

Cultivating COLORADO

Feeding your family,
growing our resources

2021 EDITION | COagriculture.com

**Southern
Ute Tribal
Agriculture**

**Pandemic
Partnerships**

**Mental Health
Matters**

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**COLORADO
DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE**

THE MANY
FACES OF
COLORADO'S
DIVERSE AG
INDUSTRY

A Lasting LEGACY

The Hirakata family continues 100-plus
year tradition of family farming

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- » Donations
- » Livestock Sales



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Gunnison County Electric Assoc.
Gunnison • gcea.coop

Highline Electric Assoc.
Holyoke • hea.coop

Holy Cross Energy
Glenwood Springs • holycross.com

Intermountain Rural Electric Assoc.
Sedalia • irea.coop

K.C. Electric Assoc.
Hugo • kcelectric.coop

La Plata Electric Assoc.
Durango • lpea.coop

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Optimized for Online: Each article can be read online, as a web article or within our digital magazine.

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Stay Informed

Discover facts and stats about agriculture in your state, including the average farm size and the number of family farms.



Cook With Colorado Products

Find tasty recipes using the state's top products such as corn, wheat and more.



Have a Field Day

Discover agritourism destinations from dairies to farm-to-fork restaurants.





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The Hirakata family grows melons, pumpkins and more on their multigenerational family farm in Rocky Ford.

PHOTO BY DENISE CHAMBERS

PHOTO: LINDA STORM



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Cultivating COLORADO

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SENIOR EDITOR Hannah Patterson Hill
ASSOCIATE EDITORS Rachel Graf, Kelly Rogers
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS Rachel Bertone, Jessica Walker Boehm, Fatuma Emmad, Kim Hill, Annelise Jolley, Christiana Lilly, Kasey Neiss, Joanie Stiers, Kayla Walden
V.P./CONTENT & MARKETING Jessy Yancey
V.P./CREATIVE SERVICES Laura Gallagher
ART DIRECTOR Amy Hiemstra
SENIOR GRAPHIC DESIGNER Emmylou Rittenour
SENIOR PHOTOGRAPHER Jeff Adkins
STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Nathan Lambrecht
MEDIA ASSET MANAGER Alison Hunter
WEB DEVELOPER Richard Stevens
PRESIDENT Ray Langen
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER Kim Newsom Holmberg
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT Jordan Moore
V.P./BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT Drew Colston
INTEGRATED MEDIA MANAGER Kara Katona
V.P./OPERATIONS Molly Morton
V.P./CLIENT SERVICES Katie Middendorf
SENIOR AD COORDINATOR/DESIGNER Vikki Williams
AD TRAFFIC COORDINATOR Patricia Moisan
SALES OPERATIONS SPECIALIST Courtney Cook
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CHAIRMAN Greg Thurman
PRESIDENT/PUBLISHER Bob Schwartzman
CONTROLLER Chris Dudley
ACCOUNTING TEAM Maria McFarland, Lisa Owens
DATABASE DIRECTOR Debbie Woksa
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY Kristy Giles
HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER Peggy Blake

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COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE:

COMMISSIONER Kate Greenberg
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC OUTREACH Mary Peck

Special thanks to all Department staff for their support.

For more information about the Colorado Department of Agriculture, contact:

Mary Peck, Director of Communications and Public Outreach
 305 Interlocken Pkwy., Broomfield, CO, 80021
 (303) 869-9000
 mary.peck@state.co.us

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Kate Greenberg was appointed Commissioner of Agriculture in December 2018. She is a strong advocate for conservation, agriculture education and farmland affordability.

Welcome to our fifth edition of *Cultivating Colorado*, filled with information and articles that speak to the strength of agriculture in our great state.

Agriculture is inherently resilient, innovative and adaptable. Among many other things, 2020 has highlighted the critical importance of our diverse food producers that make up every link of the supply chain.

On these pages, you'll learn how farmers and ranchers have pivoted their operations and found new ways to connect Coloradans to local foods in the wake of the COVID-19

pandemic. You'll also get a sense of how very diverse Colorado agriculture is and learn more about the skill it takes to keep it thriving. Here at the Colorado Department of Agriculture, we benefit from this skill in part through the expert guidance and real-world experience of the farmers and ranchers who sit on our Ag Commission, featured on page 26.

I'm honored to work in an industry that is foundational to our lives, a steady reminder of all that we have to be thankful for, and one that is working to provide greater opportunity for all. And I'm so proud of the more than 300 employees at the Colorado Department of Agriculture who work hard every day to uphold our mission of strengthening and advancing Colorado agriculture, promoting a safe and high-quality food supply, protecting consumers, and fostering responsible stewardship of the environment and natural resources.

Thank you for your interest and for your support of Colorado agriculture.

Sincerely,

Kate Greenberg
 Commissioner of Agriculture



COLORADO
 Department of Agriculture



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Colorado Ag

An overview of the state's food, farming and agribusiness sectors

COLORADO BOASTS MORE THAN JUST MAJESTIC MOUNTAINS

and outdoor adventures – it's also an abundant agricultural powerhouse. With 38,900 farms spread across 31.8 million acres, Colorado's farmers and ranchers work tirelessly to produce commodities for both the state and the nation.

The average size of a Colorado farm or ranch is 817 acres. Cattle and calves top the list of the state's agricultural commodities, with dairy products, corn, hay and wheat following closely behind. The Centennial State ranks nationally in the top 10 for several crops, including barley, alfalfa hay, proso millet, grain sorghum, peaches, sheep and lambs. The Colorado ag industry greatly supports the local economy, contributing approximately \$47 billion each year and employing more than 195,000 people, not to mention international exports, which total around \$2 billion annually.

Along with crops and commodities, Colorado's agriculture industry encompasses everything from agribusiness and ag education to providing necessary resources to farmers in a number of areas, including mental health. In the international crisis of COVID-19, Colorado farmers, ranchers and agricultural entities stepped up to support the industry and each other, with the strengthening of resources like the Colorado Crisis Hotline and using technology such as online sales platforms to stay connected with consumers.

With a strong foundation and a dedicated support group, Colorado agriculture will continue to succeed.

38,900
TOTAL FARMS

>195,000
AG JOBS

Sources: USDA Census of Agriculture,
Colorado Department of Agriculture,
National Agricultural Statistics Service

ECONOMIC
IMPACT:
\$47B

PRINCIPAL FEMALE
FARMERS
26,406



Update your plate with

THE
nutritious
EGG!

DGA SCIENTIFIC REPORT RECOMMENDS EGGS

The Dietary Guidelines for Americans Advisory Committee recently issued recommendations for *birth to 24 months old* and specifically recommended eggs as an important first food for *infants and toddlers*, as well as for *pregnant and lactating women*.

The DGA's Scientific Report also highlighted the importance of a nutrient plentiful in eggs – choline – while recommending eggs as a *first food for babies* to reduce the risk for an egg allergy. The Advisory Committee additionally encourages eggs for *pre-teens and adolescents*.



