

THE NATIONAL WESTERN CENTER'S



2050 FOOD SYSTEM VISION



OUR VISION:

A regenerative and nourishing food future for Colorado —
reuniting urban and rural lives and livelihoods from soil to supper.

PEOPLE & PLACE

CHALLENGES

VISION





COLORADO-GROWN



The new campus is being built at the longtime home of the National Western Stock Show.

The National Western Center will be a year-round urban hub for food and agriculture discovery – in the heart of the American West. Our mission is to convene the world to lead, inspire, create, educate and entertain in pursuit of global food solutions.

The National Western Center is already working toward a better food future, powered by the people of Colorado who in 2015 agreed to support our mission, and who committed nearly \$1 billion to build a campus that would establish this place as a global epicenter for agricultural heritage and innovation.

This vast and promising work is only possible through collaboration. The National Western Center is being built thanks to the partnership and creativity of the City and County of Denver, the National Western Stock Show and the Colorado State University System, with additional programming to come from the Denver Museum of Nature & Science and History Colorado.

We're also building a statewide network of organizations, communities and individuals who are committed to reimagining the food system, bridging the rural-urban divide and securing a more positive food future.

Together, we will deploy our 2050 vision to strengthen the food chain in our state by connecting its diverse stakeholders. Our platform-based approach seeks to attract, convene, support and empower the people and organizations who can make meaningful change. We will pursue this vision with a passionate focus on cultivating a sense of oneness across Colorado and the West.

Learn more about the National Western Center at:
nationalwesterncenter.com

DIVERSE PEOPLE, DIVERSE PLACES ONE VISION FOR COLORADO

Our Vision Prize Place At-a-Glance

≈90%
of Colorado's Ag

≈90%
of Colorado's People



WESTERN SLOPE

Includes Grand Junction (Confluence of the Colorado River and Gunnison River)
Known For: Tree fruit (Palisade peaches and apples), wineries and cattle

2050: 50% increase in population expected

Additional Info:

- Unique micro-climates from the mesa and canyons keeps the air warm
- Tourism-driven economy in some counties creates a situation of haves vs the have nots with many residents below the poverty level
- Isolated transportation infrastructure – “4 hours to any population center”



SAN LUIS VALLEY

Includes Headwaters of the Rio Grande (Alamosa)
Known For: Potatoes and other agriculture

2050: Slight increase in population expected

Additional Info:

- Receives 10 inches of rain per year
- 3 counties are in the top 100 poorest counties in the nation, but there are some very affluent people and places
- Rich history and range of cultures – Oldest church in Colorado, Spanish history, settler history, producers who go back 16 generations, land grants, newer Amish and Mennonite populations



FRONT RANGE

Includes Denver and Pueblo

Known For: Food manufacturing (Mission Tortillas, Celestial Seasonings, Horizon Organics, etc.) and food retail innovations (fast casual, natural grocery stores, etc.)

2050: 50% increase in population expected

Additional Info:

- 80% of the population of Colorado
- Economically and socially diverse
- Persistent challenges with equitable healthy food access, diet related diseases especially in lower income populations, and economic pressures including limited affordable housing



SOUTH PLATTE RIVER BASIN

Includes Fort Morgan

Known For: Livestock and food manufacturing (Cargill, Leprino, etc.)

2050: Population expected to double

Additional Info:

- Weld County is the 8th highest producing county for ag products in US
- 2nd behind Aurora in most diverse communities in Colorado
- Low unemployment rate, but some very low income areas
- Front line of urban expansion into rural ag land, water right transfers



