COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SW COLORADO

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PROJECT INTRODUCTION

The Southwest Colorado Region 9 is composed of five counties. These counties include Archuleta, Dolores, La Plata, Montezuma, and San Juan. The majority of these counties are considered to be rural areas, if not frontier. In other words, they are sparsely populated regions that are often isolated from major service centers. Many within the region struggle with low income, unemployment, lack of affordable housing, unreliable means of transportation, and non-access to sufficient food. However, the region also has a strong history in agriculture. Much of the existing farms are small-scale and family based. They do face many challenges such as complications from periodic drought, the cost of technological advancement, movement toward large scale efficiency and global competition, increasing regulatory costs, and more. Yet there are over 10,000 farms and regions within the region. The land is vast and good for grazing livestock. It also has good sun and quality soil. The variations in elevation provide a number of microclimates that allow for a more diverse set of crop production. I therefore set out to understand how to utilize agriculture as a medium to inspire rural economic development and meet food security needs.

INTERNSHIP GOALS

The goal of this internship was to provide a road map of economic development for the region. To develop community partnerships and work with underserved populations in order to better understand the real world struggles that are being faced within rural communities. To identify notable problems and outline real solutions that can be acted upon.

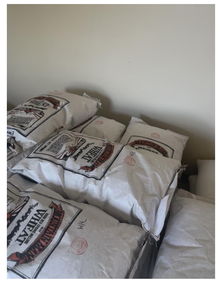
APPLICATION TO MY EDUCTATION

I am a master's student in agriculture and resource economics with a focus on food systems and international trade. The food system and those resources involved are essential to the economic prosperity of the world. Food has the power to drive economic vitality and create meaningful work. Issues within our food systems flow far beyond access to sufficient food and into other areas of the economy. In studying the intricacies of the local SW Colorado food system and its component parts, I have been able to identify key economic issues. I plan to extend my focus on these issues well beyond this project and my degree.

WHAT I DID

I worked with a variety of institutions, non-profits, co-ops, farms, unions, and government bodies to identify local economic issues and piece together agricultural based solutions. First and foremost, I integrated myself within the local food community. I established relations with members of the Montezuma Food Coalition, Good Samaritan Food Pantry, Southwest Farm Fresh Cooperative, and The Good Food Collective. I also frequented local farmers markets and food education events. Most importantly, I visited local farms to have in depth conversations with farmers. With assistance from the SW CO Research Center, I also had the opportunity to connect with the Rocky Mountain Seed Alliance and the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union. From here, I was able to move down the supply chain and speak to end product producers such as Blue Grouse Bread. Next, I partnered with local education systems to establish pathways for higher learning. Pueblo Community College is now in the process of launching an agricultural program that will provide affordable and accessible knowledge to local communities. This program has been designed to both better equip and create the local agricultural labor force, but also to act as a portal for those students who wish to continue on with their studies at other institutions. I also spent time evaluating youth development and education through work with The Pinon Project, Montezuma Land Conservancy, and Southwest Open High School. In terms of economic development initiatives, I worked intimately with the Dolores County Development Corporation, Region 9, and the Montezuma County Economic Development Committee. As it pertains to labor, I worked on a collaborative project to promote solar installation as viable workforce development initiative. I also had the opportunity to sit on meetings with Team UP Southwest Colorado to learn more about broader community issues such as mental health.

Heritage Wheat – Value-Added Product



WHAT I LEARNED

I learned about the many bottle necks, resource constraints, costs of production, and limits to distribution that farmers face within the region. For small farms, the final percentage share of pocketed income continues to shrink. One potential solution to this has been the use of co-operatives. Through co-operatives, small farms can maintain their independence while sharing in resources and transportation costs. Another identifiable issue among small farms in SW Colorado is the ability to distribute their products beyond the local landscape. Transportation costs are high and perishable food is subject to geographical constraints. Those commodities that can be shipped further distances are often sold at a lower price, such as coarse grains for feed. An attractive solution to this is the production of value-added products. For example, the production of heritage wheat can be sold to local bread makers to produce health conscious breads that can be marketed at a higher cost and shipped to a further market. The same goes for apple varieties, of which can be used in the making of hard ciders. Another issue faced within the region has to do with supply chain and processing facilities. There is only one local meat processor to support the entire SW region. During the pandemic, they were booked out for over a year. One solution to this has been a mobile processor for smaller farm animals such as chickens that can come directly to your farm and perform on-sight processing. In terms of education, I learned that many intelligent individuals do not attend schools of higher education due to affordability, accessibility, barriers of community, and lack of information. For example, those who have family farms to attend to, cannot leave their cohort to pursue a degree upstate. Therefore, the providing of quality higher education that is local and accessible is key to establishing the next generation of farmers and ranchers. Most importantly, I learned about the rural culture and the importance of community. The rural region of SW Colorado is big on maintaining their way of life. Therefore, the type of economic growth that you inspire matters. It must attribute those who inhabit the region, preserve the environment, and be wholistic in nature.

NEXT STEPS

From here, we must act. From an educational standpoint, we can continue to partner with both Pueblo Community College and the local indigenous populations to create educational pathways to higher education. We can also continue to identify new value-added crops that can be grown and sold by local farmers. In addition, we can seek to source grants and other means of funding to tackle barriers of entry, supply chain, machinery, and transportation. And finally, we can establish regulations that support local businesses and inhabitants of the region.