

Growing the Regional Food System through Land Use Policies in Garfield, Pitkin, and Eagle Counties



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For the Safe and Abundant Nutrition Alliance (SANA)

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Executive Summary

Garfield, Pitkin, and Eagle Counties have experienced increased development pressures on agricultural lands as their populations have increased. While each of these communities pride themselves on their agricultural heritage, they have each been challenged to manage growth in ways that preserve these lands. Additionally, there is a growing movement in the region to grow the local food system and improve access to farming for first-generation farmers. In 2018, Garfield County conducted a county-wide food assessment and found that the two biggest barriers for local producers are adequate access to land and water. Stakeholders shared that farmers in Pitkin and Eagle Counties face similar challenges. At the request of the Safe and Abundant Nutrition Alliance (SANA), this report has been compiled to provide policy and program recommendations that will make land and water accessible to first-generation farmers, prioritize the preservation of farmlands for use in fruit and vegetable farming, and provide local market opportunities for first-generation farmers.

On a national scale, prime farmlands are transitioning into different uses other than growing food. This is concerning because prime farmlands are naturally occurring and a limited resource. Farms have become much larger over the past 30 years, due to the consolidation of land, mechanization of agriculture, and use of monoculture farming. These new trends in farming have led to new environmental issues, such as increased soil erosion and reduced water quality, and are facilitating a more meat-centric food system in which 30 percent of croplands are being used to feed livestock rather than people. Suburban sprawl is another factor driving the change in prime farmlands to residential development. Prime farmlands are easily developable lands, and as farmers age out of the business and consider selling their land, these lands are at risk of permanent land use change.

There are many groups already addressing these issues in Garfield, Pitkin, and Eagle Counties, including each County's planning department, open space programs, NRCS, CSU Extension, land trusts, and community activists. Each county's planning department has prioritized the preservation of agricultural lands and set goals to do so in their comprehensive plans. However, many of these goals remain unmet and require further implementation. Garfield County faces the unique problem of having very little publicly owned land and has no open space program. Overall, each county could be doing more to encourage developers to develop in specific areas of their communities, preserving other areas for agriculture. However, land preservation is just one part of the solution. Programs that encourage fruit and vegetable farming specifically and those that support the economic development of the local food system still need to be developed. Pitkin County is the only county to distinguish farming from agriculture in their Code, and all three counties could include more specific language in their Codes to legitimize farmers' markets and produce stands and streamline permitting for these uses.

The overall finding is that while each county could benefit from specific changes to their land use codes, acting regionally in building the local food system would have the largest impact. All of the non-governmental actors involved already serve the region as a whole, and many farmers think in this way as well. Aligning policies and programs with municipalities and neighboring counties, creating a regional food council, and applying for funding for innovative programs in a united effort would benefit each county's food system. As SANA continues to develop their regional food systems plan, the recommendations in this report will assist in developing programs and policies to address the issues facing first-generation farmers in this area.



Co-owners of Two Roots Farm, Christian Lebar and Harper Kaufman, standing in front of their leased farming property in Emma Open Space in Pitkin County. *Source: Aspen Public Radio*

Policy Recommendations

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| Make land and water available for first-generation farmers. | Prioritize the preservation of farmlands for use in fruit and vegetable farming. |
| Policy 1: Diversify preservation tools, including TDR programs and Open Space programs. | Policy 1: Support new opportunities for the agricultural production of produce. |
| Policy 2: Encourage land leasing by private land owners. | Policy 2: Educate the community on the local food system and the value of agricultural lands. |
| | Policy 3: Pursue water reuse for agricultural lands. |
| Provide local market opportunities for first-generation farmers. | Improve Regional Cooperation |
| Policy 1: Refine the use regulations for farmers' markets and farm stands to encourage permanent access. | Policy 1: Establish SANA as a regional food council and involve strategic players. |
| Policy 2: Create a regional food hub to encourage the development of small farm businesses. | |
| Policy 3: Develop policies for local food procurement. | |