



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Community food assessments are conducted to provide a community with a greater understanding of its food needs and resources while addressing a wide range of food-related issues and concerns. Food assessments take a systematic and participatory approach to understanding the entire food system, including information about production, distribution and consumption.

In 2005, we, the Growing Partners of Southwest Colorado, were funded by the US Department of Agriculture's Community Food Projects Program to initiate and lead a community-wide food assessment. Our assessment took place in La Plata County, a community located in southwest Colorado that is diverse in both its people and geography. With over 60 years of combined experience, the five Growing Partners organizations each bring unique experience and qualifications to the partnership.

Nearly 500 voices are shared in the final report, representing 35 farmers and ranchers, 36 non-profit and service agencies, 36 restaurants, 13 grocers, 100 youth, 123 consumers, 96 forum participants, 25 schools and 5 medical and nutritional experts. The assessment began in October 2005, and the final report<sup>1</sup> was unveiled to the public in February of 2007 at *Homegrown*, a two-day local foods conference, co-sponsored by the Environmental Center at Fort Lewis College. 200 people were in attendance to hear the summary of the report and the recommendations made for food system change.

The assessment covers four main areas:

**Food Production** – a historical profile; current information and future projections regarding the obstacles and opportunities for regional food production; and food resources including charitable food programs, gleaning projects, farmers' markets, and community gardens;

**School Food Programs** – school lunch, school gardens and Farm-to-School;

**Food Security** – its definition and impact;

**Community Food Projects** – their definition and ability to address the issues in each of these areas.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.sustainableswcolorado.org/cfa.htm](http://www.sustainableswcolorado.org/cfa.htm)

## METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

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Data collected for the community food assessment focused on both qualitative and quantitative data. We approached the project as members of the community and regarded our community as the experts behind understanding the food system. We came to the table first as experienced farmers, growers, educators and community members, and second as individuals dedicated to the research component. As interviewers, our responsibility was to present a blank slate to the community, and our only agenda was to allow all participating interviewees and respondents to speak without restraint about the food system. Interviews and surveys ranged from a 15-minute consumer survey to a 6-hour in-person interview. They were each tailored by population, resulting in separate surveys for farmers and ranchers, youth, school administration and staff, non-profit and social service agencies and consumers from different ethnic backgrounds.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

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Community food security framed the assessment and its results. Based on the responses from hundreds of interviews, La Plata County residents define community food security as a situation in which all people at all times have access to healthy, *local*, affordable and culturally appropriate food, produced in ways that are sustainable. A look at local food production and access determined whether we currently meet that definition.

Interviews indicate that people feel there are deeply entrenched cultural, climatic and economic challenges that make agricultural operations difficult in the region. There were, however, many suggestions for creating a system to work within the current parameters to make agricultural ventures more successful. Additionally, local food production does not currently meet the demand of consumers and retailers for local food. But it is this demand and a look to our agricultural history that demonstrate there is great potential for successful agriculture in the region.

Despite our isolation and lack of production, La Plata County, in normal circumstances, does not suffer from food shortages. As related by many La Plata residents and specifically service agencies, we *do* suffer from shortages of quality foods - healthy, high quality and whenever possible, local food. We also lack access to affordable, culturally appropriate foods that are accessible to the community at large regardless of location, income or culture.

With these predominant themes of lack of food production and lack of accessibility to quality foods, it is fair to conclude, based on our community's definition, that La Plata County is *not* food secure. This assessment's recommendations to increase our food security address the issue of food security in relationship to production and access.

In order to increase the amount of available local food, greater support is needed for those interested in growing food. Such support should:

- (1) improve access to agricultural land and growing spaces,

- (2) encourage alternative and existing production systems,
- (3) increase the marketing, storage and distribution of local farm products and
- (4) provide consumer education to promote local food and agriculture.

Because of the fundamental differences that exist in La Plata County for different populations, and their effect on food access, these differences must be considered to effectively and equitably build a local food system. Special considerations in developing food projects must address both rural and urban food needs; resource, income and financial asset disparities; cultural differences and the different resources and needs of our local schools.

Considering the need for more food production in order to address the various disparities in our community, community food projects should address the need for:

- (1) wider Farm-to-School efforts,
- (2) links between low-income program recipients and local food resources,
- (3) better farmer training and support and
- (4) access to more growing spaces.

Through the assessment's examination of local food production, distribution and consumption, new possibilities now exist for La Plata County residents to work together to create a food system that is more equitable and self-reliant. This project sparked community interest in the food system, and local farmers gained a clear understanding of the demand for local products. Schools learned about the possibilities of Farm-to-School programs, and public and private agencies were encouraged by the number of possible projects available to enhance their existing programs. By clarifying the components of the local food system and defining food security, this assessment served as an excellent tool with which to speak to the community and identify the community food projects needed to strengthen both of these.

## **ABOUT THE REPORT**

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The community food assessment report is broken down into chapters, not only for readability, but to direct readers to their specific area of interest. However, each chapter is related to the others, and builds upon the preceding chapter; they are connected as equal components of our local food system.

**Chapter I**, the introduction, provides a detailed description of the key organizations involved, the assessment methodology and the goals and objectives of the assessment.

**Chapter II** provides a profile of La Plata County - the social, cultural, economic and environmental characteristics that most likely shape the face of food and agriculture in our community.

**Chapter III** offers a historical and present day profile of agriculture for the broader region of southwest Colorado. It details the obstacles and challenges of agriculture as noted by a diverse group of farmers and ranchers.

**Chapter IV** covers existing food resources including charitable food programs, such as food banks and soup kitchens, and provides a profile of the region's farmers markets, community gardens and CSAs. In this chapter, there is a harvest calendar and sample local foods menu detailing available crops, wild foods, wild game, and culinary herbs available in the region.

**Chapter V** looks at the local school food programs in both public and private school system, covering school lunch, gardening, nutrition and agricultural programs. In the chapter you will find a list of 16 schools in the county who currently offer gardens and greenhouses.

**Chapter VI** shows a profile of health and nutrition through the eyes of a diverse group of medical and nutritional experts in the community.

**Chapter VII** defines community food security through the eyes of La Plata County residents. It also tackles the issue of food security for specific underserved populations including: Latinos, Native Americans, older adults and rural residents.

Finally, **Chapter VIII** summarizes a broad and extensive list, compiled from interviews, of the possible solutions and community food projects that could improve the local food system. This list refers to and builds on cited needs and resources identified in previous chapters.