

**Coloradans' Views on Farm Labor:
A Closer Look at the 2022 Public Perceptions and Attitudes about Colorado Agriculture
Survey**

Anita Alves Pena, Dawn Thilmany, Martha Sullins and Jonathan Cable

REDI Report – January 2024

<https://csuredi.org/>

- Approximately 98% of Coloradans surveyed agreed that Colorado's food and ag industry is important to the state's future economic development.
- Over 75% feel that it is very or somewhat important that farm/ranch labor is treated fairly in terms of pay and working conditions when making food purchasing decisions.
- Over 50% of Coloradans agree or strongly agree that Colorado farmers and ranchers are responsible in their care for workers.

Overview

Approximately every 5 years since 1996, the Colorado Department of Agriculture and CSU have partnered to conduct the Public Perceptions and Attitudes about Colorado Agriculture Survey. The 2022 wave surveyed more than 1,100 Coloradans whose responses signal how state residents find the food and agriculture industry to be important to the state's future economic resiliency¹. For example, the survey shows that approximately 98% of respondents agreed that Colorado's food and agriculture industry is important to the state's future economic development and that the presence of ranches, farms, and agriculture is important to the quality of life in Colorado. The survey was representative of Colorado's demographics. Approximately 20% identified as being of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, and 13% identified with a race other than white. 51% of respondents indicated they had lived in Colorado for more than 31 years, and 20% were 65 years of age or older. The largest share reported living in suburban areas (56%), with 22% from urban areas, and 21% from rural areas. A little more than half had some experience growing or raising their own food.

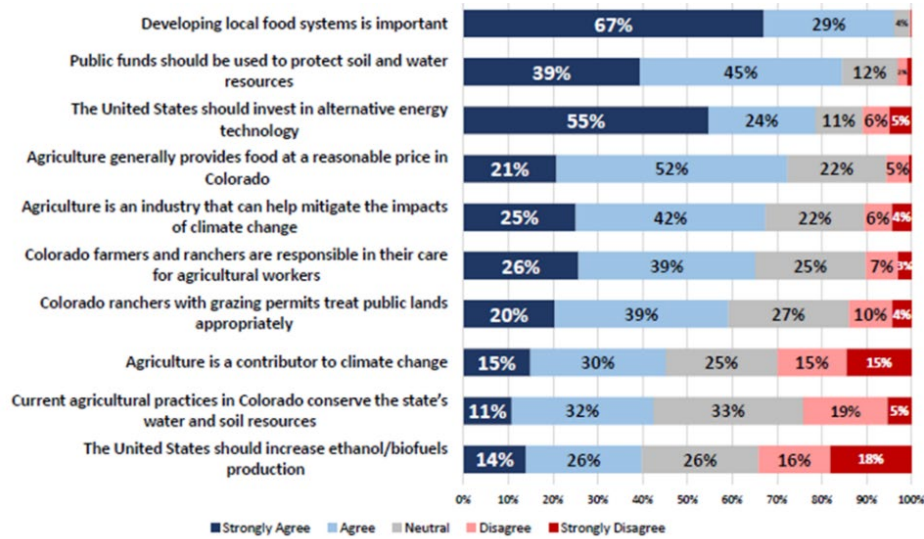
A Closer Look at Perceptions of Farm Labor

State-level labor issues have driven some key policy changes related to pay and working conditions for agricultural workers, and this survey explored Coloradans' perceptions of those issues. This brief highlights what was learned and what it means in the context of the broader set of survey responses.

Figure 1 shares how fully Coloradans agreed on various public issues related to agriculture and food. Overall, Coloradans reported that they desire opportunities to support the agricultural sector and seek transparency in how their food dollars flow. A very high percentage of Coloradans (96%) agree or strongly agree that developing local food systems is important, the highest level of agreement across all issues, while 84% believe in investing public dollars in protecting the state's natural resource base. A smaller percentage of Coloradans (65%) believe Colorado farmers and ranchers are responsible in their care of workers. This finding signals an opportunity to improve understanding or better communicate about this important topic with the buying public.

¹ Visit <https://ag.colorado.gov/markets/publications/public-attitudes-survey-2022> for the full report.

