



# Regional Opportunity Report: Denver MSA

## Colorado Blueprint of Food and Agriculture

A unique opportunity to strengthen key food and agricultural areas through stakeholder conversations that explore opportunities for food-systems led community and economic development across Colorado

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[foodsystems.colostate.edu](http://foodsystems.colostate.edu)

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## Background on the Colorado Blueprint

The stage is set for Colorado agricultural and food system stakeholders to frame, guide and innovate a Blueprint for the sector's future. Understanding key assets, emerging issues and priorities for future investments and policies will enable us to sustain the state's standing as a global leader in production and processing, while maintaining the culture of health, quality of life, and livable communities valued by both its long-time residents and those who choose to move to Colorado as their new home. This Blueprint is a unique opportunity to strengthen key food and agricultural areas through stakeholder conversations that explore opportunities for food-systems led community and economic development across Colorado.

In 2016, key organizations in Colorado's food system came together to guide a process culminating in a shared vision for the future of Colorado's food system. The groups include:

- Colorado State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Research Centers,
- Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council,
- Colorado Department of Agriculture,
- Colorado State University College of Agriculture,
- Colorado State University Office of Engagement and Extension,
- LiveWell Colorado, and
- Colorado Food Policy Network.

The groups divided the State into nine regions loosely based on the location of the state's agricultural experiment stations/research centers plus several additions to ensure representation of all corners of the state. Nine regional advisory teams were assembled to identify previous food system assessments, engage important regional stakeholders and voices, and help coordinate a regional townhall meeting. The regional advisory teams included representatives from the Agricultural Experiment Station, Colorado State University Extension, Colorado's Food Policy Network, and the Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council.

For each of the townhall meetings, members of the regional advisory team were asked to select up to four key issues that influenced but transcended any one industry sector across the food system. These could be topics on which the regions were already working or areas they saw as key opportunities to address (for example, workforce development and retention to support the next generation of agriculture). These issues were used to guide the townhall discussions. Colorado State University provided key background data points to support discussion. The remainder of this report highlights the result of those discussion in the Denver MSA Region.

## Denver MSA Region Overview

The Denver MSA region is located in the central portion of the state and consists of Adams, Arapahoe, Broomfield, Clear Creek, Denver, Douglas, El Paso, Elbert, Gilpin, Jefferson, Park, and Teller counties.

The Denver MSA regional advisory team includes: Blake Angelo, Manager of Food System Development, Denver Office of Economic Development; Shannon Spurlock, Director of Public Affairs and Policy, Denver Urban Gardens;

Jody Beck, Assistant Professor in Department of Landscape Architecture at CU Denver; Brehan Riley, Unit Supervisor, Office of School Nutrition Colorado Department of Education; Annette Shipley, County Director, Douglas County; Sheila Gains, Extension Agent; Danielle Ardrey, Community Development Coordinator, Arapahoe County; and Jacki Paone, County Director, Jefferson County.



The regional advisory team identified previous assessments that touched on any aspect of the food system. See <http://foodsystems.colostate.edu/research/colorado-blueprint/metro-denver/> for full list of previous assessments. Collectively these reports identified several key regional challenges and opportunities:

### Key Challenges

- One of the fastest growing regions in the nation;
  - Growing competition for limited amount/number of natural resources (e.g. water, land);
  - Steady loss of farms;
  - Limited production in the region;
  - Land use changes; and
  - Competition for scarce warehouse/manufacturing space;
- Geographically isolated with high arid plains climate;
- Previous work in the food system has often been Denver County focused;
- Economic and regulatory environment does not actively preference healthy food choices and environments;
  - Many low- to moderately low-income neighborhoods lack convenient access to grocery stores.

### Key Opportunities

- One of the fastest growing regions in the nation;
  - Rapid growth in demand and opportunities for new food businesses/ventures,
- Residents care deeply about their own health and the health of their broader community;
- Diversity and richness of food traditions; and
- Highly engaged network of institutions, businesses, non-profits, and residents;

- Food and agriculture is increasingly recognized as a key driver in community and economic development,
- Tens of thousands of skilled employees in food and agricultural sectors,
- Thousands of food businesses,
- Hundreds of non-profits.

**Denver MSA Community Town Hall Focus Areas**

The Denver MSA regional advisory team identified five focus areas to serve as the basis for discussion at their community town hall meeting: 1) How does food get to and move through communities and what are the implications for low-income households?; 2) Is there adequate access to land and/or water to support the next generation of agriculture?; 3) What opportunities and challenges (processing, distribution, aggregation, production differentiation – organic/local, markets – institutional procurement) do we have in the region that we can leverage to support farmers and economic development?; 4) How can we best promote job and entrepreneurial opportunities in ag and the food system? Balance economic development strategies between cultivating our own businesses and attracting the relocation of large firms? What are the workforce implications, including for youth?; 5) How can we reframe food and agriculture as a key dimension of quality of life including looking beyond the dollar value to publicly beneficial aspects of agriculture, community foodscapes, landscape and open spaces?

