



Rocky Mountain
Farmers Union

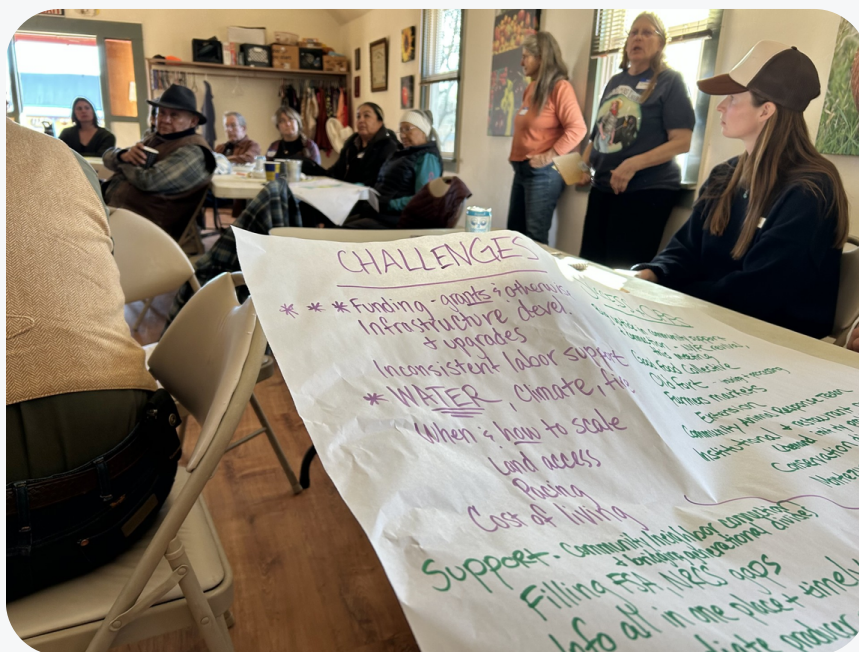
Four Corners Farmers & Ranchers Coalition

Winter Thaw Roundtable Report

The Rocky Mountain Farmers Union's Four Corners chapter gathered local producers on Sunday, February 1, 2026 at the Mancos Grange for a community feedback discussion identifying agricultural challenges, needs, and opportunities in the region.

Participants expressed deep commitment to farming and ranching, pride in family-based production, and optimism about local demand. At the same time, they described systemic challenges in land access, labor, capital, water, regulatory complexity, and generational transition.

This report synthesizes the greatest needs identified in the roundtable and outlines practical pathways forward for coordinated, supportive action.



Greatest Needs Identified

Financial Viability and Profitability

Core Concern: Producers cannot remain in agriculture without stable, predictable profitability.

Key Issues:



- Limited access to funding and grant navigation support
- Capital gaps for infrastructure development
- Uncertainty around when/how to scale up
- Cash flow instability
- Need for off-farm income to survive
- Balancing affordability for consumers with fair pricing for producers
- Rising cost of living
- Liability concerns - ex: insurance coverage, agritourism

Labor and Workforce Development

Core Concern: Labor is difficult to find, retain, and afford. Labor shortages threaten operational stability and increase burnout.

Key Issues:



- High cost of labor; need for skilled labor
- Inconsistent and unreliable labor supply
- Complex labor regulations introducing operational liabilities
- Challenges of seasonality, physical and mental demands of the work
- Inability to provide benefits and insurance packages

Water and Climate Resilience

Core Concern: Water access and climate risk are existential challenges. Water insecurity and climate volatility undermine investment confidence and long-term planning.

Key Issues:



- Drought and irrigation curtailment
- Water rights availability, complexity, and cost; regulatory barriers
- Fire and climate risk
- Long-term soil and ecosystem sustainability
- Lack of economical compost and natural fertility source access for soil health practices

Resource Navigation and Coordination

Core Concern: Resources exist but are fragmented. Producers spend excessive time navigating systems instead of farming.

Key Issues:



- Lack of coordination for funding pathways - need for a centralized “one-stop shop” resource directory
- Recent disruption in FSA and NRCS staffing
- Desire to leverage local wealth into local food systems versus federal funding



Greatest Needs Identified

Land Access, Ownership, and Transition

Core Concern: Land is difficult to access, afford, and legally navigate. Without coordinated land transition strategies, farmland risks consolidation, development pressure, or loss from active production.

