

# Rebuilding Our Local Food System in Southwest Colorado<sup>1</sup>

Jim Dyer, Southwest Marketing Network & Farm to School Program

The time is right to re-establish a healthy community food system here — one that depends on our local farms and ranches, provides the highest quality products possible to local consumers, keeps money in the local economy, and is sustainable for the long run.

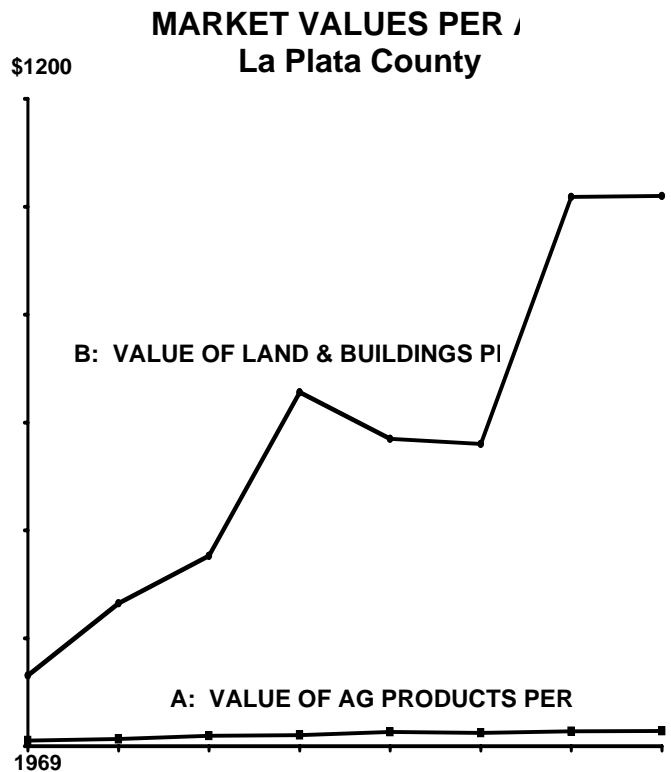
There is perhaps no better time than now to rebuild this vital part of our local economy, of our life here in the Four Corners. For one, the loss has been great — across the country much of our capacity to provide food and fiber for our own communities has been lost. And the threats are great — development pressures and loss of prime farm land, corporatization of our food supply and globalization of markets, rising energy prices, drought, and climate change. If we don't find a way to strengthen the local ag economy soon, there may be little to save.

## Pressures on Agriculture

Of all the pressures on agriculture in SW Colorado, climate swings and development pressures are especially great. One of the best comparisons to illustrate the latter is between the two trends over the past years of the value of what farmers and ranchers can produce per acre each year (line A in the diagram<sup>2</sup>) versus the average value of the land and the buildings on each acre (line B). This is a tight squeeze that leaves may producers with little choice than to consider selling. A healthy local food system is made up of consumers and citizens who value local agriculture for all that it offers — open space, aesthetic landscapes, wildlife habitat, and local food and fiber — and are willing to support it.

## The Focus on Obesity as an Opportunity

We are fortunate to have the attention of the country right now focused on obesity, diabetes, and the nutritional quality of food — everyone is thinking nutrition. Local food doesn't have to be healthy — and we can always eat too much of it — but it tends to be fresher, less processed, and more varied through the year. The more we understand where our food comes from, the more we will pay attention to its quality, not just its quantity. We can't count on the public's attention to these issues to last indefinitely. Tomorrow, something else will be more newsworthy, so we should make the most of this opportunity to re-establish the importance of our local farms and ranches.

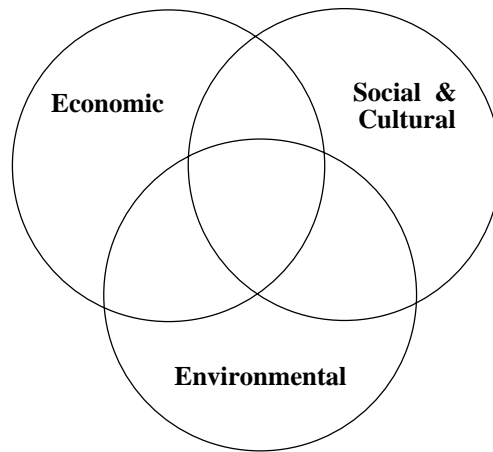


<sup>1</sup> Adapted with permission from an article by the author in the program of the 2006 Four States Ag Expo ([www.fourstatesagexpo.com](http://www.fourstatesagexpo.com)) printed by the Cortez Journal.