ARKANSAS RIVER BASIN

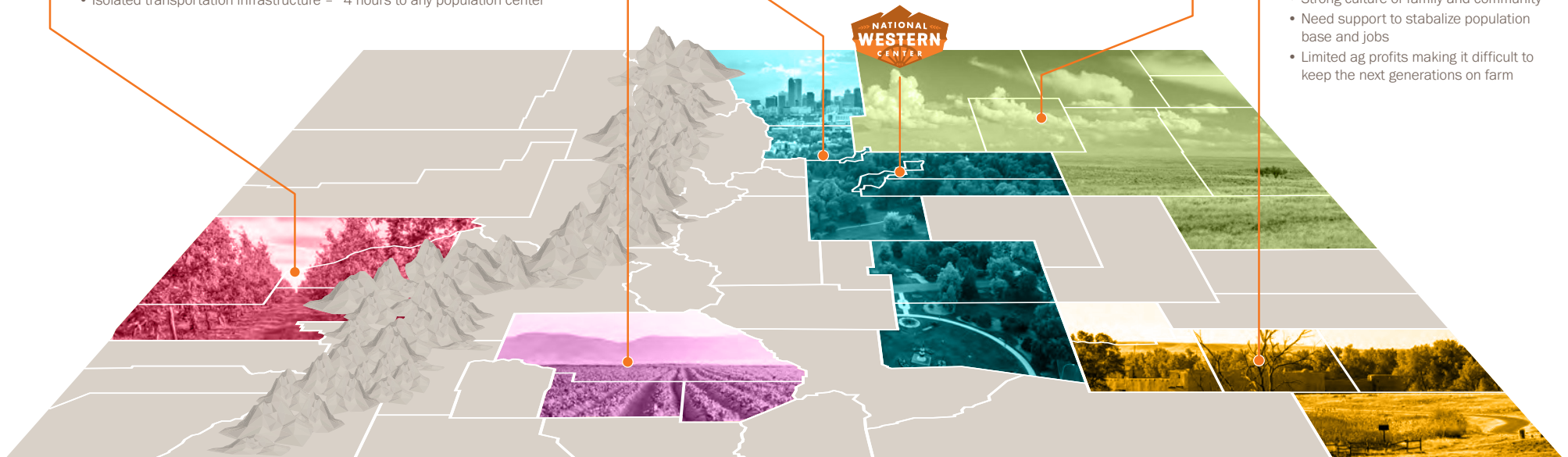
Includes La Junta

Known For: Rocky Ford melons, onions and beef

2050: Slight decrease in population expected

Additional Info:

- Under-tapped region of the state, opportunity to absorb population
- Great land for irrigated farming, dryland farming, and rangeland – “this area could grow anything”
- Strong culture of family and community
- Need support to stabilize population base and jobs
- Limited ag profits making it difficult to keep the next generations on farm





A CO-DESIGNED VISION

Co-designing with food systems stakeholders in our communities was central to sketching and refining our vision.

REGIONAL VISIONING SESSIONS

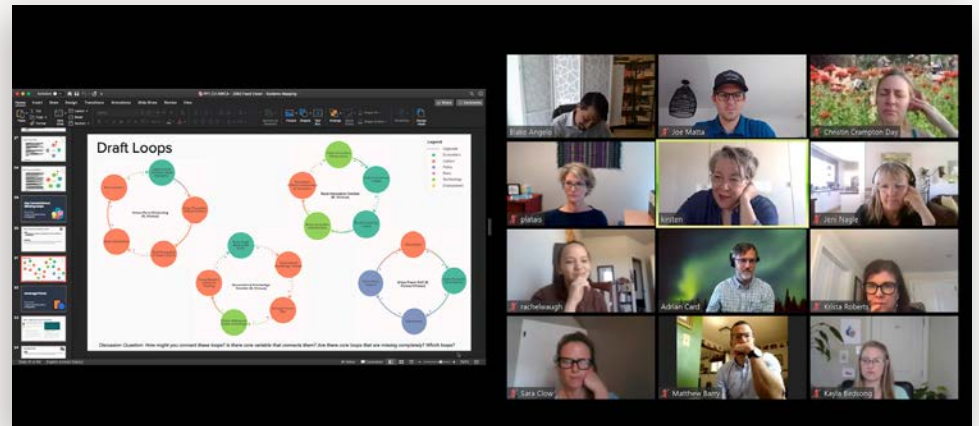
First, we hosted six two-hour “visioning” focus groups in key agricultural regions and urban centers. More than 100 participants futurecasted with us!

SYSTEMS INTEGRATION

We then analyzed the rich data from our focus groups, synthesized it into a proposed vision, and presented it to a smaller group of 20 for feedback and finalization. This group included varied perspectives – from producers, economists and chefs to consumers, funders and food-access experts – and seeded our corps of technical advisors.

