

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

**Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado
and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health**

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Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

Introduction

Food is essential for life. Agricultural food systems ensure that the general population has access to this life-sustaining need. Unfortunately, the individuals who maintain our food systems are at risk because farming is considered one of the most dangerous jobs in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Farm labor is strenuous and taxing on the body, which frequently leads to long term health problems that can ultimately affect a farmer's ability to work. Agricultural work requires farmers to lift heavy objects and work in a bent over position that strains the spine.

In addition to the physical hardships, farmers experience increased rates of suicide and emotional distress due to the uncertainty and financial risk of agricultural work (Colorado Department of Agriculture, 2022). 80% of farmers report experiencing work related anxiety (Hopkins et al., 2023). To add to their struggles, very few farmers receive health care as part of their compensation. The high cost of health insurance makes it difficult for farmers to afford insurance, as well as affording care, putting them at greater health and financial risk (National Young Farmers Coalition, 2022). In the United States a full 89% of farming households rely on some form of additional income to supplement the income earned from their farms (USDA, 2022).

The national Farm Bill, which is currently up for review in 2023, will substantially impact the agricultural industry and the livelihoods of the farm workers who provide our crucial food systems (Jablonski et al., 2022).

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

Methods

This study was conducted in two parts. First, data was collected through background research, followed by personal interviews with local farmers, with the objective of determining a common health concern of farmers and proposing a solution. Then, in response to the research and interview data, local businesses and nonprofit organizations were contacted to collaborate on an effort to help solve an identified problem for farmers.

Background research was conducted through a literature review and analysis of existing data, as well as using experience based knowledge from working on various farms in Southwest Colorado. Custom questions were formulated to understand what motivates individuals to pursue a career in agriculture, what are the priorities around their farming practices, and what are the stressors and barriers affecting their physical and mental health. The transcribed data from detailed interviews was used to identify common themes in individual perspectives relating to farm workers' personal health.

Local businesses were contacted and interviewed about their existing level of community involvement and interest in offering relief to local farmers in the form of discounted services. Non-profit organizations were interviewed to learn how they could be involved in a community-based collaboration. The interested businesses were connected with a non-profit to provide discounted services to local farm workers.

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

Data

Many common themes were identified regarding the physical and mental health of local farmers. However, it is important to note that many of the personal stories were unique and differed from farm to farm. With qualitative data, it should be acknowledged that the nuances of individual experiences are more complex than a standard set of interview answers can convey.

Physical Stressors

The most prevalent physical stressors identified by the farmers in this study were the repetitive motions and lifting of heavy objects required in their daily tasks. Back problems are a common issue in agriculture because farmers are constantly bending over while working in the fields. Specific examples that the interviewed farmers mentioned as burdensome tasks include: moving hundreds of pounds of carrots, bending over to harvest salad mix, lifting fifty pound potato sacks and extensive time pulling weeds.

“Everything about farming is taxing on your body I would say. But generally speaking, as far as specific tasks are concerned, harvest and weed mitigation are probably the most taxing tasks on the farm.”

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health



Fig. 1. Hundreds of pounds of root crops harvested from Sol Vista Farm packaged and ready for delivery.

Jackson, D. [@Solvistafarmmanacos]. (2020, September 29). [Final Fall Carrot Harvest], Sol Vista Farm, Hesperus, Colorado. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFvliNhFLEq/>

One farmer recounted a time that they had to receive cortisone shots after experiencing nerve damage in their hands. After harvesting squash with clippers for two days, that farmer lost complete sensation in their thumb and pointer fingers for six months. Another specific concern regards the spreading of soil amendments, like chicken manure pellets and blood meal, which can be damaging to throat and lung health if inhaled. Another participant described the wrist pain associated with using a

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

spray gun for long periods of time. Lack of sleep was also described as a stressor during the growing season, due to working long days.

“It’s a short season, you’re cramming everything into a short window. It’s just the workload. I work almost seven days a week all summer long at least 10 hour days, and some days are 14 hours, others are 12 hours. It’s not good, but it’s what happens. You’re either going to harvest and weed the crops and do all the maintenance or you’re going to walk away from something you’ve already put all this energy into.”