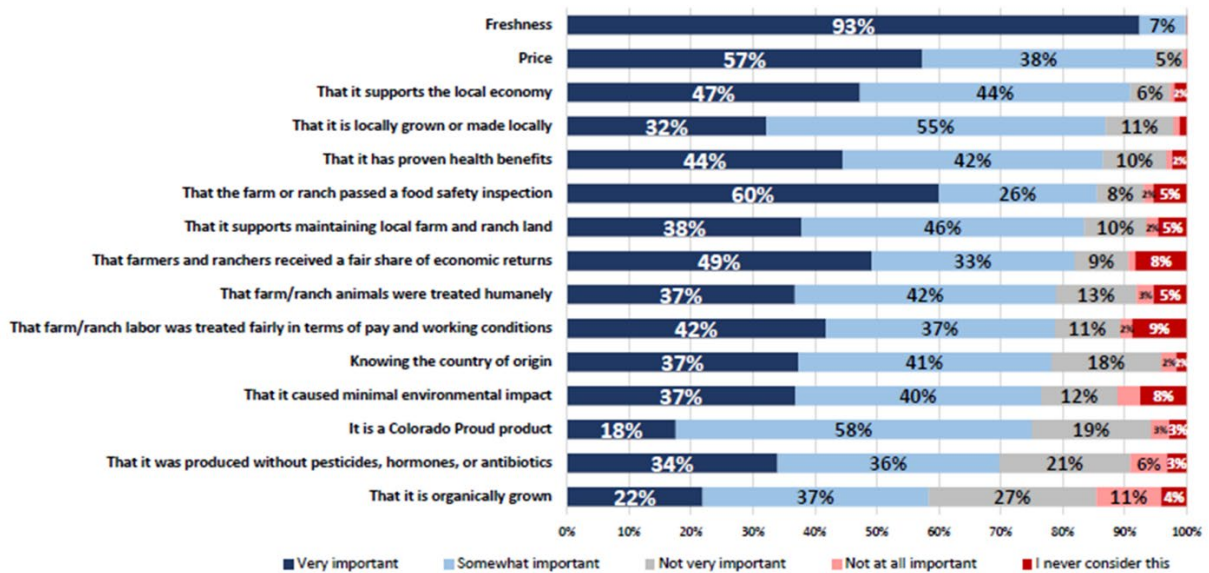
Figure 1: What is your level of agreement with the following statements?



Labor Issues in the Marketplace

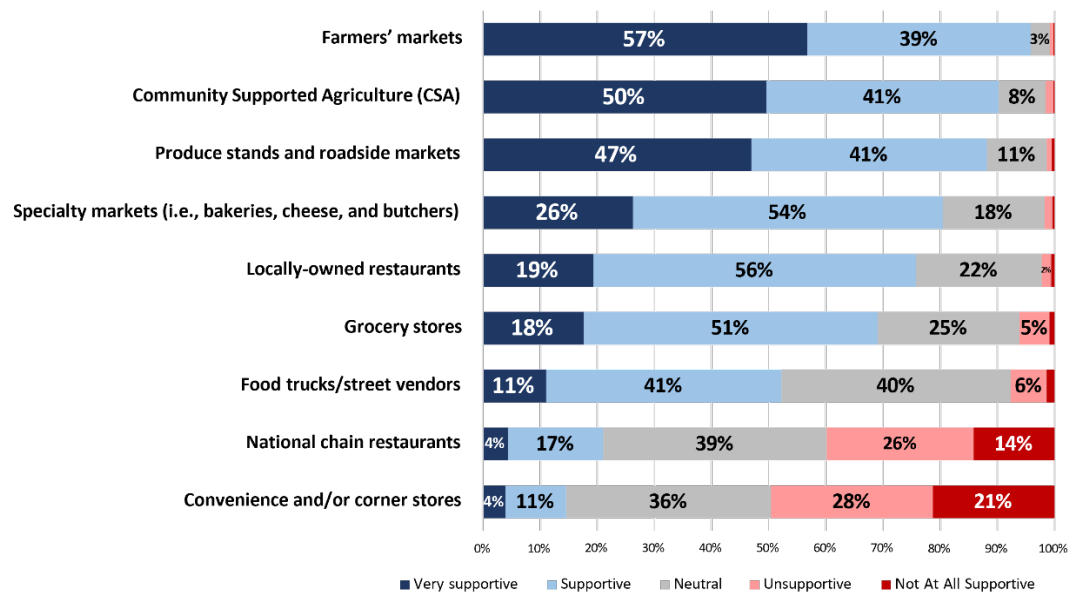
Although freshness, price and food safety are still top of mind when shopping for food products and making purchasing decisions, 91% of Coloradans prioritized supporting the local economy and 82% consider that it is important for farmers and ranchers to receive a fair share of economic returns from those purchases (Figure 2). Similarly, 79% felt it was important that farm and ranch labor was treated fairly in pay and working conditions. Interestingly, these responses were highly (over 70%) but not perfectly correlated. It is worth exploring in future research whether there is any potential tension among Coloradans in their understanding and perception of whether fair pay and working conditions for workers may challenge the returns to producers.

Figure 2: When you shop for fruits and vegetables, meat, dairy and other food products, what is the level of importance of the following factors in making decisions of what to purchase?



With nearly 90% of respondents thinking that farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSAs) and farm/produce stands support farmers, ranchers, and food businesses, 67.2% responded that they purchase some of their foods at such markets (Figure 3). Together with the high support for the development of food systems shared above, it is clear there is a broad base to support the local agricultural sector as key part of the Colorado economy. Yet, keeping a viable agricultural sector will be challenging without a highly skilled and available workforce, particularly for labor-intensive sectors such as fresh produce. It seems there is an opportunity for Colorado farms and ranches to better tell the story of the economic contributions they make to their communities, including their payroll that contributes to local spending and their workforce that may contribute to maintaining population, particularly in rural counties seeking to maintain workforce-aged households.

Figure 3. How supportive do you think these food markets are to Colorado farmers, ranchers, and food businesses (Colorado Proud)?



Finally, free response questions at the conclusion of the survey revealed that some respondents felt that they knew relatively little about treatment of workers, as well as about agriculture in general, and wanted to learn more. The High Plains Intermountain Center for Agricultural Health and Safety (HICAHS) at CSU is one source of information, outreach and training. To learn more about their programming, please visit: <https://vetmedbiosci.colostate.edu/hicahs/>