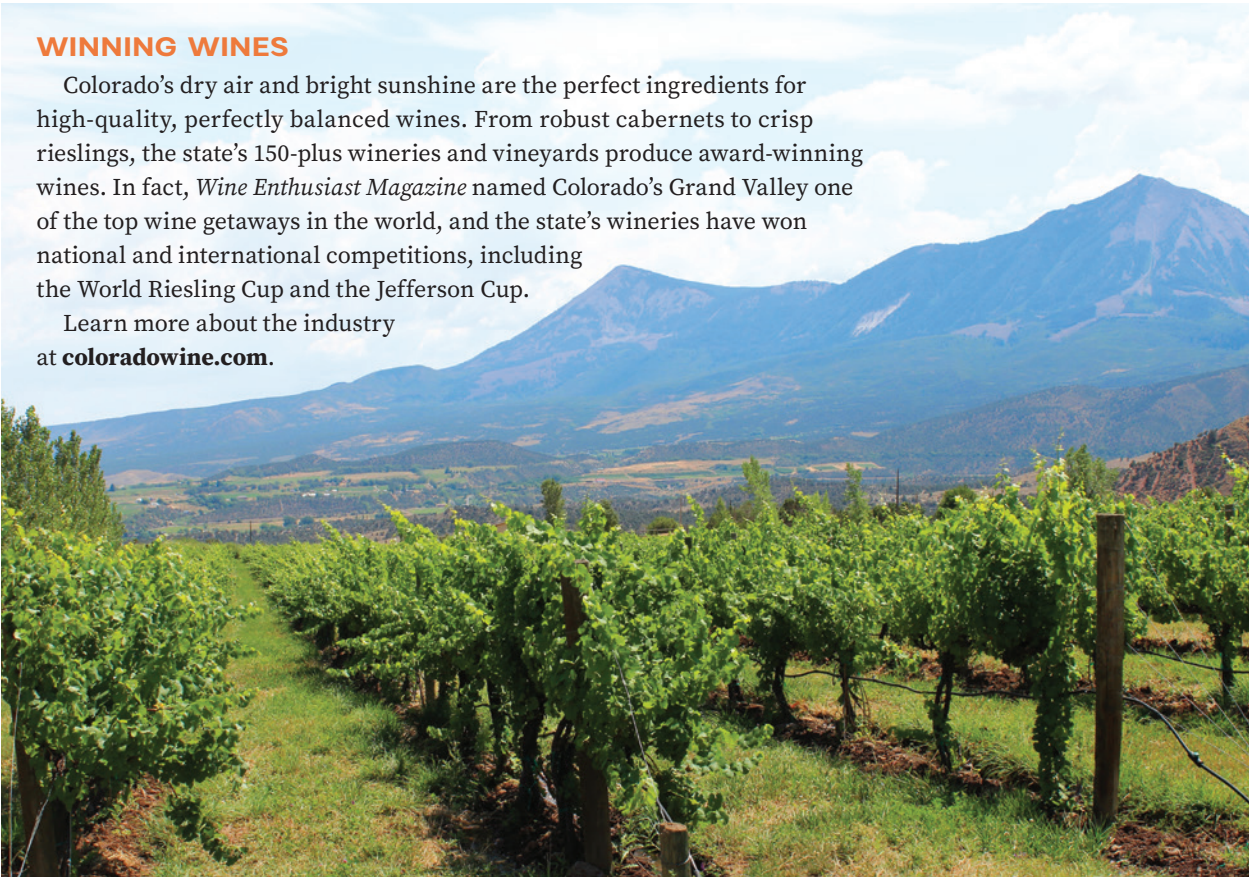
Learn more about our organization and more about the incredible, edible egg at www.coloradoeggproducers.com



WINNING WINES

Colorado's dry air and bright sunshine are the perfect ingredients for high-quality, perfectly balanced wines. From robust cabernets to crisp rieslings, the state's 150-plus wineries and vineyards produce award-winning wines. In fact, *Wine Enthusiast Magazine* named Colorado's Grand Valley one of the top wine getaways in the world, and the state's wineries have won national and international competitions, including the World Riesling Cup and the Jefferson Cup.

Learn more about the industry at coloradowine.com.



SUNNY-SIDE UP? That egg on your plate could have come from one of Colorado's 4.8 million laying hens, which produce more than 1.4 billion eggs each year.

Eggs Benedict with Wilted Spring Greens

Ingredients

- 6 large eggs
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 12 ounces mixed spring greens
- 6 pieces ham, thinly sliced
- 3 English muffins, halved and toasted
- Hollandaise sauce, for topping

Instructions

1. Poach the eggs, taking care to keep yolks intact. Set aside.
2. Melt butter and saute garlic until just fragrant. Stir the greens into butter and garlic until just wilted.
3. Place a piece of ham on each toasted muffin half. Distribute the greens over each, working quickly to keep the food warm. Top with a poached egg and hollandaise sauce.



ONE IN A MELON

Since 1887, sweet, juicy Rocky Ford cantaloupes have been grown in the Arkansas River Valley, after pioneer G.W. Swink journeyed from Illinois to Colorado and settled in Bent County. At the Rocky Ford crossing, he built a trading post and began experimenting with growing muskmelons, proving the conditions were perfect for melon production and attracting producers from all over. Fast forward to 1895, when the first trainload of Rocky Ford melons was sent to St. Louis in a successful attempt at exporting out of state. Soon, the fruit was being shipped all the way to New York and became quickly well-known and loved.

The melons still have widespread name recognition today, and local farmers formed the Rocky Ford Growers Association in 2011. To preserve the integrity of the name, Rocky Ford melons (which now include watermelon and honeydew) must grow within the boundaries of the Rocky Ford region, which consists of nutrient-rich soil for ideal growing conditions. Learn more at rockyfordgrowersassociation.com.



MORE THAN 40
AQUACULTURE
PRODUCERS AND
DISTRIBUTORS ARE
LICENSED BY THE
COLORADO
DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE.

WHAT'S IN SEASON?

Produce calendar
for Colorado

PRODUCT	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Apples								A	S	O	N	
Apricots							J	A				
Arugula					M	J	J	A	S	O		
Asparagus					M	J						
Beets							J	A	S	O		
Bell Peppers								A	S			
Broccoli							J	A	S	O		
Cabbage							J	A	S	O		
Cauliflower							J	A	S	O		
Cantaloupe							J	A	S			
Carrots								A	S	O	N	
Celery							J	A	S	O		
Chard						J	J	A	S	O		
Cherries						J	J					
Chile Peppers								A	S	O		
Chinese Cabbage						J	J	A	S	O		
Collards					M	J	J	A	S	O		
Cucumbers	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Eggplant								A	S	O		
Grapes									S	O		
Green Beans							J	A	S			
Herbs								A	S	O		
Honeydew								A	S	O		
Kale					M	J	J	A	S	O		
Lettuce					M	J	J	A	S	O		
Mustard					M	J	J	A	S	O		
Onions								A	S	O	N	
Peaches							J	A	S			
Pears								A	S	O		
Plums								A	S			
Potatoes	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Pumpkins									S	O		
Raspberries								A	S	O		
Summer Squash							J	A	S			
Spinach				A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	
Strawberries						J	J	A	S			
Sweet Corn							J	A	S	O		
Tomatoes	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Turnips					M	J	J	A	S	O		
Watermelon							J	A	S			
Winter Squash	J	F								O	N	D

Source: Colorado Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association

Find more online

To learn more about what's growing in Colorado, visit COagriculture.com.



What's Growing in Colorado

A glimpse at the state's leading ag products based on cash receipts*

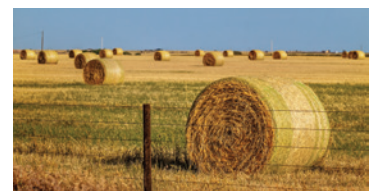


CORN \$577.1M

In 2019, Colorado farmers harvested 1.3 million acres of corn for grain and produced 159.9 million bushels, with Yuma County ranking as the state's top corn for grain producer. The same year, Colorado's corn for silage harvest spanned 175,000 acres and resulted in the production of 4.2 million tons.

HAY \$535M

Colorado farmers harvested 1.46 million acres of hay in 2019, including 730,000 acres of alfalfa, and produced more than 4 million tons of hay.



WHEAT \$363.5M

Ranking fourth in the U.S. in winter wheat production, Colorado's winter wheat harvest covered 2 million acres and produced 98 million bushels of the crop in 2019.

CATTLE & CALVES \$3.6B

Colorado has a total of 2.8 million cattle and calves on more than 12,000 farms across the state.



DAIRY PRODUCTS & MILK \$899.6M

With Weld County leading the state in milk production, Colorado produced over 4.8 billion pounds of milk in 2019.



*WHAT ARE CASH RECEIPTS?

Defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service, cash receipts refer to the total amount of crops or livestock sold in a calendar year.

PANDEMIC Partnerships

Determined Coloradans get creative in serving their communities with fresh, local food



IN THE FACE OF COVID-19'S disruptions, Coloradans found creative ways to continue to provide fresh, local food for their communities. From adopting social-distancing safety measures to moving to online sales, producers went above and beyond to feed consumers.