<sup>2</sup> Data from US Census of Agriculture ([www.nass.usda.gov/Census\\_of\\_Agriculture/index.asp](http://www.nass.usda.gov/Census_of_Agriculture/index.asp))

## Growing Consumer Interest in Sustainably Produced Products

More and more, we see that enlightened consumers are pressing for change. Many consumers are looking beyond the benefits to themselves of fresh, local, wholesome foods, and to how their food choices affect the environment, farmers and farm workers, and future generations. This is the essence of sustainability — taking a wide angle look at the impacts of our agricultural and food system to ensure that these practices make sense economically, but also environmentally and socially. It also involves taking the long view to make sure that we provide for our needs while not diminishing those options for our children for generations to come. More and more consumers want to know how sustainably their food is produced. What better way than for them to see the farms and ranches and talk to the producers of their food, another inherent benefit of buying locally.



### Three Aspects of Sustainability

A sustainable local food system would be one that is resilient in the face of threats such as globalization, climate change, rising energy prices, and the like. One that is economically viable and rewarding, environmentally sound and restorative, socially just and nurturing. More and more customers are demanding this, and our community and our children deserve no less.

### How Big is the Local Market?

Producing for local needs is good for many reasons, but we are a pretty small remote community. Is the market here enough to get excited about? A quick and dirty estimate can be made by applying US government statistics on the buying habits of Western US residents to our local population. **This shows that residents of both counties together spend an estimated \$162,000,000 on food each year.** This doesn't even count purchases by tourists, so it's a very conservative estimate. The table below breaks this down by some categories that might interest local producers.

### Estimated Annual Food Purchases by Residents of La Plata & Montezuma Counties<sup>3</sup>

Selected Products:	Total Annual Estimated Purchases (\$)		
	La Plata County	Montezuma County	Both Counties
Beef	4,525,400	2,299,000	6,824,400
Pork	3,029,400	1,539,000	4,568,400
Poultry	2,861,100	1,453,500	4,314,600
Eggs	822,800	418,000	1,240,800
Fresh milk & cream	2,580,600	1,311,000	3,891,600
Fresh fruits	3,945,700	2,004,500	5,950,200
Fresh vegetables	4,020,500	2,042,500	6,063,000
Processed fruit	2,374,900	1,206,500	3,581,400
Processed vegetables	1,514,700	769,500	2,284,200
<b>Total of Selected Products</b>	<b>25,675,100</b>	<b>13,043,500</b>	<b>38,718,600</b>
<b>Total of All Food</b>	<b>107,618,500</b>	<b>54,672,500</b>	<b>162,291,000</b>

<sup>3</sup> Estimates derived from Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey, ([www.bls.gov/cex/2003/region/region.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/cex/2003/region/region.pdf)) accessed 12 Sep 2005

Let's assume that only a few consumers buy locally at first — maybe 10% of total purchases — that is still over \$16 million in sales for local farmers and ranchers. And let's assume that only some of our producers sell locally — maybe 100 producers — that would amount to an average of \$160,000 in sales for each producer. This is not rocket science or exact, but it does show that there is plenty of money being spent locally on food, so why not try to keep some of that money in the local economy?

### **A Glimpse from the Past**

But don't we have a very short growing season and all sorts of other constraints. We just can't produce these kinds of foods, or can we? A quick check of the 1945 US Census of Agriculture – for La Plata County for instance — showed that the county produced 28,000 bushels of apples, 24,000 bushels of potatoes, 2.2 million gallons of milk, and much more. And there were only 13 more farms on the books in 1945 than in 2002. It may not be easy, but it's possible.

### **What Can We Do?**

**Consumers**, and who isn't one, should get to know our food and how it is produced, and realize that we make choices at every meal that have far reaching impacts — economically, environmentally, and socially — in our community and around the world. It may be easier to hide from the implications of our food choices, but on the other hand, this knowledge empowers us to “make a difference” in the world three times each and every day.