TECHNICAL ADVISORS

We expanded and diversified our group of technical advisors to 56 people and invited them to join us in building a systems map and implementation plan. Each advisor joined one of four themed working groups and attended two virtual workshops.



STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Finally, we interviewed 11 people from across the state in-depth; they shared profound and personal insights about the challenges they face, and what a day in the life will look like in 2050 amid a more nourishing and resilient future of food. You can find their insights throughout this document.



CHALLENGES WE FACE TODAY



CULTURE



TECHNOLOGY



POLICY



ENVIRONMENT



DIETS



ECONOMY

THE URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE



Rural producers feel neglected and lack a voice in political decisions that directly affect them. Meanwhile, urbanites have become detached from the sources of their food, resulting in a lack of appreciation for rural communities. Rapid urbanization is exacerbating the divide – shifting financial and political power away from rural priorities and toward urban priorities.

URBAN GROWTH'S IMPACT ON SCARCE RESOURCES



By 2050, Colorado's population will reach 8.1 million, with 6.8 million living on the Front Range, increasing the percent of city dwellers in the state from 78 to 84 percent. As cities grow, land prices are increasing rapidly. Higher land prices hinder beginning farmers from accessing prime ag land, and family farms from passing to younger generations.

FOOD INSECURITY



An influx of high-income workers is driving up the cost of living, widening food access and health disparities within and across urban and rural regions. Close to one in 11 Coloradans, one in seven rural Coloradans, and one in seven Denver families are food-insecure. And despite Colorado having the lowest rate of adult obesity in the country, the rate of increase in obese/overweight people since 2009 has been higher in kids than adults. Clearly, the benefits of a growing economy are not shared equally.

CLIMATE CHANGE & WATER SCARCITY



Annual average temperatures have increased by about 2 degrees over the past 30 years and are forecast to increase up to 5 more degrees by 2050. As a result, the Colorado Water Plan predicts 700,000 acres of agricultural land could come out of production. A water shortage in Colorado – the headwaters for 18 other states – could affect ag economies throughout the West.

MAINTAINING SOIL HEALTH



Soil health is the heart of our food system. Farms and ranches rely on healthy, productive soils, as do rural communities and economies. Yet the loss of prime ag land and increases in input prices are driving one-size-fits-all approaches to increasing yield – which can result in poor soil health. Soil health stewardship requires a targeted, place-based approach to agriculture viability.



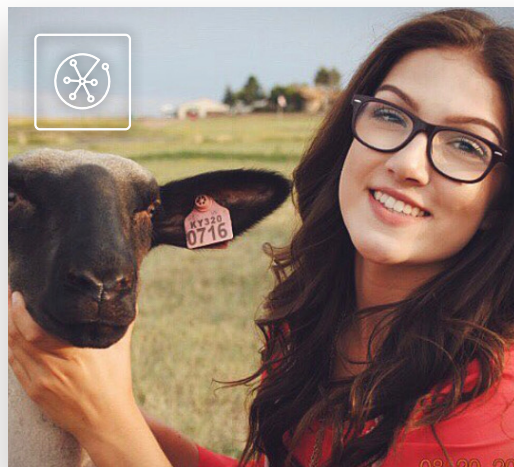
ADDRESSING THESE CHALLENGES

CULTURAL INTERDEPENDENCE & INTEGRATION

We believe food drives connection, connection drives respect, and respect fosters community. Through statewide educational programming, regional celebrations of food culture, and unique, on-campus experiences, the National Western Center and its network will reestablish connections to the people and places where our food comes from, bridging the urban-rural divide by 2050 and inspiring a sense of pride in local food culture.

ECONOMIC STABILITY AND REDISTRIBUTION

The National Western Center and its network will invest in next-gen ag workforce development; cultivate new market opportunities for Colorado producers; root ag innovation in rural, regional hubs; and support new food infrastructure across the rural-urban continuum. By 2050, the region will be recognized as a leading global innovation cluster in food and agriculture and will feature a robust portfolio of patents, early-stage venture funding and R&D.