Community members attending the town hall meeting included farmers and ranchers, members of CSU extension, county government offices, non-profits, food and ag businesses, county public health agencies, Food Bank of the Rockies, Colorado Department of Public Health, and the Colorado Farm Bureau. Community members formed groups around an interest in each of the selected focus areas. Each group was asked to complete the following:

1. Select opportunities and levers for their focus area in the Denver MSA region,
2. Prioritize investments, programs, or projects in their community that could be identified as low-hanging fruit (i.e. could be accomplished in the near future) and/or would create a systematic impact (i.e. typically a longer time frame), and
3. Identify the type of organization that would be take a lead role and a supporting role for each opportunity or lever. Results from these discussions follow.

**Denver MSA Community Town Hall Meeting Notes**

*Focus Area 1: How does food get to and move through communities and what are the implications for low-income households?*

<b>Investments/ programs/projects</b>	<b>Lead Role</b>	<b>Supporting Role</b>
<b>Low hanging fruit</b>		
1. Support access to SNAP/WIC/EBT	Public sector/government	Nonprofit/government
2. Support farm to school programs	Government	Non-profit
3. Support nutrition education efforts focusing on benefits of local and organic	CSU	Non-profit
	COFSAC	Non-profit and private sector

4. Document/identify how to ensure that grocery stores include access to healthy food (particularly in ‘food desert’ areas)		
<b>Systematic impact</b>		
1. Develop a regional distribution system to support accessible local food	Government	Private sector
2. Identify additional local food sources and find opportunities to make these products available affordably	CSU	Government
3. Subsidize land for beginning farmers and ranchers	Government	CSU
4. Create and promote local food culture	CSU	Non-profit and private sector
5. Increase collaboration between/among food systems stakeholders	Non-profit, CSU	Public and private sector

**Key takeaways:** The group identified the need to increase enrollment and efficacy of food assistance programs (e.g., SNAP, WIC, EBT) by making it easier to enroll in programs, to incentivize grocery store participation, and to increase double up bucks at farmers markets.

*Focus Area 2: Is there adequate access to land and/or water to support the next generation of agriculture and what are the long-term implications of producers leveraging natural resources?*

<b>Investments/ programs/projects</b>	<b>Lead Role</b>	<b>Supporting Role</b>
<b>Low hanging fruit</b>		
1. Promote access to and utilization of agricultural technology by all scales and commodities of agriculture (particularly that promote increased water efficiency)	Private Industry	CSU
<b>Systematic impact</b>		
1. Cohesive local, state, national policy development around land/water use	Government	Non-profit
2. Promoting policies and program that support collective/sharing/community production	Non-profit	Government
3. Open space investment in local agriculture	Government	CSU, non-profit, and private

**Key takeaways:** The availability of both land and water as major challenges facing new/beginning farmers and ranchers. The group identified increasing farmer leasing of public lands, increasing water storage capacity, and changing land regulations/tax policy as ideas that could assist new and beginning farmers. Additionally, increased water

efficiency is available through new technologies, but, due to its complexity, is not accessible to all farmers.

*Focus Area 3: What opportunities and challenges (processing, distribution, aggregation, production differentiation – organic/local, markets – institutional procurement) do we have in the region that we can leverage to support farmers and opportunities for economic development in the Denver MSA and across the state? Comparative advantages? Regional assets?*

<b>Investments/ programs/projects</b>	<b>Lead Role</b>	<b>Supporting Role</b>
<b>Low hanging fruit</b>		
1. Connect with health organization to promote fresh fruits and vegetables, healthy eating, and Colorado products	CDPHE Hospitals and Health Systems (UC Health, Kaiser, Centura)	Nonprofit/ communities and Industry
2. Develop a more transparent/consistent local food brand(s) and definition	Retailers (industry)	CDA (perhaps lead role too) and industry
3. Consumer education and demand building (why buy local): marketing that leads to increased purchases of Colorado products	Nonprofit/ communities	Government, industry, and CSU
<b>Systematic impact</b>		
1. Develop more processing infrastructure (for meat and fruits/vegetables)	Industry, government (support/encouragement – esp. via regulations)	CSU (assessment)
2. Partner with Good Food 100 to increase chef demand and promote local purchasing	Industry	Industry
3. Support local/regional food distributors (first assess how)	CSU (assessment) and industry	Industry

**Key takeaways:** Although farmers markets have been a good venue for producers to begin a business, they do not enable farmers to scale up to meet the demands of larger markets. The group identified infrastructure improvements (e.g., cold storage, distribution) as necessary to enable farmers to scale up. In the Denver MSA, scale appropriate infrastructure is largely unavailable; it is mostly too small or too big. In addition to infrastructure, the group identified a need to improve the marketing of local Colorado products—current messaging is lacking strength and purpose.