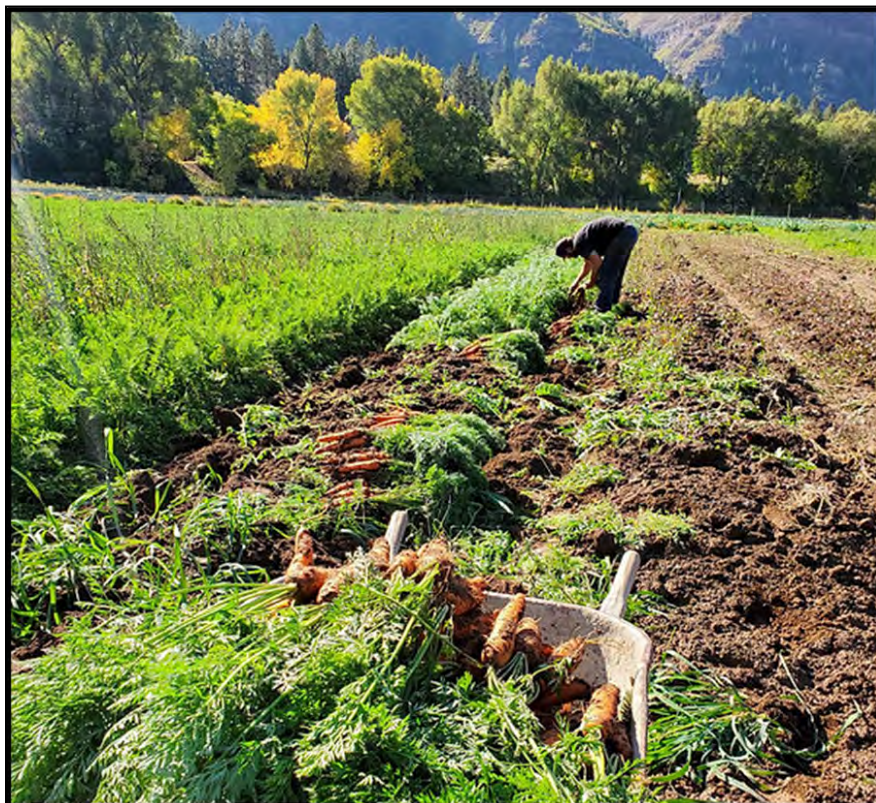


Fig. 2. A farmer at Fields to Plate Produce is bent over harvesting rows of carrots. Back problems are a common health issue experienced in the agricultural industry from repetitive movements and lifting heavy objects.

Fields, M. (n.d.). 20200924_101231. photograph, Fields to Plate Produce, Durango, Colorado. Retrieved from <https://www.fieldstoplateproduce.com/large-grid>

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

Physical Care

Some of the farmers mentioned that they actively stretch before or during work for injury prevention; other farmers stated that they do not keep up with actively stretching and taking regular breaks due to the busyness of the farm schedule. Some farm workers wear masks while spreading amendments to avoid dangerous exposure. Being mindful of their form while lifting objects and bending over during repetitive tasks is an effective way for farm workers to take care of their bodies. Three of the farmers interviewed find healing benefits in activities and exercise off the farm that can counter the repetitive motions of farm tasks, such as riding bikes and walking.

“Movement is medicine, if you’re doing repetitive things that’s fine, but change your posture with it if that’s switching knees.”

Time is a major barrier for farmers to address their physical health. However, some farmers stated that soaking in a hot springs or a bath, going to a chiropractor, massaging out muscles, and swimming in the river have been beneficial to their bodies and general well-being.

“[Hot springs] have been one of my biggest life savers between stretching and actively working out, lifting weights.”

Whenever it is possible, taking extra time to make tasks easier on the body has been instrumental in helping farm workers avoid injury.

“We are in it for the long haul. We realized that before we injure ourselves, we are taking two trips instead of one. Particularly with harvesting, if it’s in a basket or totes, you lean out and fight against the weight and it’s always unbalanced.”

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health



Fig. 3. Rutabagas from Brightwood Farm loaded into a harvest bin

Brightwood Farm (n.d.). [Winter Rutabagas!], Brightwood Farm, Hesperus, Colorado. Retrieved from <https://www.brightwood.farm/gallery>

Deciding what tasks and crops are most important to the farm and strategically planning for the season helps farmers conserve their energy. Farmers in this study have chosen to stop growing certain crops that are particularly taxing on the body, as well as using mechanized tools instead of doing everything by hand. Sometimes growing fewer crops is a worthwhile sacrifice to preserve farmers' health. The health and safety of agricultural workers is a long term investment for a sustainable business.

