

Community Agriculture Alliance: A look back and look forward

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For Steamboat Pilot & Today

STEAMBOAT SPRINGS — We are often asked “How has agriculture been impacted by the past year?” Like most segments of the community, there is no one simple answer.

The COVID pandemic, drought conditions, wildfires and food supply chain disruptions are just some of the challenges local agriculture has faced. But ranchers and farmers are resilient; they have always had to adapt, pivot and be flexible in the face of change.

Like many commodity products, cattle and sheep market values are uncertain with fluctuating prices. The USDA forecast reflects ongoing challenges with possible supply chain disruptions and processing impacts.

In 2020 the COVID pandemic significantly impacted national meat processing, creating an increased demand for smaller processors. In Northwest Colorado, we are fortunate to have two USDA processing plants in Craig, but they quickly became overwhelmed and booked for processing into the new year. Small, local meat producers have struggled to get animal processing scheduled but have altered operations and come up with solutions.

Variable weather patterns have long been a reality for agriculture. Long- and short-term adaptability in production continues to be an integral part of agriculture.

The U.S. Drought Monitor at droughtmonitor.unl.edu [↗](#) shows Routt County at the highest intensity on the drought index at Exceptional and Extreme Drought, as of Jan. 7. The site has an information chart showing impacts, which include large economic losses for agriculture and recreation, significant wildfire development and mandatory water restrictions. All very bleak images but a very possible reality that the entire community should prepare for.

To drive this point home, data from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows that 2020 was Colorado’s second driest and seventh-warmest year ever recorded. To counter this negative information, there is hope. The use of technology and weather data can help producers more accurately and effectively plan for irrigation needs.

2020 was a record year for real estate activity in Routt County. As new people are drawn to smaller rural communities, the resort town “boom and bust” cycle continues. As more people are seeking space and acreage, land values have increased significantly creating pressure on agriculture to consider selling and developing beloved open spaces. Our community is fortunate to have organizations such as the Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust working to provide options for landowners and keep agriculture lands protected.

Despite all these challenges, agriculture remains positive and even optimistic. Baby goats and lambs are being born this winter. Cattle have been bred and spring calves will soon be grazing in meadows. Seeds for new crops have been ordered and are ready to plant. Interest in local food has skyrocketed in the Yampa Valley.

Last year, local producers sold over \$330,000 worth of products via the CAA Market local food program compared to \$110,000 in 2019. New producers are now offering more local food options and existing producers are working to diversify their businesses and sell locally. A wide range of community organizations continue to work in support of local agriculture.

The struggle to find a balance between growth and maintaining the rural way of life we value is not a new issue. Recognizing that the scenic fields of hay and grazing animals are truly working landscapes. This is an important place to find common ground. If we agree that agriculture has critical value in our community, we can all work to protect and support what we love. Now, it is more important than ever.

Michele Meyer is executive director of Community Agriculture Alliance.