BACK TO BASICS

In Lakewood, executive director of the Colorado Farmers Market Association (CFMA) Rosalind May worked with agriculture and public health officials to develop recommendations and a toolkit for farmers markets to open safely,

albeit with changes such as placing vendor booths at least 6 feet apart and creating a clear flow of traffic through the markets to maintain physical distancing. "In the past, farmers markets have been places with music, events and lots of social gathering," May says. "Those elements had to be taken out so markets could serve their essential function: as businesses where farmers can sell what they produce and where people can access fresh, healthy, local food."

Some farmers even reported an increase in sales in the summer of 2020. According to May, although revenue for markets themselves is

down, managers remain committed to staying open to benefit both producers and consumers.

UPLIFTING SEASON

In Denver, R&B's Mo' Betta Green MarketPlace had long served the community through two weekly farmers markets in areas considered "food deserts," where residents lacked sufficient access to affordable, healthy foods. Mo' Betta founder Beverly Grant, a pioneer in the urban food movement, also offered exercise classes, free tastings and cooking demos as part of her HEAL (Healthy Eating, Active Living) model.



COVID-19 halted many of those worthy endeavors. “My whole farmers market model is based on engagement,” Grant says. After reviewing CFMA guidelines, she decided her markets couldn’t operate the same way they had before the pandemic. She could, however, offer a walk-up or curbside farm stand with a contactless payment system.

Thanks to grant funding, Grant employed 22 high school- and college-age youth to aid in spring planting. Broken into teams to limit contact, the youth planted, weeded, harvested and operated the farm stands stocked with Mo’ Betta bounty and that of a few select vendors.

Throughout the long days of hard work, Grant noted the positive

attitudes of the teens who worked for her. “The youth were so grateful for the opportunity,” she says. She noticed something else, too, during the 2020 season. “People had more of a spirit of love and appreciation. By focusing on the basics, we uplifted people with beautiful foods. This has been one of the most enriching seasons of my 10 years.”

RAMPING UP RETAIL

In Salida, Scanga Meat Company greatly expanded its retail sales when major meat plants temporarily closed during the pandemic. Scanga also offered home delivery and ready-to-cook meals and communicated regularly with customers by expanding its social media presence.

During the height of the shutdown, Valley Packing & Catering in LaSalle operated limited retail store hours to allow employees to focus on processing for local producers as quickly as possible.

A WAY TO SERVE

In Loveland, Alan Horn saw a Facebook post about a man virtually connecting Kansas consumers to producers in their own communities. “This could work for Colorado,” Horn thought. Within a day, he had started a Facebook group called Shop Colorado Farms.

The platform allows ranchers and farmers to post meat, vegetables and other homegrown products for sale; consumers can purchase directly from those who grow them. Within a week, the group had more than 3,000 members – now it has far surpassed that number. Posts from buyers praising producers “elevates local sellers, showing others they are selling a good product,” Horn says.

A digital marketer by vocation, Horn had no experience in agriculture or in fighting hunger, yet he was moved to act. “During COVID-19, I had no way to serve others, and this was the perfect opportunity to do that.”

– Kim Hill



Looking to buy local?

The Colorado Department of Agriculture has put together a fantastic directory of farmers markets and food stands. Find one near you at COfarmersmarkets.org.



Rosalind May, executive director of the Colorado Farmers Market Association, helped develop a toolkit for farmers markets to operate safely during the pandemic.

Come Together

Southern Ute community works to ensure access to healthy foods

THE LONG HISTORY OF THE

Southern Ute people of southwest Colorado is marked by perseverance and the ability to adapt in the face of adversity. From being the first tribe to use horses to creating a bevy of nutrition, health and agricultural programs today, they continually strive to strengthen and sustain their community.

“The opportunity for tribal members to succeed in the production of agriculture is vast,” says Kevin Mallow, Southern Ute agricultural division head.

Living in a food desert and a region prone to drought, the Southern Ute Tribe has gotten creative with making sure its community has access to nutritious foods. The Food Distribution Program serves low-income community household members, and like the rest of the country, they’ve seen an increase in food insecurity. Through this program, participants have access to USDA nonperishable, frozen meats and fresh produce.

EDUCATION AND CONSERVATION

The Tribe also empowers its members by educating them. The Tribal Health Department, Boys & Girls Club and Southern Ute Indian Montessori Academy lead classes on healthy eating habits, and members can access health screenings and education through the Tribal Health Department and SunUte Community Center. The Tribe also has a small bison herd (harvested on a limited basis), and the Culture Preservation Department educates the public about traditional foods, including gathering and preservation practices.



The Southern Ute Tribe has focused on upgrading its irrigation systems and leveraging unused water rights.

When it comes to water conservation and rights, the Tribe has taken matters into its own hands in upgrading its archaic irrigation systems. Decreased funding for the Bureau of Indian Affairs has limited the bureau’s ability to carry out the trust responsibility of the federal government. The Tribe also finds ways to forecast and measure droughts and other environmental events. The Tribe’s Water Use Options Team has helped develop unused water rights.

“The tribe has vast underutilized agricultural land,” says the Tribe spokesperson. “Couple that with the fact that we have also underutilized, senior water rights and we are in a prime position to pivot our agricultural strategy to something with greater benefit to the tribal membership as a whole.”

MODERNIZATION

However, like other rural areas, there’s been a reduction in interest in agrarian living – especially among the youth. To promote farming and provide support, the Southern Ute

Tribe is implementing modern farming practices, such as using hemp as a hay alternative, greenhouses and investigating the start of a co-op to strengthen purchasing power. The Agriculture Department helps with weed and rodent management, soil analysis, and tasks like welding, fencing and spraying. In the fall, they host a produce sale where farm equipment is rented out.

Historically, the tribe was nomadic, migrating each season while hunting game and harvesting and sharing vegetables, nuts and berries. However, in 1887, the Dawes Allotment Act forced tribal nations to adapt homesteading and farming practices in the style of white settlers. Not only was this a change of lifestyle, but it also abruptly changed the tribe’s diet. This is why the Food Distribution Program and other cultural initiatives are so important.

“The Ute people view everything as interconnected,” the Tribe spokesperson says. “Everything has life and everything should be respected for what it brings to the world and to the Ute people.”

– Christiana Lilly

RISING *to the* OCCASION

Colorado State Fair and Fairgrounds
continue serving the community



ESTABLISHED IN Pueblo nearly 150 years ago, the Colorado State Fair is far more than an annual event; it's a Centennial State institution that residents can count on. Coloradans can also count on the Colorado State Fairgrounds, which have historically served as a local community hub during crises. This ethos of community service continues to reside in the heart of the Fair today.

"The Colorado State Fair not only brings together agricultural organizations like 4-H and FFA, but it also unites the entire community," says Scott Stoller, general manager of the Colorado State Fair. "It's the state's largest summer event, drawing more than 466,000 people, and Pueblo takes pride in that. Plus, the fairgrounds have a history of

meeting local needs during hard times and emergencies – that's also something this community takes a lot of pride in, and for good reason."

DEEPLY ROOTED

The Colorado State Fair has been held in Pueblo since it began in 1872, but it didn't find its current home at the Colorado State Fairgrounds until 1901. That year, with its new half-mile racetrack, 300-foot-long grandstand, exhibition halls and stables, the fair drew a record-breaking 16,000 attendees.

It didn't take long for the fairgrounds to serve the state in a larger way. During World War I, the Colorado State Fairgrounds became a training base for Colorado militia troops, and the site helped create jobs during the Great Depression

by participating in New Deal work-relief programs. In the 1930s, the fairgrounds were also temporarily home to the Civilian Conservation Corps, an organization that developed programs to help provide unemployed young men with work in natural resources conservation.

"Many of the fairgrounds' buildings and structures were constructed during the Great Depression, thanks to the Works Progress Administration, which was very beneficial for Colorado and its residents during that difficult time," says Chris Wiseman, former general manager of the Colorado State Fair and current Pueblo County Commissioner. "In recent years, the fairgrounds have sheltered families and animals affected by wildfires, state organizations have trained their



The fairgrounds served as a COVID-19 testing site during the pandemic.



The Colorado State Fair continued in 2020 on a smaller scale with added safety measures.

employees on the property – and that’s just a small sampling. Pueblo institutions know the fairgrounds are available to them if needed.”

A need arose again in 2020 – this time, in the midst of a global pandemic.