“Trying to farm in a way that is sustainable for us physically and personally because at the end of the day if it's not sustainable for the farmer to keep farming there's no farm.”

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health



Fig. 4. Mike Nolan using a tractor to mow down cover crop at Mountain Roots Produce

Mountain Roots Produce (n.d.). [Photograph of farmer using tractor], Mountain Roots Produce, Mancos, Colorado. Retrieved from <https://mountainrootsproduce.com/2018-photos/j70vjb4w27ymrwsle9prms6gg56wwf>

Mental Stressors

Financial stability is a major concern faced by farmers due to the uncertainty of the agricultural industry. Small-scale farming is generally not known as a lucrative business on its own, but when combined with environmental unpredictability, planting a crop can become a significant financial risk. The major environmental obstacles that farmers in Southwest Colorado worry about include drought, pests, and hail.

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

“Small farms change in crop patterns. The crop insurance people just throw their hands up when asked [for support] so there's little economic backup for small and diversified farms. It's way harder compared to commodified farms.”

“It's just tough you can work as hard as you want and make every decision right and mother nature will come in. A hail storm or wind will take out a greenhouse, so dealing with that is difficult. You can have all the water and employees in the world and still get dealt a terrible hand. So that's a tricky thing to accept.”

“Drought and water is the biggest issue and the economy too. Between inflation and all the people moving to the area it can change the landscape in the aspect of people from the front range wanting to come in and change things and all the sudden the normal [agricultural] stuff becomes a nuisance to them to a degree.”

“Going through those really intense drought years with the pest pressure was probably the biggest mental challenge I had experienced farming. I would go outside every morning and it was still dry, and it was still windy, and there were still bugs everywhere and it was a pretty hopeless feeling. We would think one crop was gonna make it, we weeded it and covered it up so the grasshoppers couldn't get to it, and then all the sudden the next day you would go out and they had leveled it. It always felt like, “What's gonna go wrong next?” So I hope that has made us stronger as farmers but 2021 was the biggest challenge.”

“Hail can wipe you out and it's just remarkable. We started to cover up our salad mix all the time in case a hail store comes by. But our daughter is out there with all those flowers. She's got about an acre and a half of flowers she can't cover up and you just never know and that's in the back of everybody's mind.”

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

“There are subtle things that farmers have to deal with and they wear on you. They add uncertainty and contribute to economic uncertainty. It's hard to get a store interested in your crop if you can't provide them with a succession of deliveries. If you can then you can give a local store interested in your product because once a customer sees that it's there you can continue to deliver into a demand. But if your production is limited by temperature or limited by insects its not easy and that then pushes you towards wholesale and with wholesale the return for farmer on efforts, and you only get a very small fraction of a dollar and these things are in the back of farmers minds”



Fig. 5. During the growing season of 2021, thousands of grasshoppers destroyed crops on farms throughout Southwest Colorado

Leonard, J. (2021, June 17). [Photograph of grasshopper on leaf], Mancos, Colorado.

Due to the constant demand of work during the short growing season, many of the farmers in this study stated that they lack time and energy for hobbies and social gatherings outside of the farm, which contributes to increased stress levels.

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

The nature of farming is very demanding, and there are always unfinished tasks waiting to be completed.

“Being tied down to your job 24/7 365 you’re always tied down to the farm in some aspect. Being committed to the farm all the time doesn’t leave room for you to leave especially if you have livestock, so having that responsibility can be taxing but ultimately fulfilling.”

“For me personally [farming] just feels right and now it’s more of a balance of how do you keep doing this thing that feels really purposeful and satisfying and balancing it with the actual workload which can be really overwhelming.”

The number of total farm staff differs from farm to farm; some farms have larger crews while other farms are maintained by a small handful of people. In the cases where there are only a few farmers employed, the solitude can also become a stressor for individuals who seek more connection.

“One of the hard things for farmers is the lack of connection, many farmers are introverts and prefer not to mix it up with lots and lots of folks but everybody needs connection and that can help keep folks going.”

“Farming is very isolating, all the farms I worked on I was the only employee. The farming I did was so independent and so solo that it was isolating to a degree that it was hurtful because of what I was going through in my personal life. Because I was alone there was no one to talk to. That isolation was so present. But then once I got through the thick of it and was on the mend of my own mental health, farming became this healing thing of having my hands in the soil and growing my own food.”

