going to work means going to a job and coming home," he said. "But for a farmer or a rancher, it's more than a job. It's a complete lifestyle, what you do every time you walk out your door — there are cows that need to be fed, there's chores that need to be taken care of every day. You never really take a day off.

"That just becomes who you are."

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Agrability workshops

People interested in attending the free workshops should register by calling Candiss

Leathers at 720-539-4435 or e-mailing her at cleathers@goodwilldenver.org; or Norm Dalsted at 970- 222-5657 or norman.dalsted@colostate.edu. For more information, go to agrability.chhs.colostate.edu/workshops.

The workshops run from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and they include a box lunch for those who preregister at least one week prior. For locations and more information, contact the respective extension agents:

Jan. 26: Burlington, Ron Meyer, 719-346-5571

Jan. 27: Lamar, Bruce Fickenscher, 719-438-5321

Feb. 2: Aurora, Sheila Gains, 303-738-7943

Feb. 3: Greeley, Keith Maxey, 970-304-6535, ext. 2075

Feb. 4: Sterling, Bruce Bosley, 970-522-3200, ext. 285



Disabled veteran Dean Wierth carefully navigates the snow outside his home. (*Helen H. Richardson, The Denver Post*)

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