A COMMUNITY HUB

In April 2020, the Colorado State Fairgrounds collaborated with

Pueblo County to open a free drive-thru COVID-19 self-testing site. Stoller says it was an easy decision to offer this service to the community, and he was proud to be part of the fairgrounds’ long legacy of service.

“My staff and I were fully on board to provide COVID-19 testing at the fairgrounds,” Stoller says. “We have the space and

the infrastructure, and I’m happy we could be part of this effort.”

Despite COVID-19 and its associated challenges, the Colorado State Fair was still held in 2020, making it one of only 15 state fairs across the U.S. to open in any capacity. However, unlike previous years that included live concerts and in-person

entertainment across the fairgrounds’ 102 acres, 2020’s fair primarily featured agricultural competitions, virtual activities and drive-thru events.

“The Colorado State Fair means a great deal to many people in our community and state, so it was important for us to do something in 2020,” Stoller says. “Even though it couldn’t be nearly as expansive as it usually is, we stayed true to our core principles, and we were able to safely host on-site animal competitions for 4-H and FFA members as well as a livestock auction that raised more than \$298,200 [for youth in agriculture]. All things considered, it was a success – and we’re already looking forward to next year’s fair.”

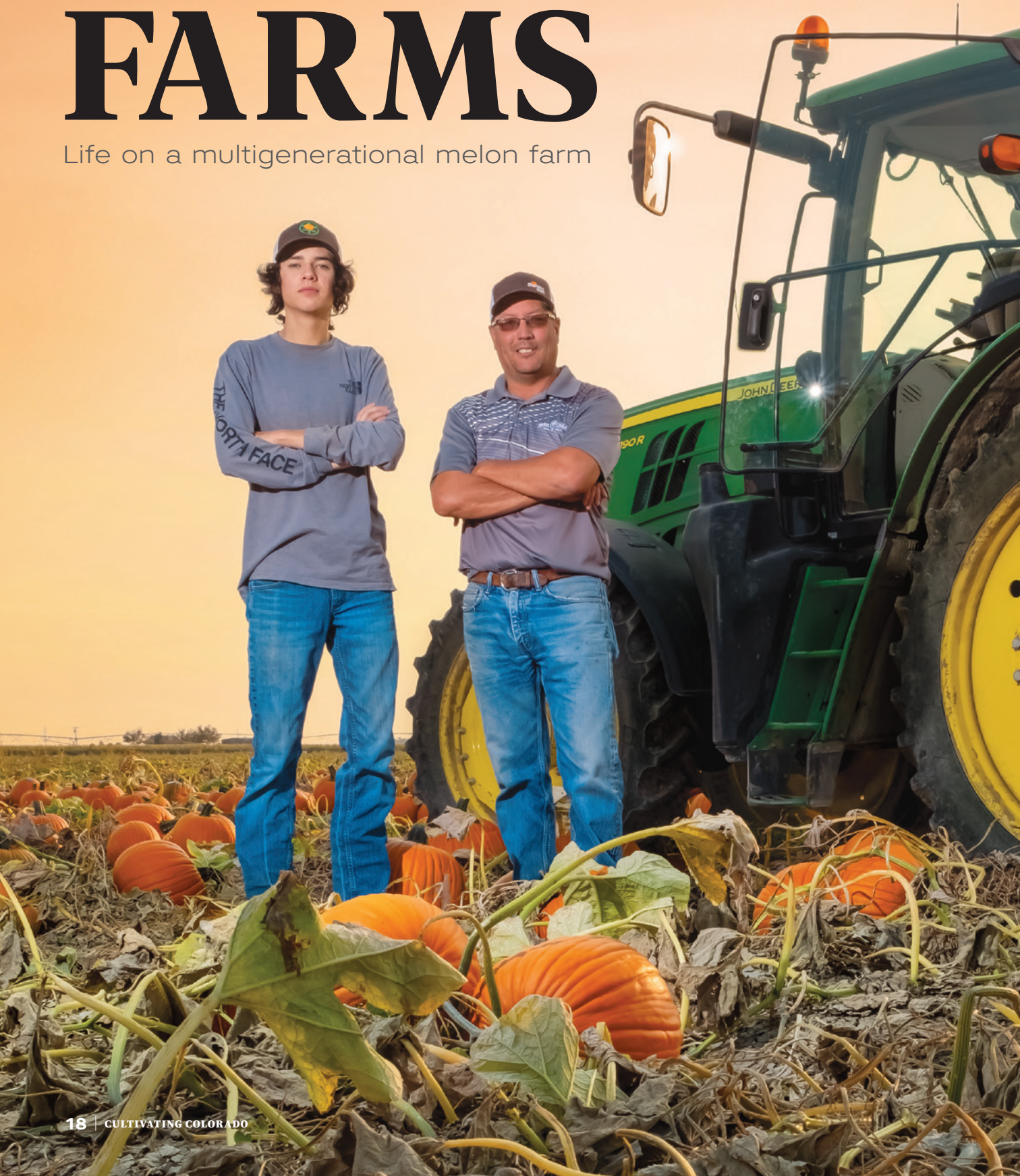
– Jessica Walker Boehm

Find more online

For more information about the happenings at the Colorado State Fairgrounds, visit coloradostatefairgrounds.com.

Hirakata FARMS

Life on a multigenerational melon farm





HIRAKATA FARMS MAY be known for its production of the world-renowned Rocky Ford melon, but behind the scenes, there's a humbling story of commitment and perseverance that has kept this generational operation running since 1915.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

"Our ancestors started farming this land more than 100 years ago," Michael Hirakata says. Today, he and his cousin, Glenn, are the primary owners and operators. "Our great grandfather emigrated here from Japan and found a nice place to settle down here in Colorado. We've been here ever since." Hirakata Farms grows and ships Rocky Ford Cantaloupe, watermelon, honeydew, pumpkins and more.

Hirakata is the fourth in his family line to continue the family farming legacy, but he didn't always know that agriculture was what he wanted to pursue. Like most young people, Hirakata wasn't sure what he wanted to do with the rest of his life – but

seeing tangible rewards in farming has a way of getting under your skin and sticking to your bones.

"When you plant a seed and see the new beginnings of a plant in just a few short weeks, you quickly grow to appreciate this way of life," he says. "It didn't take long before I realized how rewarding it was to literally see the fruits of my labor."

COLORADO AGRICULTURE COMMISSION

In addition to his role on the family farm, Hirakata serves as a member of the Colorado Agriculture Commission. Together with a few other local voices, the Commission combs through agricultural rules and regulations and decides how to advise the governor and commissioner of agriculture for the betterment of the industry.

"Serving in this capacity has actually impacted our own farm," Hirakata says. "I've had the opportunity to see what works and what doesn't in other industries and find ways to incorporate what I've learned into our business or advise

Michael Hirakata and his son, Nate, farm the land that has been in their family for more than 100 years. They grow pumpkins, melons and more.

others. It's opened my eyes to a larger agricultural world than I would've been exposed to on my own."

FARMING CHALLENGES

While his passion for farming runs deep, the more than 1,200-acre farm presents its fair share of challenges. Lately, Hirkata says, the greatest obstacles they have had to face relate to both water and labor.

"For most of the summer, we had to deal with water shortages," he says. "We would experience weeks of drought followed by storms that

covered us in an inch and a half of rain before circling back around to droughts all over again."

This is particularly troublesome for Hirkata and his family because they grow all of their produce in the fields. "We seemed to bounce back and forth a lot between very wet or very dry ground," he says. "If we had the option to choose, we would rather have it dry so we could at least control the irrigation ourselves. When the ground is so densely saturated during these storms, it increases the likelihood of decay in our plants."

Hirkata says his second-largest struggle has come in the form of employment. "It's incredibly hard to find labor in our town because it's so small," he says. "We've hired who we

can but supplemented with workers through the H-2A program because there just isn't a large enough workforce here in our area. Every single year, it feels like we're short on labor and don't have enough hands to help us harvest everything we need in the time frame we need it."

Hirkata is continuously learning and striving to improve his operation in spite of adversity.

Despite the hardships, Hirkata doesn't have plans to change careers.