HEATHER LEVY

AG-EDUCATION STUDENT | BENNETT

“I feel confident in my generation. There’s a larger resource for information and knowledge, through ag education for students everywhere. We have open mindedness coming in the next generation. The generations nowadays are the louder voices, but I think ours is bright, optimistic and loves to learn.”



ROBERT SAKATA

FARMER / PRESIDENT, SAKATA FARMS | BRIGHTON

“Our whole food system is based on cheap everything. Cheap food. The way you reduce the cost of things is by efficiency of size of operations. Look at all the consolidation that’s going on. There are just a few large grocery chains, and they’ve consolidated their buying staff. Farmers have responded by becoming larger to be able to sell their product to those companies, and they need to have year-round supplies. When we start to centralize our food supply too much, when disruptions like COVID happen, look at what happens! It’s like the potato famine in Ireland. We need to protect the diversity of agriculture we have.”

Photo by Matt Nager Photography



ADDRESSING THESE CHALLENGES (CONTINUED)

NUTRITIONAL EQUITY & ABUNDANCE

Leveraging the power of an interconnected regional food system and shared identity, the National Western Center and its partners will help drive the equitable production and distribution of nutrient-dense and culturally-relevant foods through urban and rural communities. By 2050, the trend toward more diet-related lifestyle diseases will be reversed, and inequity in food access and food security will be a thing of the past.

ENVIRONMENTAL REGENERATION

Our vision has an explicit focus on soil and water health. It includes facilitating a new ecosystem service marketplace to pay farmers for carbon sequestration, water conservation and other ecological benefits. By 2050, the past decades of degradation to agricultural lands, soil, water, air quality, and native habitat will be reversed and a virtuous cycle of waste reduction and regeneration will bolster our bioregional resilience to climate disruption.



FATUMA EMMAD

CO-FOUNDER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND HEAD FARMER,
FRONT LINE FARMING | DENVER

“In my ideal future the important thing is regenerative agriculture. Looking to traditional places where they already have this knowledge. There are many native people who are still practicing it. Looking at the ways sustainable agriculture was done forever will provide us with a lot of the solutions to get out of the mess we’re in.”



BECCA JABLONSKI

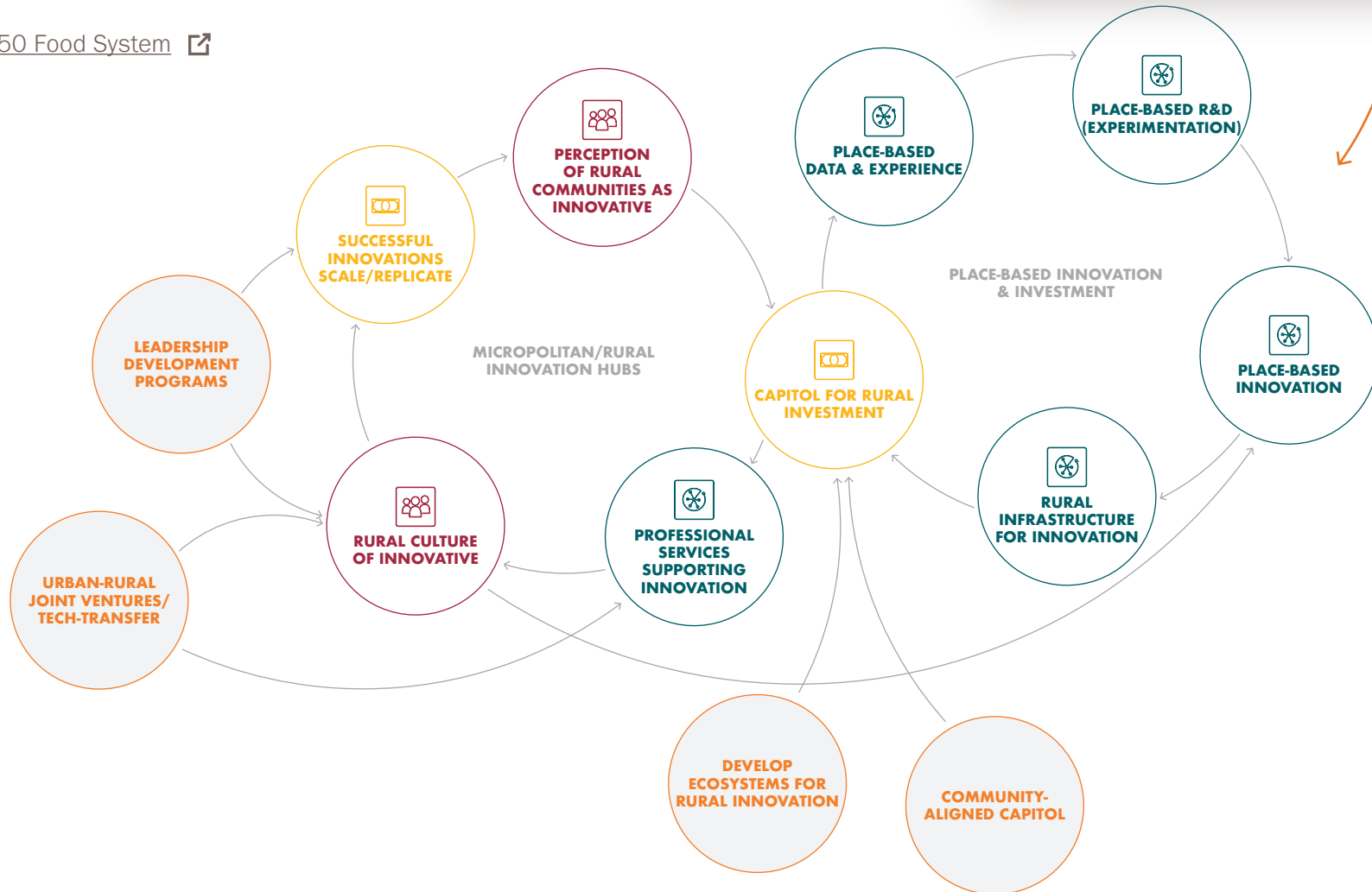
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF AG RESOURCE ECONOMICS, COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY | FORT COLLINS