*Focus Area 4: How can we best promote job and entrepreneurial opportunities in ag and the food system? Balance economic development strategies between cultivating our own businesses and attracting the relocation of large firms? What are the workforce implications, including for youth?*

<b>Investments/ programs/projects</b>	<b>Lead Role</b>	<b>Supporting Role</b>
<b>Low hanging fruit</b>		
1. Increase the availability of local food distribution	Industry	CSU, government
2. Support FFA and alternative high schools focused on training agricultural workforce	Government	CSU, nonprofit/ community
3. Ensure that 4H and FFA chapters are providing needed skills and relevant training	Nonprofit/ community	CSU
<b>Systematic impact</b>		
1. Improve local food distribution including government support for locally grown and processed items	Government	CSU, government
2. Support agricultural education that focuses on the whole food system	CSU	Nonprofit/ community, government

**Key takeaways:** The group identified FFA, 4H, as well as high school and college agricultural training programs as areas where programming could be modified to better meet the skills needed in the current agricultural climate in Colorado; a focus on agricultural technology was identified. Additionally, increased investment and training in on farm technologies (e.g., season extension, vertical farming) as well as on-farm infrastructure (e.g., distribution) were identified as ways to promote business opportunities.

*Focus Area 5: How can we reframe food and agriculture as a key dimension of quality of life including looking beyond the dollar value to publicly beneficial aspects of agriculture, community foodscapes, landscape and open spaces?*

<b>Investments/ programs/projects</b>	<b>Lead Role</b>	<b>Supporting Role</b>
<b>Low hanging fruit</b>		
1. School gardens – working to get kids invested in agriculture/food systems	Government	Nonprofit/community
2. Investments in local agricultural literacy	CSU and private sector	Government and Nonprofit/community
3. Fruit and vegetable prescription program with connection to SNAP and corner stores	Government	Nonprofit/community
<b>Systematic impact</b>		
1. Integrate farming/agriculture/food into residential development plans, including implementing a surcharge for development	Nonprofit/community	CSU and government
2. CO strategic farm and ranch water reserve as mechanism to protect and conserve the farm/ranch and water resources in CO	Nonprofit/community and private sector	Private sector
3. Incentivize agri-hoods, including meaningful opportunities for engagement of residents	Nonprofit/community	Private sector

**Key takeaways:** The group identified Farm to School, community gardens, integrating food and ag into residential development plans, and ag literacy as key places to focus investment in order to promote the publicly beneficial aspects of agriculture.

### Denver MSA Next Steps

After reviewing this report, the Denver MSA regional advisory team identified the following lead organizations for each of the regional priorities:

<b>Investments/programs/projects</b>	<b>Regional Lead Organization/Contact</b>
Support food access (SNAP, WIC, EBT, Fruit and Veg prescription program, improve access in food deserts, improve access to affordable local food)	LiveWell Colorado
Support education programs (Farm to School programs, nutrition education efforts focusing on benefits of local and organic)	Slow Food Denver, Denver Urban Gardens
Develop a regional distribution system	Rocky Mountain Farmers Union
Promote land access for beginning farmers	National Young Farmers Coalition
Promote local food culture	TBD
Improve collaboration across the food system	TBD
Improve water technology	Colorado State University
Promote cohesive local, state, national land/water use policy	TBD

Support collective/sharing/community production	RMFU Cooperative Development Center
Promote open space investment in local agriculture	TBD
Connect to health organization	CDPHE HEAL Team
Create a transparent/consistent local food brand(s) and definition	TBD
Consumer education and demand building for local products	TBD
Processing infrastructure	TBD
Increase chef demand for local	Eat Denver
Support existing distributors	TBD
Education (FFA, 4H, high school) programming	TBD
Funding for agricultural education, including local ag literacy	TBD
Include food and ag in residential development plans	TBD
Protect and conserve the farm/ranch and water resources by using Colorado strategic farm and ranch water reserve as mechanism	TBD
Incentivize agri-hoods	TBD

**Colorado Blueprint Next Steps**

With the help of key stakeholders and regional advisory teams, Colorado State University is compiling additional available data for analysis, including public health data using Community Commons, updating a previous study on the value chain of Colorado agriculture, and analyzing a survey of public attitudes of agriculture in Colorado (a survey conducted every five years by the Colorado Department of Agriculture). These data are being further augmented and enhanced through recommendations of these regional townhall participants (early 2017), key industry focus groups (late Spring 2017) and through integration of common regional themes that emerge from townhall conversations and prioritization exercises.

These documents, along with the conclusions from the regional townhall meetings and industry focus groups will be compiled into the Colorado Blueprint of Food and Agriculture. This document will be online and available for public comment (Summer 2017). Once public comments are incorporated and the document is finalized, the Blueprint will be introduced at the Ag Innovation Summit in Fall of 2017. In addition to the Blueprint, Regional Opportunity Reports (such as this report) will be provided to each of the regions, detailing the regional opportunities and levers that were identified in their townhall meeting.