"It's a hard life, but it's a good life too," he says. "We have a lot of freedom to run our business the way we want, and I've really grown to appreciate farming now more than ever before."

— Kayla Walden



What is the H-2A program?

This federal program helps U.S. farmers fill seasonal labor gaps with temporary workers from other countries.



BEHIND THE LENS: *Shelby Chesnut*

Photographer captures life on the farm for all to enjoy

Following 4Rivers Equipment on social media is a treat for those who enjoy farm life photography, thanks to Shelby Chesnut.

Married to Dawson Chesnut, the oldest of four brothers who farm together with their parents Kevin and Julie, Shelby is a storyteller, as she captures her family's life and views of what it's like to farm.

Chesnut Farms, located in Kersey, produces alfalfa hay, shell corn, silage corn and wheat. In 2018, the farm was inducted into the Colorado Department of Agriculture's Centennial Farms & Ranches program.

"What I like the most about capturing agricultural moments is that there is a story or something for the public to learn from in each photo," Shelby notes, saying that people from around the world have seen the photos and asked questions about farming and farm life.

"Our lives do not revolve around a 9 to 5 job, sometimes it's difficult, but most of the time, it pays off," she says. "You often hear farming is not a job, it's a lifestyle, and that cannot be any more accurate. I love that agriculture in itself is family."

Sharing her photos with 4Rivers Equipment feels natural to Shelby. 4Rivers has been serving Colorado farmers with John Deere equipment solutions since 1926. The company's vision and purpose are to be a working partner with the



Photos by Shelby Chesnut. See all of her work at cfagrifilm.mypixieset.com.

agriculture sector and provide the most innovative equipment and machinery and support it with industry-leading service.

"I know they can appreciate the life of farming and producing just as much as we do," she says. "We have a long-standing relationship with 4Rivers, as roughly 90% of our equipment is purchased through them. For over 40 years, 4Rivers has contributed to our production through offering

the best equipment, support, and as a valuable resource to running our equipment at a consistent full capacity. Building friendships with salesmen, technicians and mechanics has always come naturally; something not every dealership can offer."

"Sharing photos with 4Rivers is just like sharing photos among our family members," Shelby adds. "We can appreciate, criticize, laugh and enjoy them together."

“What I like most about capturing agricultural moments is that there is a story or something for the public to learn from in each photo.”

Clicking With CONSUMERS

Digital marketing and technology help producers connect with the public

Digital marketing has become an increasingly vital component in business over the last couple of decades. While not always apparent to the consumer, agriculture is perpetually adopting and adapting to new technology that helps drive business. And digital tools are no different. With the rise of social media platforms and online shops, Colorado producers are beginning to lean more heavily on digital media and marketing to connect with consumers.

BOULDER COUNTY FARMERS MARKETS

Boulder County Farmers Markets (BCFM) is a nonprofit that operates five farmers markets between Boulder County and Denver County. Seven farmers launched the group in 1987 as a growers-only market with a goal of supporting and expanding local agriculture and connecting producers to their communities.

“Today, we work with more than 70 farmers and ranchers and 150 food artisans,” executive

director Brian Coppom says.

He adds that technology has served an essential role in growing the organization because it has allowed them to share their message and connect with customers online and, this year, to attract more consumers through the convenience of online shopping and contactless payments. They’ve been able to process EBT transactions for customers in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which provides local farmers with additional sales they may have missed otherwise.

“Individual vendors are also benefiting from the increasingly easier access to technology,” Coppom says. “Many vendors haven’t traditionally accepted credit cards because of the complexity and costs, but the proliferation of platforms such as Square or Shopkeeper has helped increase sales and generate higher-volume purchases.”

BCFM launched an online preordering platform early in the year once they realized the traditional farmers market model might not be in the cards due to COVID-19. Customers can browse available items online, check out and pick up their orders at one of



Above: In the wake of COVID-19, Boulder County Farmers Markets launched a new platform allowing shoppers to preorder items online. Right: Digital platforms enable farmers market vendors to accept credit card payments.



“
**BEING A
FARMER MEANS
TENDING TO
THE LAND, AIR
AND WATER.**
”

SONDRA PIERCE
Colorado Mom and Farmer



the many available locations.

“Our customers who use the service love it,” Coppom says. “We’re finding people who want to support the local food system but not necessarily in person this year are making good use of the online shopping experience.”

**MOUNTAIN ROOTS
PRODUCE**

Mountain Roots Produce is a small farm in Mancos Valley in southwestern Colorado owned by Mike Nolan and his fiancée, Mindy Perkovich. For the last 10 years, they’ve made a living growing and selling various vegetables and other produce to restaurants. But the start of 2020 pushed them to shift gears and rely more heavily on digital media to keep the farm afloat.

“We’ve had a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program in the past, but it usually fluctuated between 50 and 100 members,” Nolan says. “But with the changes we’ve seen this year, we’re now at 165 members. The CSA model has never been our long-term plan, but it’s what we had to do to survive this year.”

While the farm has had an online store presence in the past, it was never a crucial element of their business until COVID-19.

“We would launch our products online on Monday mornings last year and make a few hundred dollars throughout the week,” he says. “But this year, we’ve been launching on Monday mornings, generating thousands in revenue and inevitably seeing our site crash by 10 a.m. from all the demand.”

Nolan says they would ideally like to transition back to the restaurant industry, but they’re working on building up their online platform in case things don’t return to normal in the near future.

“Consumers are looking for more online alternatives right now,” he says. “There are people wanting to purchase their food directly from farmers, which has been our saving grace this year. I’d recommend any established producer to have an online platform presence, especially given the current circumstances.”

– Kayla Walden



Learn how farmers
are being sustainable at
findourcommonground.com



Access Granted

The Specialty Crop Block Grant program helps increase competitiveness for fruits, vegetables, nuts and herbs



COLORADO'S AGRICULTURE industry is arguably one of the most diverse in the nation. The state's major commodities include cattle and calves, corn, and dairy products, but farmers also produce many fruit and vegetable crops such as potatoes, green chiles, peaches, onions and sweet corn, among others. These crops, along with nuts, bedding plants, and herbs and spices, are categorized as specialty crops.

With funding from the United States Department of Agriculture, the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA) manages the Specialty Crop Block Grant program to help advance specialty crops' competitiveness and strengthen the sector overall.

"The Specialty Crop Block Grant is a federal program that was created with the 2004 Farm Bill and is one of the first federal programs to directly aid specialty crops," says Jennifer Benson, grant specialist for the CDA. "Each state is eligible to apply for a block of funding and we

manage it by distributing those funds to projects that are selected from a pool of applicants through a competitive review process."

The grant is awarded to a variety of projects that can demonstrate a broader benefit to the specialty crop community and have a measurable result. For example, the project could be research-based or focused on marketing. The grant is not intended to benefit an individual farmer or business exclusively.

WORTHY RECIPIENTS

"We've funded many unique and exciting projects over the years. For example, we recently funded a project with the Colorado Potato Administrative Committee's project to test various coatings that would help potatoes stay fresh and hold their shape longer," Benson says. "Another current project is with Guidestone Colorado, a nonprofit based in Salida, where they used the funds to work with schools to figure out how to incorporate more locally

grown food into school meals, as well as working with students and adults on how to grow local produce in high-altitude areas."

Benson says the amount of funds the CDA receives each year is based on the previous year's specialty crop cash receipts. Typically, they have between \$600,000 and \$900,000 to divvy out. Those funds are extremely flexible, and the CDA has the authority to decide how many projects they'll fund and how much to distribute to each.

THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST

The process of awarding the grant is lengthy and thorough.

"We start taking applications in the winter and any eligible organization with an idea can submit a concept paper to CDA. This should include the problem they're interested in solving, the budget and letters of support," Benson says.

The proposed ideas then go through a competitive review process where a panel of experts scores the project's impact. Those that make it through the review are invited to submit a full proposal. Benson is available to consult with applicants on what objectives might be most appropriate for their applications and how to make applications competitive.

— Rachel Bertone

🔍 Find more online

To learn more about the Specialty Crop Block Grant program and how to apply, visit colorado.gov/ag or contact Jennifer Benson at jennifer.benson@state.co.us or (303) 869-9173.