“We need to integrate ag into the everyday experience for people. Maybe there’s a technology that’s a reality in our future – you go to the grocery store and through some technology you know that apple came from a farm in Oregon, and something about it. There’s no reason that information can’t be provided.”

FOOD SYSTEMS MAP

With support from our technical advisors, we created a detailed map of the Colorado food system in 2050. It illustrates our ideal future state and the interventions needed to achieve it. We call these transformations – of what are currently vicious cycles into virtuous ones – “leverage loops.” Check out this Rural Innovation Ecosystem example loop, then view the entire map.

[View Our 2050 Food System](#) 





IT'S 2050. OUR VISION IS REALITY.



It is 2050, and we have regenerated our common ground. In this remarkable new world, the National Western Center is the nexus of ag innovation and collaboration, supporting a statewide network of partners to radiate regenerative solutions across Colorado.

Our collective vision spurred the joint development of new rural economic opportunities and food policies, crafted in unison by urban and rural communities. As a result, soil health and productivity have been restored, following the mass adoption of regenerative agriculture. Rural farmers and ranchers are hailed as heroes for battling climate change by sequestering carbon in soil. Water is plentiful – thanks to healthier soil, smart urban planning and prioritizing water for ag.

This new food system has created transformational byproducts. Climate has stabilized as carbon and other greenhouse gas levels have declined. Food is richer, tastier, and more nutrient-dense. As a result of more efficient and equitable distribution, food waste is eliminated, healthful and local food is more accessible and farmer prosperity is at an all-time high. Food security is assured for all Colorado families.

It is a renewable system. It is a resilient system. Through the power of food, Coloradans knitted the complex futures of urban and rural communities into one shared fabric, building a regenerative and nourishing food system for all.

IT'S 2050. THE WEST IS ONE.

The National Western Center's collaborative efforts in soil health, water access, water quality, human health, tech and innovation, agritourism and ag business have built deeper and stronger connections between – and driven equitable value across – players in the food and ag value chain.

A CONNECTED CULTURE

The National Western Center built cultural bridges between rural and urban communities. On- and off-campus educational experiences strengthened connections between Colorado's communities – reinforcing shared values and respect for culturally-relevant and nutritious food and those who produce it.