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

Mental Care

A number of the farmers in this study discussed their participation in therapy as part of their personal mental healthcare, as well as journaling to decompress after long days of work. It is important to note that not all agricultural workers are able to afford regular therapy sessions and need to find other ways to ease work induced stress. Multiple participants stated that it is important to take time away from the farm to unwind, whether it is time spent relaxing at the river or enjoying the company of friends and family.

“I am willing to step away from things even if there is some minor consequence or falling behind on stuff. I’m not going to sacrifice my well being as much anymore just to make the farm happen.”

“Every new farmer should have [burnout] in their head. Not compromising boundaries as far as what you want for a healthy lifestyle. It is easier said than done. I am still learning that.”

Some of the farmers clear their minds and actually feel more productive when they take small breaks throughout the workday. Many of the participants described the healing aspect of the physical beauty of the natural environment surrounding their farms.

“During the growing season, I take little breaks and look at our amazing view. It is so beautiful here. If there's something frustrating that will just take care of it and you can see it anytime which is great.”

“When I'm walking from here to the barn I just take a moment's pause to look up instead of down. To stop a minute, raise your gaze, breath, look around, and then go back to it.”

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health



Fig. 6. The beautiful view from Brightwood Farm located in the Animas Valley

Vidal. (n.d.). [Photograph of Animas Valley with rainbow], Brightwood Farm, Hermosa, Colorado. Retrieved from <https://www.brightwood.farm/>

As motivation to get through a long day, some of the farmers described rewarding themselves with a treat at the end of the day, that could be cracking open a cold beer or eating a chocolate bar. Another participant said that eating healthy and not overindulging in alcohol was their way to take care of their personal mental health.

“Not consuming excessive amounts of alcohol has been one of the biggest things I’ve seen for farmers to be able to sustain their bodies. They often will turn to alcohol as a crutch as a lot of people do, but farmers more so because in the outdoors working for themselves, they feel freedom within their jobs, so they feel that drinking is okay to do even on the job. Staying away from that has been a big part of keeping my mental clarity and health.”

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

Support Systems

While the agricultural community is fairly individual, many farmers will collectively come together to support each other in times of need. Farmers can discuss their problems with each other since they can all relate to the changing stressors throughout different growing seasons.

“Farmers tend to express their problems to each other fairly openly in my experience to each other but we all feel the similar stresses at similar times of year so it's easy to relate on that level.”

“No one quite gets it like a farmer friend.”

“Right now [The Grasshopper Collective] is Mountain Roots Produce, Banga’s Farm, and Sol Vista Farm. It was a response to grasshoppers and drought in the last 10 years. Garlic has always done well no matter what the conditions are so we've decided to shift focus into that and sell the garlic seed at a premium to see how we can elevate the growers at the same time. The last couple years we experienced out here the drought was so intense and the grasshoppers were so gnarly. The idea is to create a market plan for our crops to weather those storms so that at least there's a little bit of financial security in our farms if we face more years like that in the future.”

Most of the participants in this study stated that they rely on the support of their friends and family more than anyone else during difficult times, while other farmers mentioned that their relationships with customers can be very encouraging. Community involvement with local schools and supporting gardening projects around town has been a rewarding motivation for farmers looking to give back to the community.

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

“Farmers have to support communities too. It's got to be a two way street and working together. We can't add more farmers to the market and expect the whole society to revolve and shift around that.”

“There is a positive side when a farmer can have a connection with customers. What can a community do to help farmers short of buying their stuff is appreciating the quality of what's being produced.”

Gratitude

Although many of the farmers in this study stated that at one time or another they have considered pursuing other career options, ultimately it is the fulfilling nature of farmwork that has kept them in the agricultural industry. While this research aimed to identify health stressors, there was an overwhelming response of passion from the farmers who feel extremely grateful to be able to farm. The participants pointed out that despite the stress, farming overall has had a positive impact on their mental health because they are able to do what they love.

“The term, ‘mental health issues’ would imply only challenges, there's a huge positive beneficial effect of farming. In our retirement age, we are speaking with young energetic positively focused people all the time rather than fretting about aches and pains and troubles and complaints. Some folks are worrying all the time, they're angry, they're frustrated and we don't run in that lane. It's a whole lot more positive. Truly on the positive side, when you grow healthy food in healthy soil, the environment is benefiting and the plants reflect that back at you as a farmer, you feel it and it is truly sustaining.”