All In for Agriculture

Meet the Colorado Department of Agriculture Ag Commission

HELPING TO ADVOCATE FOR and improve Colorado's agriculture industry, the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA) Ag Commission is a vital group made up of nine agricultural leaders who generously volunteer their time and expertise. The commission is responsible for making recommendations to the commissioner, governor and general assembly about ag issues, developing policies, enforcing rules and much more.

"The Colorado farmers and ranchers who comprise our state Ag Commission bring a wealth of expertise, dedication and foresight to

their work with the Department of Agriculture," Commissioner Kate Greenberg says. "Their collective guidance is invaluable to me, the department and to the tens of thousands of ag producers across our state. We are so fortunate to have them as part of our team."

BRANT HARRISON

Brant Harrison runs one of the largest organic peach orchards in the state, growing his original 5 acres of fruit trees to now more than 70 acres. Harrison also served on the Mesa County Pest District Board, CDA Pesticide Advisory

Board, Western Colorado Horticulture Society Board and Mesa County Farm Bureau Board.

KATHRYN BEDELL

Kathryn Bedell is a self-employed livestock operator who sells local meat to the surrounding community. Since 2004, she has added sheep and pork to her farm, and opened Roan Creek Ranch Grocery in 2014. She recently began advocating for a regional animal slaughter and fabrication facility and a local food distribution network.

SEGUNDO DIAZ

Segundo Diaz and his wife own and manage Martinez Farms, a 2,500-acre certified seed potato farm in the San Luis Valley. Diaz is an active member of the potato industry and is involved in the Colorado Certified Potato Growers Association and part of the international delegation for the National Potato Council's Market Access Program.

MARTY GERACE

Raised on a family vegetable farm and greenhouse operation in Adams County, Marty Gerace now lives in Golden. He continues to work in the family business, consisting of two retail garden centers in the Denver metro area and more than 1 million square feet of production greenhouse facilities in three Fort Range locations.

MICHAEL HIRAKATA

Born and raised in Rocky Ford, Michael Hirakata is a fourth-generation farmer, overseeing operations at Hirakata Farms.



PHOTO: BEN WALTHER/COLORADO DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

He manages the sales of the farm's cantaloupe, watermelon, honeydew and pumpkins. Hirakata is also the current president and spokesman for the Rocky Ford Growers Association.

GEORGE WHITTEN

George Whitten was born into a ranching family and has managed his own ranching operation since 1973. He served on the board of directors for the Rio Grande Water Conservation District and is a founding member and the current Sweet Grass Co-Op president.

COLLEEN PEPPLER

Raised on a wheat farm, Colleen Peppler and her husband own and operate 500 acres of alfalfa hay, corn, wheat and brewing barley. Peppler is a spokesperson for CommonGround, a group of more than 20 farm women across 20 states, and serves on the Colorado Foundation for Agriculture board of directors.


STEVE YOUNG

Steve Young grew up on a small ranch in eastern Colorado and spent his career in the feed and grain business. He now works for AgWest Commodities as a hedge broker/cash adviser and operates a small cow-calf operation.

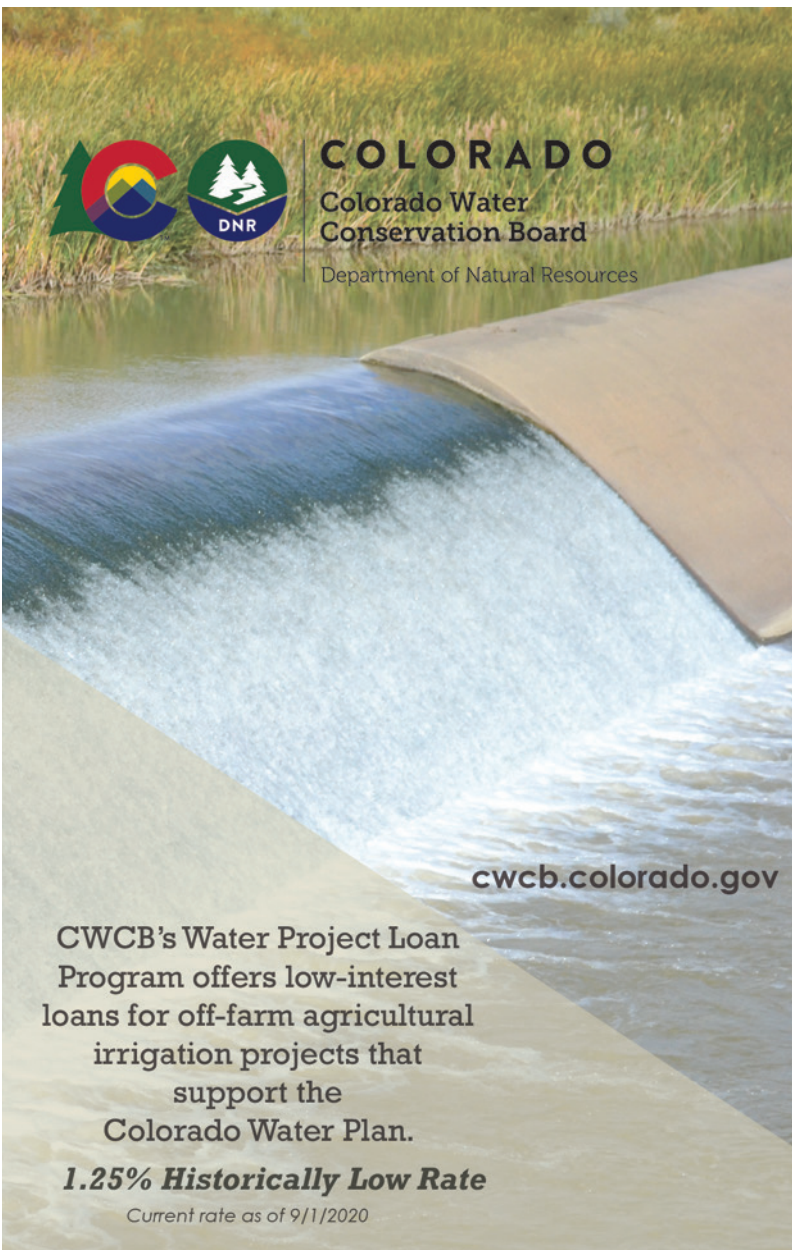
BRETT RUTLEDGE

Born and raised on a family farm in Yuma, Brett Rutledge continues to run the operation, growing corn, wheat and organic crops, as well as raising cattle and pork. He serves as chairman of the Swine Council of the Colorado Livestock Association and is a member of the Colorado Pork Producers Council and Colorado Corn Growers Association.

– Rachel Bertone



COLORADO
Colorado Water
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cwcb.colorado.gov

CWCB's Water Project Loan Program offers low-interest loans for off-farm agricultural irrigation projects that support the Colorado Water Plan.

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WHAT'S GROWING IN YOUR STATE?



FARM FLAVOR

Read about Colorado's top farm products at farmflavor.com/colorado.

Zephrine Hanson of the Veterans to Farmers program at Denver Botanic Gardens Chatfield Farms studies and educates about ways to use lavender.



Labors of LOVE

From beginning farmers to entrepreneurs to educators, Colorado's ag industry boasts top-notch, diverse talent

MOST FARMERS, ESPECIALLY small farmers who make up 87% of Colorado producers, will tell you that farming is hard, but that the path they walk is a way of life. The rewards of farming are measured in production values and economic success, but also in sun-kissed cheeks, calloused hands, nutritious food and the love of a community that supports one another.

The number of U.S. farms and dedicated agricultural land is declining as farmers age and their children move to cities.

Global trade disputes and climate change present unprecedented challenges. Black and brown growers have been historically dispossessed of land in the U.S. and face systematic barriers across the food system, compounding an already difficult path.

But this is a story of survival, resilience and the ways in which so many find their path in agriculture.

Many farmers support their labor of love with off-site income, find their calling in nonprofit work or create niche products. These essential heroes are terraforming an economic landscape that has not historically monetized and valued this labor.

Meet some of Colorado's industry leaders using their unique skills and innovation to support our agriculture system.