HOLISTIC POLICY

The new Colorado Food Bill of Rights mandates community well-being, health, access to nutrition, and overall happiness as important metrics. Colorado adopted a corresponding Food and Farm Bill to catalyze public, private, and philanthropic work across the food system in both rural and urban communities. New policies have improved the security and prosperity of family farms, farm workers and rural communities, while combating inequities in healthy food access and food security.

LEADING TECHNOLOGY

The National Western Center helped establish Colorado as a center for ag innovation and technology, and stood up an on-campus innovation district that's now home to key food and ag organizations. Through data aggregation and analysis between the National Western Center and its stakeholder network, a technological and informational backbone powers the Colorado food ecosystem and is the connector between people, farms, and food.

SHARED PROSPERITY

The National Western Center cultivated the power of self-organization in rural communities by catalyzing rural innovation hubs and urban-rural joint ventures. Farmers and ranchers adopted new, more efficient technology while urban-based ag tech businesses supported regional agriculture, thus strengthening the economies of Colorado's rural areas.

NOURISHING DIETS

Researchers created new technologies that use data to communicate the most beneficial foods and nutrients. These new technologies radically transformed the efficiency of the hunger relief network, reduced the prevalence of obesity by half, and fewer than 1 in 100 kids and seniors now experience hunger.

A REGENERATIVE ENVIRONMENT

The convening power of the National Western Center helped organizations solve the climate emergency through advancing regenerative farming, soil health, water management, sequestered carbon, and enhanced water capacity. As a result, hundreds, if not thousands, of harvests remain.



A CONNECTED CULTURE

The National Western Center used the economic dependencies in the value chain to build cultural bridges between rural and urban communities and across diverse industries. For example, in what was once a food desert, the National Western Center’s public food market became an internationally-recognized epicenter of healthy, local, fresh food. It reconnects consumers to the source of their food, and creates business-development opportunities for low-income entrepreneurs as well as a vital pathway for Colorado’s ag community to bring their products to urban markets.

National Western Center programs and events on-campus and in rural destinations help rebuild connections between Colorado’s communities, and reconnect urban consumers with their agricultural resource base. The National Western Stock Show and the CSU Spur campus play a big role. Agritourism and education are just the beginning – creating shared values about the importance of nutritious food and those who produce it ultimately drives a more equitable and efficient food chain.



SYLVIA HERNANDEZ
CHEF AND ENTREPRENEUR, COMAL HERITAGE FOOD INCUBATOR
& LA CATRINA GRILL | DENVER

“I would like to see those specific public markets where they bring everything for Latino-American people – chiles and tomatoes and more. Maybe once a week they come to a farmers market, and you buy it by the week. You can go and make an order where you can see the product you’re buying. Seeing a picture online – it’s not the same.”



MIKE BARTOLO
ARKANSAS VALLEY FARMER,
CSU VEGETABLE CROP SPECIALIST | ROCKY FORD

“I’ve been working on developing new strains of the Pueblo chile for many years. It’s been grown in Pueblo, Colorado for over 100 years. I inherited a bag of seed from my uncle. Developing new strains has helped it take off. It’s a template for how we can reconnect our food system. We have wonderful food grown here, and people have a love for it. The Pueblo chile has given Pueblo something to be proud of. It’s important to their culture. It’s been a springboard for restaurants and other food businesses. The Pueblo Chile and Frijoles Festival started as a modest gathering, and now more than 150,000 people attend every year. It’s a real celebration.”



ALEX SEIDEL

CHEF/PROPRIETOR: FRUITION,
MERCANTILE, CHOOK | DENVER
FOUNDER/CEO: FRUITION FARMS &
FRUITION FARMS CREAMERY | LARKSPUR

“I have this idea of building a farm bill for Colorado, taking the model of the U.S. farm bill. It could build a roadmap for our state. Even if we haggle between urban and rural areas, we can still make choices together based on that document. The farm bill introduces an opportunity to unite and build a script.”



