

Impact

Colorado State University
Extension

Sharing the difference CSU Extension makes in people's lives and their communities.

Building capacity, building community

Beginning farmers around the state are learning to identify appropriate markets, develop plans for their new businesses, and build critical networks through a leading-edge program that gets results.

Issue

The number of small farms and ranches is growing throughout Colorado with many producers selling their vegetables, fruit, flowers, dairy, meat, and other food products directly to consumers, retail, and wholesale customers. Many of these producers have limited agricultural business experience or may have training in general business topics only.

Extension's Response

Colorado Building Farmers (CBF) was developed in 2007 to help beginning farmers with zero to 10 years of experience learn to strategically develop a business and manage its risks. It was first offered in 2007 and 2008 in Boulder County. The organizing team included Adrian Card, Extension agent in agriculture and natural resources, Dawn Thilmany, professor and Extension agribusiness economist, and Martha Sullins, Extension specialist in agriculture and business management. A Boulder County advisory committee provided guidance.

In 2009, the 8-week program expanded to two additional locations in Colorado, with grant funding from the Western Center for Risk Management Education. Since that time, CSU Extension agents have offered the program in Boulder, Chaffee, Delta, Denver, La Plata, Larimer, Pueblo, and San Miguel counties.

Each course is designed to help beginning farmers succeed by 'building community and building capacity.' Around the state, every class begins with a shared meal and peer-to-peer networking, followed by a presentation from one or more guest speakers, who either address the program's core curriculum—strategic business planning, marketing, enterprise budgeting, and record keeping—or discuss specialty subjects that reflect the business and enterprise interests of area participants. County Extension agents choose specialty subjects with input from a local advisory committee (composed of local farmers, ranchers, and agricultural professionals) who know area issues and limitations. Examples have included:

- Risk management, insurance and managing labor, legal, and financing issues—various counties;
- Urban agriculture, volunteer management and recruitment, and city zoning—Denver County;
- Regional food distribution, land access, food safety, and dairy production—Chaffee County;
- Agritourism, value-added processing, farm incubator models and networking—La Plata County.



The Bottom Line

- CSU Extension is training a growing segment of market farmers and ranchers on how to strategically develop a business, manage its risks, and succeed in diverse markets.
- *Colorado Building Farmers* is becoming an important incubator for Colorado's local and regional food production and marketing systems.

By the Numbers

- Total farmers trained since 2007: 360
- Percent of farmers who would recommend class to others: 100
- Percent of farmers who increase their farming networks: 98
- Cost to participate: \$90 - \$220

Impact

CBF is helping new and beginning farmers assess their ability to start and maintain a new farm operation or expand and improve an existing one. Throughout the program, participants learn critical business planning and assessment skills, while gaining access to producer networks for agricultural inputs, financing, technical support, marketing insights, as well as land and water resources. As a result, CBF is becoming an important incubator for Colorado's local and regional food production and marketing systems.

Completion of the program includes presentation of a business plan; beginning farmers then may apply for the program's mentorship program that pairs them with experienced farmers for one planting and growing season.

Evaluation results indicate that CBF is building new capacity in more localized systems that complement more traditional food distribution. Every CBF participant takes one pre- and one post-course assessment. The pre-course survey asks participants to gauge their readiness to operate a farm or ranch business based on specifics, such as:

- current or planned agricultural production;
- current or anticipated sales outlets for their products;
- their knowledge, skills, and attitudes about managing production and business risks;
- their knowledge of where and how to obtain land, labor, credit, equipment, and services, such as technical advice and business and marketing support.

Post-course surveys require participants to revisit these questions and indicate how their intentions, knowledge, and skills may have changed by taking the course. Some specific evaluation measures include gains in knowledge, changes in their attitudes and behavior about planning for an agricultural business, perceived connections and use of new professional community networks, and access to on-farm learning.

Aggregated pre- and post-survey results from 2011-12 programs in Boulder, Denver, Larimer, and Chaffee counties show that:

- many aspiring producers take the course before investing in their operations;
- participants in every region increased their knowledge of business management practices, such as developing a business plan, pricing products, implementing pricing strategies, complying with regulatory issues, and accessing local resources and technical support;
- ninety-eight percent of participants increased their network of farming colleagues and can draw on them for information/resources;
- nearly one-third of all participants plan to apply for a mentorship with an established farm operator. Card says that the community of producers who mentor, apprentice, and guide new farmers/ranchers strengthens the overall food system and better serves the needs of the local buying public;
- one hundred percent of participants would recommend the course to other farmers or potential farmers.

Data from a longitudinal survey of Boulder County program participants show that the program is also providing direct-market farmers with the skills, resources, and confidence they need to improve their business management practices and decision-making. Boulder County participants from reported that the program has helped them improve their production and management skills as well as develop new and diverse market outlets.

Colorado State University Extension, U.S. Department of Agriculture and Colorado counties cooperating. Extension programs are available to all without discrimination. Updated August 2014..

"This course is a highly effective way to communicate key information to people so they can reduce the amount of valuable resources wasted on false starts. This class is an inoculant against failure!"

— Denver County participant

"The Building Farmers course was just what I needed to help me go from being a serious 'hobby' gardener to actually starting a business. The information presented and contacts I made have been invaluable."

— Jonathan Hart
Chaffee County CBF participant

"I had a participant who was already farming and stopped for a year because they realized they were burning capital. That was an enormous success for them to say, 'I'm going to take an entire year off to focus on this planning.'"

— Blake Angelo
former Urban Agriculture Extension Coordinator,
Denver County

Building Farmers in the West

Two grant awards in 2009 and 2012 totaling \$1.3M from USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development program fostered program expansion into other Western States as *Building Farmers in the West* for producers in Colorado, Idaho, Oregon, New Mexico, Nevada, Washington, Wyoming and Arizona. In addition, 2012 funding helped create advanced offerings for program graduates..

Contact Information

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