ZEPHRINE HANSON

Zephryne Hanson of Hampden Farms is a farmer and entrepreneur. Hanson has been farming since 2017 after moving her family to Colorado on a journey of healing, self-care and empowerment. Hanson is an Air Force veteran and a Black woman in the Veterans to Farmers program at Denver Botanic Gardens Chatfield Farms, where she conducts a lavender feasibility study and teaches how to grow, harvest and use lavender in numerous ways.

Hanson describes herself as a serial entrepreneur. "All the cumulative jobs I have stepped into led me to be the kind of farmer I am today," she says.

Her multiple communities include her family, Veterans to Farmers, Mile High Farmers and FrontLine Farming. Each provides different support in Hanson's agricultural career as she navigates her path as a person with intersectional identities.



Harrison Topp serves as membership director for the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union and manages a fruit farm in Paonia.

HARRISON TOPP

Harrison Topp is the director of membership at Rocky Mountain Farmers Union and a partner and manager of Topp Fruits, LLC, in Western Colorado. Topp has been working in agriculture for a decade in various capacities, including school garden education, advocacy and operating his own farms. Topp credits much of his current fruit farm's success to having his whole

family's support, including their off-farm income, which covers daily or yearly expenses.

"We are overcoming this challenge with grit, ignorance and endurance," Topp says. "Every farmer that I know who has been farming for more than 10 years has failed at least once – bottomed-out failed, rise-from-the-ashes kind of failed." Topp feels that young farmers need to know they will have these moments.



Veronica Lewis in front holds a chicken, while (from left to right) Oscar Vital, JaSon Auguste, Perdita Butler, Damien Thompson, Alonzo Barrón Ortiz, Baiza Getabecha, Kasey Neiss and Fatuma Emmad gather around the FrontLine Farming tractor at Majestic View Farms.

FATUMA EMMAD

Fatuma Emmad is executive director and head farmer of FrontLine Farming (FLF), a People of Color (POC) and womxn-led nonprofit that focuses on farmer advocacy and food justice with an explicit focus on building toward new antiracist food systems. Emmad co-founded FLF with Dr. Damien Thompson. She also serves as the president of Mile High Farmers and is an educator for kindergartners and up to college level at University of Colorado Boulder, where she teaches environmental justice in the masters of environment program.

Emmad is grateful for the seeds of knowledge she carries from those before her and for the way in which land has always provided a home away from home.

JENNIFER SCHARPE

Jennifer Scharpe is the executive director of Colorado Foundation for Agriculture, a statewide nonprofit that works to advance agricultural literacy for elementary students. Scharpe grew up on a farm in Minnesota, which influenced her decision to work in agricultural advocacy. She continues her family legacy through educating the next generation and advocating for

Find More Online

To learn about some of the great Colorado organizations mentioned in this story, check out these websites.

Colorado Foundation for Agriculture
growingyourfuture.com

FrontLine Farming
frontlinefarming.org

Mile High Farmers
milehighfarmers.com

Veterans to Farmers
veteranstofarmers.org

farmers across the state.

Scharpe shows that every one of us has a role in advocating for our farmers and the food system that supports us.

KASEY NEISS

Kassandra (Kasey) Neiss is the data activist and systems manager at FLF, working on policy and data advocacy, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) outreach, system management, and at the farm. Neiss has worked for political campaigns, cannabis businesses and racial justice coalitions. This year, she

helped launch a nonprofit farm program in Aurora and is the Colorado Farm and Food System Response Team's data analyst.

Some of her earliest memories are of family urban gardens and cooking with elders.

– Fatuma Emmad
and Kasey Neiss

Jennifer Scharpe is the executive director of a nonprofit aimed at teaching students about agriculture.



LEFT PHOTO: LINDA STORM; THIS PAGE: JENNIFER SCHARPE

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ANIMALS *Who* WORK

Learn more about agriculture's lovable helpers



PHOTO: ISTOCK.COM/CEBATAUF



FARMERS AND ranchers pour their blood, sweat and tears into cultivating the land, raising animals and feeding the nation. But we can't overlook the farm animals who help them day in and day out. Sheepdogs, cattle dogs and horses are all integral parts of Colorado agriculture that can sometimes go unnoticed.

LIVESTOCK PROTECTION DOGS

Colorado is the No. 1 lamb feeder in the United States. It's also ranked third in the nation for the total number of sheep and lambs and fourth in the nation for wool production. With all those animals grazing on the abundant natural grasses of the Centennial State, it's no surprise that working dogs are an essential part of any sheep operation.

"Herding dogs, often border collies or Australian shepherds, help shepherds move sheep from one location to another," says Bonnie Brown, executive director of the Colorado Wool Growers Association. "Rotational grazing helps maintain well-managed pastures and rangelands, so sheep are always on the move."

Livestock protection dogs are another valuable member of the team on a sheep farm. A variety of breeds in this category are common in the United States, such as the Great Pyrenees, Akbash and Anatolian shepherd. These brave and courageous animals are known for their protective instincts, sometimes even making the ultimate sacrifice and giving their lives to protect their flocks from attack.

"Livestock protection dogs, also known as guardian dogs, are the sheep's first line of defense against predators," Brown says. "Colorado is a predator-rich environment with

foxes, coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, bears and now wolves. Our cherished guardian dogs are more important now than ever before.”

CATTLE DOGS

Cattle dogs play an enormous role in the farming community. These are the workers on the ground, helping move and separate cattle and preventing ranchers from having to mount and dismount their horses constantly.

One of the most popular breeds for this job is the Australian cattle dog. These clever and driven animals have long been considered irreplaceable in the Australian beef industry and have since become popular among ranchers in the United States as well. In addition to their keen intelligence, this breed is known for its ability to drive cattle over long distances and rough terrain without breaking a sweat.

“Livestock protection dogs, also known as guardian dogs, are the sheep’s first line of defense against predators.”

Bonnie Brown, *executive director of the Colorado Wool Growers Association*

HORSES

“The equine industry is vibrant and alive in our state,” says Bill Scebbi, executive director of the Colorado Horse Council. “A 2018 economic impact study showed we’re a \$1.8 billion industry with a \$3.8 billion economic impact on the state. There are more than 160,000 horse owners here that represent about 250,000 horses.”

Colorado has a rich history in ranching and farming, but none of it would be possible without horses. For generations, horses have been

integral to building infrastructure and cultivating fields. But many today still use these majestic animals to check on and move their livestock.

“Quarter horses are among the most prominent of breeds in our state, though we have representation of well over 30 breeds that thrive here,” Scebbi says. “We have a robust dude ranch and trail-riding industry, and quarter horses are known for their docile temperaments and ability to handle the environment with ease.”

– Kayla Walden



PHOTO: ISTOCK.COM/GEBUGIT



Practically Perfect POTATOES

Nutritious, delicious and a key part of Colorado's ag economy

SAN LUIS VALLEY HAS A SECRET.

This scenic community yields a superfood with more potassium than a banana, as much vitamin C as an orange, loaded with antioxidants but free from gluten, fat, sodium and cholesterol. With an ideal growing environment, it's no wonder the region is a leading producer of potatoes.

"We've been growing potatoes in this part of Colorado since the 1850s," says Jim Ehrlich, executive director of the Colorado Potato Administrative

Committee (CPAC). "We're actually the second largest shipper of fresh potatoes in the country," he continues. "We produce about 21 million hundredweight potatoes. This year there are around 57,000 acres being grown in the state, and 52,000 acres are here in the San Luis Valley."

Federal legislation paved the way for CPAC's launch in 1941, giving farmers an association where they could control the quality of their products. As CPAC prepares to celebrate 80 years of service, the organization remains a vital voice for the state's growers, helping keep them sustainable and profitable.

"Our three main focus areas are research, promotion and education," Ehrlich

says, adding that the work ranges from monitoring regulatory issues and markets to educating consumers about this versatile vegetable.

Sheldon Rockey, chair of the CPAC Board of Directors, says more than 150 potato growers and their families are meeting consumer demand for every type of potato, including the fingerlings grown at Rockey Farms.

Third-generation farmers, he and brother Brendon are passionate about sustainable farming and have adopted a number of practices favored by their grandfather, including utilizing livestock rotation to minimize the need for inputs.