HOLISTIC POLICY

Community well-being, health, access to nutrition, and overall happiness have become important metrics for the state as mandated by the Colorado Food Bill of Rights. Driven by a sense of shared destiny and nearly unprecedented bipartisanship, Colorado adopted a Food Bill of Rights and a corresponding Food and Farm Bill to move public, private, and philanthropic work across the food system in both rural and urban communities. Statewide roundtables, an urban-rural food/ag caucus, and a new policy center drove massive statewide engagement and equitable representation. New policies have improved the security and prosperity of family farms, farm workers and rural communities. They also ensure distribution of nutrient-dense foods to address key social determinants of health, including inequities in healthy food access and food security.



LEADING TECHNOLOGY

Through convening and supporting partners statewide, the National Western Center helped accelerate Colorado as a center for ag innovation and technology, incubating companies to measure soil carbon, propagate regenerative agriculture, deliver water efficiency, build food incubators, spread urban farming and create community economic development.

Through data aggregation and analysis between the National Western Center and its stakeholder network, a technological and informational backbone powers the Colorado food ecosystem and is the connector between people, farms, and food. It's all possible thanks to strong rural broadband. The National Western Center helps cities, the state, and farmers and ranchers to understand supply/demand trends, operational issues, environmental challenges, and the unique needs of our diverse regions. Its partners develop new tech, seed stocks, and farming techniques, then deploy information digitally and through human teams to producers.

SHARED PROSPERITY

Local leaders in rural communities have established rural innovation hubs and urban-rural joint ventures. With greater economic viability, farmers and ranchers adopted new, more efficient technology to further develop their businesses. With more technology on farms, urban communities created new tech businesses to support regional agriculture. These tech businesses generated new higher-paying, higher-skilled job opportunities for residents of agricultural areas, which promote rural prosperity and stability.

Distributed regional processing and manufacturing operations contribute to thriving rural communities. From mobile meat-processing and cold storage hubs to commercial kitchen space and transportation cooperatives, flexible, scale-appropriate and value-added infrastructure has resulted in a more resilient and equitable system.

NOURISHING DIETS

Researchers at the National Western Center and across Colorado created new technologies that allow consumers to determine the foods that are best based on growing season and availability, source, nutrients, and ability to prevent or counteract health conditions. On-campus experiences at the new public food market (in what was once a food desert) and CSU Spur’s sensory taste lab now engage everyday consumers and inspire greater demand for nutrient-dense, packaged foods.

A thriving public/private network of grocery stores, school meal programs, institutions, restaurants and charitable food locations is dramatically reducing food waste and improving food security. With the help of new public policies, this network has cut the prevalence of obesity in half, and now fewer than 1 in 100 kids and seniors experience hunger.



M'LISSA BAKER
SENIOR MANAGER, COMMUNITY VOICES,
HUNGER FREE COLORADO | DENVER

“In 2050, food access and livable wages help elevate the state as a whole. What happens to the produce that can’t be sold – what we call ugly produce? What are we doing to repurpose it so it eliminates food waste? The solution is those that can afford to pay do pay, and it’s staying in the state. And those who lack the funds to purchase nutritious food can still get access to locally grown foods and produce and dairy. It’s not just siloed or thrown away because someone can’t use it. We have such a cool environment here in Colorado. We can have ranchers on the plains and growers in the mountains. It’s really neat what we can do within our – literal – four walls.”



A REGENERATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Improved soil health helped solve the climate emergency. Producers sequester carbon in the soil through regenerative agriculture. In 2020, the UN FAO estimated we had only 60 more harvests remaining. We now have hundreds if not thousands of harvests left. Every one percent increase in soil organic matter generated by producers results in about five tons of carbon sequestration per acre. Colorado serves as a global model for rolling climate change backward via agriculture.

Water conservation is also a priority. For our headwaters state, stewarding and enhancing this resource is now critical to the West. Regenerative agriculture is essential to proper water management. Every 1 percent increase in soil carbon per acre generated by producers increases the water holding capacity of the land by roughly 20,000 gallons per acre.

These changes have created new value streams for Colorado producers through an ecosystem services marketplace, and have helped to prove a new model for mitigating climate-change-driven drought and extending the growing season in semiarid areas.



