

"It's not a cure-all, but they were able to come up with things to help people stay in agriculture. They did a few small things, but it was enough to let me stay on the ranch."

Chad Campbell, A Hotchkiss rancher who benefited from the services of AgrAbility



Shaun Stanley | The D

Chad Campbell loads the cooler at Homestead Market in Paonia, where meat from his ranch is sold. Campbell has multiple sclerosis, and through AgrAbility he received a portable cooling unit and vest that will keep the muscle-destroying illness from sidelining him in the s

Ailing farmers, ranchers land he

Low-profile AgrAbility program provides tools to help overcome disabili

By Monte Whaley
Denver Post Staff Writer

Fort Collins — The fatigue dogged him, as did the occasional loss of equilibrium.

But what worried Chad Campbell most about the multiple sclerosis that gripped his body was the fear that he could no longer work the ranch that has been in his family for nearly seven generations.

"It was really something I wanted to keep doing, but during the hay cutting in the summer, the heat really wipes me out," said the 34-year-old Campbell. "It was getting to the point where I thought I'd have to give it up."

Help recently arrived through a little-known, little-used service housed in a sterile office on the Colorado State University campus.

AgrAbility — created by the federal Farm Bill of 1990 — helped Campbell get a portable cooling unit and vest that will keep the muscle-destroying disease from crippling him during the grueling summers on his Hotchkiss spread.

AgrAbility helps farmers and ranch-

ers throughout Colorado get the tools and equipment they need to keep working their land.

But AgrAbility has such a low profile—that few of the state's estimated 54,000 farmers and ranchers know about it, said director Bob Fetsch. Since AgrAbility started in Colorado in 1997, only about 107 families have taken Fetsch up on his offer to help.

"I wish we did have more families calling me and talking to me about their situation," Fetsch said. "People don't realize the wonderful resources that are available."

Still, even those who do know about AgrAbility often refuse to call Fetsch because of the same stubborn pride that keeps them scratching out livings on hayfields and orchards throughout the state.

"A lot farmers think coming for help is a reflection on them or that it's welfare," said Nancy Smith, director of Colorado's division of vocational rehabilitation. "But it's their tax dollars that pay for this."

In Colorado, AgrAbility works with local CSU extension agents, the state and Easter Seals Colorado to assess

what individual farmers need to keep them going. Nationwide, the program brings together land-grant colleges and universities in at least 18 states and local nonprofit groups.

Support for a farmer with a bad back or a missing arm can range from a \$13,000 four-wheel-drive, all-terrain vehicle to a \$30 power riveter.

Rehabilitation engineers can also design hoist systems to help farmers get into tractors or adapt a prosthetic arm to attach tools where a hand use to be, AgrAbility proponents said. State and federal grants pay for the equipment.

AgrAbility raised hopes for Campbell that he will be able to keep his family's 750-acre spread and eventually pass it along to his daughters.

"It's not a cure-all," Campbell said, "but they were able to come up with things to help people stay in agriculture."

He added: "They did a few small things, but it was enough to let me stay on the ranch."

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Introdu worksho schedule

AgrAbility will have a series of workshops this year throughout the state to inform residents to its services. The next is scheduled for Monday, Oct. 10, at 10 a.m. today and in Grand County on Thursday, Oct. 13. For more information, contact Bob Fetsch at 970-491-5643 or e-mail at fetsch@colostate.edu.