“I was working as a social worker in the mental health industry. I worked Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, got off then went to the farm on Fridays and it was one of the most healing things. It was a form of therapy for me. It became my mental health saving grace. I learned my own healing. I work in crisis care,

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

**weather its suicide, sexual assault, or domestic violence I would deal with five
crisis a shift. To have the farm to reground myself because it was this special
thing I could do.”**

**“Last year when it was raining and beautiful and green, I would walk down
and see our block of brassicas and everything was just gorgeous. It’s this
joyful sense of, “This is it, this is what I’m supposed to be doing”. Or
harvesting the cauliflower and seeing the customers so excited to buy it
brings a different mental energy that feels really good that balances it out.”**



Fig. 7. Rows of crops at Mountain Roots Produce

Mountain Roots Produce. (n.d.). [Photograph crops growing at farm],
Mountain Roots Produce, Mancos, Colorado. Retrieved from
<https://mountainrootsproduce.com/farm-membership>

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

Actions

Two local businesses were interviewed following the discussions with farmers in order to determine the next steps towards providing support through discounts. Both Durango Hot Springs Resort & Spa and Yoga Durango have a significant level of community-based involvement, partnering with other businesses and organizations to benefit the local community. Durango Hot Spring Resort & Spa offers a *10-Soak Card*, as well as a *Frequency Card*, which are specifically designed for local residents that reduces the general admission rate by 20%. Yoga Durango has *Class Packages* and *Monthly Passes* for frequent customers. These two businesses understand that farmers make an important contribution to the community in a physically demanding job. Both businesses showed enthusiasm for the idea of providing discounted services to farm workers.



Fig. 8. Durango Hot Springs Resort & Spa located in Hermosa, Colorado has become a spot frequented by locals and tourists.

Durango Hot Springs Resort & Spa. (n.d.). [*Hot Springs and Mountains*]. photograph, Hermosa, Colorado. Retrieved from <https://durangohotspringsresortandspa.com/>



Fig. 9. Yoga Durango has been in business since 2006, providing services for the local community

McGourty [@YogaDurango]. (2022, December 3). [Photograph of yoga class in session]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckg0KU6O50p>

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

The Good Food Collective (GFC) is a non-profit organization located in the Four Corners region that is working to strengthen the local food system. They provide technical assistance to farmers by helping them obtain irrigation grants and developing relationships between farms and local chefs. Service opportunities are provided to assist with farm labor and discussions hosted to promote understanding and support for the agricultural community.



Fig. 10. The Good Food Collective logo

Gfc logo. (n.d.). Nonprofit Organization | The Good Food Collective. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://www.goodfoodcollective.org/>.

A third-party, non-profit organization will function as the connection point between farmers and businesses in order to make the discounts for local farmers logistically work. GFC is currently working with Durango Hot Springs Resort & Spa and Yoga Durango to set up a model for providing benefits to local farmers. This includes help with advertising and providing security in the legitimacy of the farmers receiving discounts. These businesses will also benefit from the likelihood that the participating farmers will become returning customers. In addition, this collaborative resource provides a promotional opportunity in a town where many citizens have the desire to support ethical businesses.

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

Discussion

Southwest Colorado experiences a short and intense growing season. Time and space is a major barrier for farmers being able to prioritize their physical and mental health. Farmers are more likely to utilize community discounts during the off-season, winter months when the workload on the farm is reduced. Although farming is an extremely strenuous career, there is an overwhelming sense of gratitude and passion for the work shared by the farmers who were interviewed. Even though this research focuses solely on small-scale agricultural workers within the Southwest Colorado region, most of the food consumed by the general population is farmed by migrant workers who remain widely unrecognized and deserve appreciation for their hard work and contribution to the food system.

“Most of the produce that we consume here is produced under a largely invisible workforce like migrant labor and I think there is unfair exaltation and hype for farmers like me and folks who are running booths at the market and the guys who are writing books about small scale farming. If there is one thing I would ask of the broader consumer community it would be to be aware of those people, most of the real skill and knowledge is held within those folks who have been working all these different fields at an incredibly high pace for incredibly low wage and rights. There is a lot of appreciation for certain types of farmers but there could be a broader perspective from the community. You will do more for the farm world putting your energy into immigration reform than you ever would spending money at a farmers market.”