### **Why Local Food & Fiber?**

- **It reduces energy use, pollution, and costs.**
- **It supports local farmers and ranchers.**
- **It can help preserve open space.**
- **It can be more fresh and diverse.**
- **It keeps money circulating in the local economy.**
- **It allows better communication between producers and consumers**

This knowledge will invariably lead us to seek out local sources of food and fiber. One good local source is the “Mesa Verde Country Guide to Local Sustainable Food and Fiber,” available on the SASCO website (see below). Forty regional producers who direct market locally through farmers markets, farm stands, restaurants, and stores are listed along with their products and how to buy them. In each listing, a producers statement explains what is unique about their products and what makes their operation sustainable — strict erosion control, compost or manure for fertility, efficient irrigation, biological insect control, biodiversity on the farm, cover crops, and the like. It's one good way to get to know where your food comes from.

Even better than buying locally is to grow some of your own food. There is no better way to eat sustainably, to get to know your food, and to make the highest quality food affordable than to grow it yourself. Technical help abounds and most everyone can find a spot in the backyard, on the balcony, or in a community garden. Once you grow a tomato for yourself, buying tomatoes will never be the same.

**Producers** can learn more about alternative crops and even consider value-added processing on the farm or in the community. They can develop their story — what is it about their farm or ranch and their products that is unique, that makes them proud to be a producer? This is the best marketing message for local direct marketing. They might start by diverting some of their harvest to a local source and test the market. They can submit a listing for the “Mesa Verde Guide.” Here too, technical assistance is readily available (see below).

**Citizens**, again that's most of us, have a responsibility as well. We can get involved in initiatives that support local agricultural development. A good example is the Farm to School program in La Plata

County. Recently started in La Plata County, and easily replicated in other parts of our region, this group strives to increase student understanding of food, nutrition, and local agriculture while working to get as much local product as possible into school meals. There are many obstacles in the form of federal, state, and local policies, and the lack of enough local product, but the prospect of getting local, high quality food into our children's meals inspires the parents, nutritionists, producers, and administrators involved to persevere. Small but very important amounts of local greens are now going to salad bars in nine schools in the Durango 9R District, along with classroom activities on growing, preparing, and eating local foods.

As citizens, we can also help improve the policies on the local, state, and federal levels to promote rather than discourage healthy local food systems. Farm to School efforts need policy reform on all levels if they are to bring significant amounts of local food to our children. Fundamental policy and institutional changes are needed to ensure that all residents in our region have access to healthy, local, affordable, and culturally appropriate foods — the very definition of “food security.” Land use codes and county plans should encourage rather than impede sustainable agricultural production — large and small — and local marketing. The local Sustainability Alliance of SW Colorado has agriculture as one of its focus areas, and anyone can join. Enlightened policies are critical to a healthy local food system, and we are all ultimately responsible for those policies.

**Community Food Security:**  
**All people in our community have access to healthy, local, affordable, and culturally appropriate food.**

### **Getting Involved:**

There are many things you can do to learn more and to help in this effort, and several are listed below. If you have any questions or problems accessing these web resources, many of which we have posted on the Sustainability Alliance of SW Colorado (SASCO) website, do contact me. If you would like to learn more about Farm to School programs, SASCO, the Colorado Food and Agriculture Policy Council, the “Mesa Verde Guide,” the Southwest Marketing Network, and other initiatives, please contact me as well. There is plenty to do, and a multitude of ways to get involved.

- Get involved in **Farm to School**: [www.sustainableSWcolorado.org](http://www.sustainableSWcolorado.org)
- Find local products in the **Mesa Verde Guide**: [www.sustainableSWcolorado.org](http://www.sustainableSWcolorado.org)
- Read the **Community Food Assessment** for La Plata County: [www.sustainableSWcolorado.org](http://www.sustainableSWcolorado.org)
- Learn about **organic agriculture**: [www.OrganicColorado.org](http://www.OrganicColorado.org)
- Learn about **alternative marketing & food systems** in the SW: [www.swmarketingnetwork.org](http://www.swmarketingnetwork.org)
- Help change **food and agriculture policies** for the better: [www.sustainableSWcolorado.org](http://www.sustainableSWcolorado.org)
- Find out about **sustainable growing and marketing**: [www.attra.ncat.org](http://www.attra.ncat.org)
- For an **online version of this guide** and to print copies: [www.sustainableSWcolorado.org](http://www.sustainableSWcolorado.org)