HARRISON TOPP

FARMER/PARTNER, TOPP FRUITS | PADNIA
MEMBERSHIP DIRECTOR, ROCKY MOUNTAIN FARMERS UNION

“In the future, I hope people in Colorado think, ‘I live in an ag state.’ I want a giant peach on the National Western Center water tower. We can work with Colorado Proud and the tourism office to build that ag identity on the state level. So that the idea of eating a Colorado peach or steak feels as essentially Colorado as having a great powder day [skiing] or getting out on the trail, mountain biking, hiking or camping. These things that Colorado is really known for. With the really high quality food we can produce here, there could be more affinity. And I like to think it gives me the opportunity to get more for my crop.”



2050: A DAY IN THE LIFE

ROBERTO MEZA

CO-FOUNDER, EMERALD GARDENS | BENNETT, CO

6 a.m. I wake up today – and every day – on a 35-acre farm nestled between Denver’s eastern suburbs and the South Platte River Basin’s shortgrass prairie.

8 a.m. I check the electric delivery trucks that are charging off a solar-powered station. The coolers are running. We’re waiting for our partner farmers to bring food so we can aggregate it for wholesale and retail markets.

8:15 a.m. In the greenhouse I see the controlled environment automation is working perfectly. My business partner, David, checks an analysis of the health of our crops from the day before and cross-references it with our weather station so we can make minute changes to optimize the quality of our crops.

9 a.m. I join a call with the Denver Sustainable Food Policy Council about a program that provides local food for public schools. Not only are we stewards of our crops and our environment, but also of our regional food systems and communities.

10 a.m. The Denver Housing Authority confirms logistics for a mobile market co-created with nonprofit farms and partner orgs to provide underserved community members access to local food and strengthen our communities.

11 a.m. Through scalable technology and blockchain software, I identify a delivery truck coming from west Denver to our area, and request that it pick up tilapia from our aquaponics greenhouse to take back to west Denver. I check a box, and it’s as good as done.

Noon. I join our farmers as they gather for lunch. Farm workers in Colorado are valued, especially since COVID-19. That respect translated into a livable wage, and labor laws that protect immigrant workers.

2 p.m. I work on the finances. Our local chapter of Slow Money has created a pool of no-interest loans. It makes me optimistic about our farm’s future.

4 p.m. I personally welcome 20 visitors for an immersive agritourism experience. We’re one of a few farms easily accessible via commuter rail.

5 p.m. I lead our visitors in an experiment using mealworms to compost plastics. The worms filter impurities, and so we can safely feed the worms to animals. They provide us with amazing organic compost. They are the final piece in a financially stable, permaculture operation.

6 p.m. Our visitors have an immersive farm-to-table dinner. We enjoy seasonal foods grown on the farm or bartered from neighboring operations: root veggies, asparagus, edible flowers, microgreens, edible insects, and tortillas from heritage grains.

10 p.m. I crawl into bed and stare out the window. To the west, DEN is sending flights overhead. To the east, there’s a herd of bison on a neighbor’s ranch helping to reestablish the grasslands.

As I drift off to sleep I think how Emerald Gardens has achieved our original model of a trifecta relationship – we take care of the plants, the plants take care of us, we take care of the community, the community takes care of us. Everything has come down to this.



ONENESS IN THE WEST

Our vision began in 2020 as an entry for the Rockefeller Foundation's 2050 Food System Vision Prize, but has expanded far beyond those bounds. It reflects the National Western Center's mission and corresponds with our established goal to strengthen the Colorado food chain.

Through conversations with Coloradans, we've learned that systemic change will only be possible when the lives and livelihoods of those growing our food and those consuming it are tightly woven. That's why the vision we've put forward starts and ends with people.

We are working with an ever-expanding network to intervene in the system and create positive change. We will begin by establishing measurement systems and baseline data in areas like soil health, and piloting programs statewide. Implementation of the vision will be a continuous process of engaging and learning, and it can only be achieved collaboratively with partners. Our door is always open.

Food is a marvelous vehicle for rebuilding connections among Coloradans, and for strengthening the human fabric that can uphold — or upend! — our system. Its production is a shared endeavor, as is its consumption. If food can sustain each person along the way from soil to supper — economically, nutritionally, spiritually — and if those fruits are reinvested into the system, then we will have achieved our goal: a regenerative and nourishing food future.

We invite you to join us on this journey. Learn more and get involved at: nationalwesterncenter.com/experience/a-food-vision-for-2050/



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

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