

Community Agricultural Alliance: Agricultural lands in the Yampa Valley are a benefit to all

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For Steamboat Pilot & Today

A two-lane highway paralleled the scenic river as it snaked through the long Western Slope valley. Verdant farmlands and grazing livestock backed by wild and towering mountains, rock cliffs and sage-covered hillsides hugged the river as it meandered west toward its eventual junction with the mighty Colorado.

This was 1970, and many of the valley's smaller towns were nothing more than a gas pump, a post office and, if you were lucky, a small cafe. I can picture all of this as if it were yesterday, even though I was only 5 going on 6 at the time.

Understandably, you are thinking this bit of nostalgia is for the Yampa Valley. Nope, I'm describing the Eagle Valley, stretching from Vail west to the mouth of Glenwood Canyon, but the description fits both valleys around 1970.

It is about this time I-70 was built right through Eagle County in the early 1970s, and its topography and land use decisions paved the way for growth such that the 20 miles of agricultural lands bordering the Eagle River from Vail to Wolcott and beyond are largely now developed. As you drive through the valley, you see a lot of infrastructure sprawled over what used to be agricultural land.

As a kid, I thought rancher Pete Dodo was almost of the earth himself; he was the epitome of a western rancher — weathered, hardworking and community-minded. His ranch is now hotels and homes surrounding the base of Arrowhead Ski Resort. I was unnerved by his gruffness but understood his deep connection to the land on which he had lived on and off since 1918.

Perhaps because of these personal connections, I'm saddened every time I drive through the Eagle Valley. My grief is not because of growth itself, but because of the sprawl of infrastructure, golf courses, second homes and people over what used to be beautiful and productive farmland. It seems that we should be able to plan better than this for the enjoyment and benefit of all.

The Yampa Valley has been spared some of this change by virtue of location (not on I-70) and through the dedicated efforts of many to sustain farming and ranching as a way of life. Of course, there has been development, but so far, it has largely been localized to relatively small areas of the county.

The 2017 Census of Agriculture reported that Routt County has 887 farms/ranches with a total of 465,119 acres. More than 70,000 acres of ag lands are under conservation easement such that it can never be developed. Supporting this legacy of agriculture in the Yampa Valley goes to many including the hardworking farmers and ranchers themselves, the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (formerly Yampa Valley Land Trust), The Nature Conservancy, Routt County, the Community Agriculture Alliance and many other local organizations, individuals and groups.

The Yampa Valley's agricultural lands are a benefit to all who live and visit Routt County. We are all blessed to see the wide-open, working landscape, but it doesn't stop there. We all also benefit from greater food security, reduced greenhouse gas emissions and a more diverse and vibrant community because some of our food can be produced, sold and consumed locally.

I was raised in the Eagle Valley, but the Yampa Valley's agricultural heritage and wide-open agricultural lands are why I call the Yampa Valley home today.

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Penny Fletcher DECEMBER 24, 2020

Thank you Sarah for recognizing the beauty of the Yampa valley . Our county commissioners did an amazing job controlling the sprawl and keeping our valley open and thriving. Can you imagine driving down Rabbit Ears pass and seeing nothing but a valley full of homes. The Land Preservation Subdivision (LPS) saved the density in the valley. Our golf courses are well thought out and our water resources controlled. The Yampa Valley provides us blessings everyday we look at her! Peace and Happy Holidays.

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