Geography is another San Luis Valley secret. "We get 350 days of sunshine. We do get

150+

potato growers meeting consumer potato demand

57K

Acres being grown in the state

21M

hundredweight potatoes produced

cold, but that's actually a bonus because it kills a lot of pests," Rockey explains. "Our growing area is probably one of the most sustainable in the country," he adds of the region's rich soil and favorable conditions that are practically perfect for growing potatoes.

Pro Tip

No need to wrap a russet in foil. Be kinder to the environment and enjoy a fluffier potato by simply piercing with a fork and baking au naturel. More recipes and tips at coloradopotato.org.





Mental Health MATTERS

Hotline serves residents in crisis across Colorado

COLORADANS in crisis can call or text for immediate confidential support, a free 24/7 service that shows the importance of caring for your mental wellness as much as physical.

The Colorado Crisis Services hotline at (844) 493-8255 (or text “TALK” to 38255) serves more than 250,000 people annually in

their moments of need – any time of day, any day of the week from anywhere in the state.

“First of all, mental health absolutely matters; it is a real thing,” says Bev Marquez, CEO of Rocky Mountain Crisis Partners. Her company’s professionally trained counselors and trained peer specialists manage

the hotline for Colorado Crisis Services, a statewide behavioral health crisis response system. “It’s really important that people have immediate access to the right resource at the right time.”

Of the 15 different hotlines that Marquez’s company manages, Colorado Crisis Services represents the largest. The hotline fields and makes between 700 and 800 calls a day for people in crisis or concerned about a friend or relative in crisis. About 60% of the callers simply need to talk.

“A crisis is self-defined,” says Marquez, a licensed counselor. “It can be anything from a family not getting along because they are all working remotely to someone calling who’s actively

suicidal, and we are helping them put the gun away for the next 10 minutes so we can have a conversation and do some stabilization.”

HOTLINE HELPS WITH ANONYMITY

Mental health in the agriculture industry proves more important than ever with a continually changing world and endless stressors.

The free hotline at Colorado Crisis Services offers accessibility, anonymity and affordability, common concerns in rural areas of the state. Suicide hits particularly hard in rural communities, where the rate ranks higher per capita, Marquez says.

Rural areas also more commonly carry stigmas regarding mental health because small

For Free, Accessible 24/7 Mental Health Support:

Colorado Crisis Services
Call (844) 493-TALK (8255)
Text “TALK” to 38255
coloradocrisisservices.org

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
Call (800) 273-TALK (8255)
Text “TALK” to 741741
afsp.org

Note: Similar to 911, “988” will launch in July 2022. In the meantime, use the hotline numbers above.



communities often uphold a culture of taking care of themselves.

“If they are farmers or ranchers or working in the mines, you work really hard, you go home and maybe you play hard, but what you don’t do is ask for help,” Marquez says. “I think different messaging out in rural communities has been important for us to do.”

Rural isolation, weather stresses and financial strain can overwhelm rural Coloradans who are more challenged with anonymity in mental health care than in populated areas.

“I might go to church with the local counselor, or they know my car or truck if I’m parked outside a facility,” Marquez says. “I think hotlines can be helpful there.”

ACCESSIBLE RESOURCES

A variety of local, state, federal and national funding allows Colorado Crisis Services to offer free phone and web support in addition to local crisis unit stations and walk-in centers.

People often think about mental health care as going only to a psychiatrist. Yet, support can be packaged in virtual sessions, phone apps, calling a hotline, talking to a primary care physician or talking to peer specialists.

Screening yourself or loved ones can help too. Some warning signs to

seek support include the consistent feeling of dissatisfaction, conflict or isolation, whether in life, relationships or jobs. Someone in crisis may have trouble making decisions or use drugs and alcohol in a way that impairs their health or judgment. Expressing thoughts of suicide indicates the need to seek prompt help for yourself or on someone’s behalf.

“It’s a conversation that we all need to get more skilled and more comfortable in having,” Marquez says. “Our mental health needs regular attention and maintenance, like our physical health does.”

The Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA), together with Colorado State University, Colorado Farm Bureau and Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, has partnered with Colorado Crisis Services since 2017 to promote the hotline in the state’s rural and agricultural communities and to help train those taking calls about the unique challenges faced by farmers and ranchers in crisis. Earlier this spring, CDA launched a new outreach toolkit that includes videos, radio messages and printable posters with rural-targeted messaging about the hotline. Learn more at colorado.gov/ruralmentalhealth.

– Joanie Stiers



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YOUTH IN AGRICULTURE

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ColoradoFFAFoundation.org



WHAT'S COOKING IN YOUR STATE?

 **FARM FLAVOR**

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GROWING *an Industry*

Colorado's young hemp industry matures

WHEN THE 2014 FARM Bill legalized industrial hemp cultivation, Colorado was the first state to establish a regulatory structure. “[Colorado] embraced hemp quickly, and got a head start on quite a few other states,” says Brian Koontz, hemp program manager for the Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA). From 2014 to 2020, the program has more than doubled in size annually, with the average hemp field increasing from 5 to 10 acres and now averaging more than 20 acres.

Colorado was also the first state to establish a certified seed program and now breeds 17 varieties of nationally certified hemp seed. Hemp is cultivated from the cannabis plant and is distinguished by various qualities, most notably its low THC levels – no more than 0.3% – and used in commodities from grains to textiles and more. In recent years, it's soared in popularity thanks to the demand for cannabidiol (CBD) products.

In short, Colorado's young industry is booming. What's ahead for hemp?

GROWING PAINS

In the 2018 Farm Bill, the USDA defined hemp as a legal agricultural commodity. Soon, large-scale farmers began cultivating the crop. “We have a lot of people who've supplemented

their corn or wheat or hay production with hemp,” Koontz says. “It's a less risky, more reliable crop to cultivate after the 2018 Farm Bill.”

With this legalization comes growth for the industry, as well as growing pains. The 2018 Farm Bill requires all states with a hemp program to meet the same requirements. The benefit of this is an even playing field, explains Laura Pottorff, plant health and certification section chief for CDA. But for Colorado, new restrictions also mean shifting how the program has functioned since 2014.

“One of the challenges is that we're dealing with a crop that has a cousin that's still very heavily regulated,” Koontz says. Being so closely related to marijuana means regulations for hemp are extra stringent. Pottorff says that would-be growers sometimes overlook the regulations placed on hemp cultivation. “Our challenge is to educate; not to discourage people from taking part, but to (remind them) they need to do their due diligence.”

CORRECTING THE MARKET

The year 2020 brought a significant shift in Colorado's hemp industry. Surprisingly, the change was rooted less in the coronavirus pandemic than a market correction. After product flooded the market in 2019,



PHOTO: JUSTIN KASE COOPER





Hemp farmer Bob Sievers (back) works with CDA's Wondirad Gebru and Brian Koontz.



many growers had surplus crops in 2020 and didn't bother planting again. "Today, we have about a 55% decrease in the number of registrations," Pottorff says. "Although no one could deny (the pandemic) had an impact, a lot of the folks who were growing the crops felt that changes were mostly due to the market."

Of course, any kind of economic downturn is tough on smaller growers, and the pandemic made it difficult for small farmers to compete. But in general, Koontz believes that although 2020 was a challenging year economically for hemp, the industry will continue to grow because more states have an approved hemp plan and the supply chain continues to strengthen.

INNOVATIONS TO COME

Being a young industry leaves plenty of room for improvement. In the coming years, Koontz foresees innovations in banking and insurance options for growers: "There needs to be a better mechanism for helping cultivators to finance their crop or their operation and to obtain crop insurance."

With more research and development, plant scientists can breed hemp for a low THC level and characteristics for specific markets. Pottorff believes breeding breakthroughs will come with time, making hemp a more mainstream agricultural crop. "I think it's coming, but it's going to take a lot of science and a lot of research and development," she says.

Both Koontz and Pottorff look forward to the development of more markets. Right now, CBD takes up the lion's share, but they hope demand will increase for hemp in fiber, construction materials and grain. "Hemp is (already) utilized as a food source in granola bars, cereal, etc.," Pottorff says, "but we're getting most of it from Canada and China. It would be really exciting to see that develop in the U.S."

— Annelise Jolley



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