The Farm Bill is a piece of legislation relevant to the agricultural industry that is updated every five years, and will be reviewed and renewed in 2023. Political engagement is an effective way for individuals to support agricultural workers.

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

“The support that local agriculture needs generally falls into many categories, the majority of farming issues are going to be solved politically. Political engagement is a huge piece that people need to realize. We’re not going to buy our way out of this problem, of course its good to support local agriculture with your dollar but if you want to take it further than that [political engagement] is what needs to happen.”

“We're in the cycle right now for the next five year Farm Bill and that will happen later on this year. So there are opportunities and we certainly encourage folks to communicate with their elected officials. Senator Bennet happens to be a leader in that process so we have an opportunity specifically with him to acknowledge some of these needs.”

It may not solve all the problems that farmers face on an annual basis, but local community-based involvement and appreciation for farmers is a powerful way to support agricultural workers. Businesses that are willing to offer their resources to farmers at a discount can make a meaningful difference in the lives of individual farmers who are working hard to, sometimes, just make ends meet. Whether food is locally sourced or commercially grown, it is important to recognize the hard work, personal sacrifices, and enormous contribution to society that farmers make to bring the essential commodity of food to our plates.

“What can a community do? Celebrate local food in any way that you can. There's no better way to boost up a farmer than to see people laughing and smiling eating prepared foods that have their ingredients in them.”

“I think it is really important for communities to understand that binaries hurt farmers, to look at things so simply. That black and white perspective in itself is actually really harmful to agriculture. We are in unprecedented times and we don't have any basis. What the solution is for good is still so

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

obscure and complicated, so the more open minded everyone can be in my opinion the better.”

Future Research Recommendations

A further long-term study should be conducted to determine the effectiveness of local discounts on impacting the health and wellness of farmers. Following a set of interview questions, discussions with farmers should be carried out over the course of at least two growing seasons. Participants should be asked if they utilized the discounted services and if it contributed to their health and wellness in any way. Interview transcriptions should then be compared to identify any significant changes that took place over time.

In addition to the two businesses that contributed to this study, more businesses should be contacted in the La Plata and Montezuma counties to expand the accessibility of resources to agricultural workers in the area. More businesses that offer hot springs and yoga classes would be ideal, as farmers have expressed a beneficial interest in these services and there is a multitude of service providers in the Southwest Colorado region. Other services could be offered to accommodate the varying interests of agricultural workers, such as climbing gyms, art supply stores, ski resorts, and other spa services. Farmers participating in this research identified an interest in local restaurants and the desire to enjoy food prepared by a chef using fresh, local ingredients. Restaurants around Southwest Colorado should be contacted regarding their willingness to provide agricultural workers with seasonal gift cards, allowing

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

farmers and chefs to enjoy the symbiotic relationship with the food they grow and prepare.

All the farmers in this study have been in the industry for less than 25 years. Generational farmers hold a unique perspective that was not captured in this research. Because generational farmers have extensive knowledge on the agricultural industry and a wealth of experience, they should be included in future research with a comparative analysis to newer farmers.

Of the seven farmers interviewed for this study, there is only one who does not own a farm. Although all agriculture workers endure physical demands, the farm employee in this study, who was not the owner, described being able to leave the mental stress of the farm behind when she clocked out, while that stress was constantly present for her bosses. The different experiences between farm owners and their employees is significant, and a future study should include an equal amount of perspective from each group. A comparative study should be included to distinguish between the health of farm owners and farm employees.

Furthermore, this research focused specifically on small-scale farmers; however, many of the same health issues that small-scale farmers face are also experienced by large-scale farmers and ranchers. While chemical exposure was not a concern for any of the farmers interviewed in this research, it is a major health issue in industrial agriculture. Future research could include a comparative study on the health differences between large-scale farmers and ranchers versus small-scale farmers, as well as evaluating farmer workers' perspectives on their own wellness needs.

Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the
Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

With Gratitude To

This research would not have been possible without the local farmers who took the time to speak with me about their perspectives and experiences in the agricultural industry:

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Dean Vidal, Owner of Brightwood Farm

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Mindy Perkovich, Owner of Mountain Roots Produce

Mike Nolan, Owner of Mountain Roots Produce

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Health and Wealth: Interviews with Small-Scale Farmers in Southwest Colorado and the Effects on their Mental and Physical Health

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