Key Issues:



- Limited access to land suitable for farming
- Pathways to land ownership feel unclear or inaccessible particularly for young and beginning farmers and ranchers
- Trend of aging producer population, and need for security in retirement
- Need for transition and legacy planning
- Navigating zoning and land use regulations
- Facilitation and mediation support needed in land matching and transition

Market Access and Fair Pricing

Core Concern: Demand exists, but systems do not consistently reward producers fairly. The region must better align demand with producer profitability and equitable food access.

Assets:



- Restaurant and institutional interest
- Farmers markets
- Farm-to-school opportunities

Key Issues:

- Community and institutional willingness to prioritize local food spending and fair pricing for producers
- Maintaining accessibility of local food to marginalized and lower income communities (SNAP cuts)

Infrastructure and Distribution Gaps

Core Concern: Producers lack the systems necessary to move product efficiently and profitably. Without mid-scale and centralized infrastructure, producers struggle to scale appropriately or access wholesale and institutional markets



Key Issues:

- Need for centralized storage and processing
- Distribution support
- Coordination support
- Capital for infrastructure investments

Potential Paths Forward Identified

Establish Regional Agricultural Resource Hub

Possibilities:



- A centralized “one-stop shop” resource directory for grants, technical assistance, land listings, workforce programs, infrastructure opportunities, etc.
- Funding and grant navigation assistance
- FSA/NRCS application support
- Promote tool libraries and shared equipment access

Address Labor Stability

Possibilities:



- Workshops for producers on ag employment law, writing job descriptions, onboarding, fostering a strong work culture to increase retention, management/supervisor skills, creative compensation models for small farms, etc.
- Centralized regional job postings and worker/internship/apprenticeship matchmaking with operations
- Advocate for regional ag workforce housing solutions
- Strengthen workforce development partnerships

Develop Land Access and Transition Programming

Possibilities:



- Facilitate land access, legacy and succession planning workshops
- Partner with Montezuma Land Conservancy to expand agricultural easement tools
- Plug into land-link programs connecting retiring producers to beginning farmers
- Explore long-term land lease models and community land trusts
- Support education around local zoning and code compliance

Water and Climate Resilience Initiatives

Possibilities:



- Facilitate water rights education workshops
- Expand soil health programming and funding access
- Promote grass banking approaches for livestock
- Emergency preparedness workshops

Potential Paths Forward Identified

Youth Engagement and Ag As a Viable Career Path



Possibilities:

- Support an increase in internships and farmer-in-training programs
- Strengthen partnerships with schools, 4-H, FFA
- Develop mentorship networks (intergenerational pairing)

Support Producer Wellness and Sustainability



Possibilities:

- Community connection events
- Mental health support resources
- Peer support groups
- Encourage business planning tools to reduce burnout

Improve Market Alignment and Community Buy-In



Possibilities:

- Institutional procurement commitments (schools, hospitals, restaurants)
- Explore community investment notes or revolving no- to low-interest loan funds
- Support expansion of SNAP
- Consumer education campaigns on value of local food
- Fundraising events such as “50 Mile Dinner” to reinvest in producers

Bolster Local/Regional Distribution and Processing Infrastructure



Possibilities:

- Further develop shared-use commercial kitchen or processing spaces
- Feasibility study for centralized storage and processing facility
- Deepen partnerships with and learn from existing food hubs/distribution
- Evaluate community-supported infrastructure investment fund



Conclusion

The Four Corners agricultural community demonstrates strong commitment, local demand, and emerging partnerships. However, structural barriers – particularly around profitability, labor, water, land, and infrastructure – require coordinated, systemic solutions. The most impactful path forward lies in:

- Centralized resource coordination
- Workforce development
- Land access and transition planning
- Water and climate resiliency initiatives
- Infrastructure and business investments
- Aligning community wealth with local food systems
- Tools that support overall producer wellbeing

With leadership from Rocky Mountain Farmers Union and aligned regional partners, the Four Corners region can be better positioned to build a durable, equitable, and economically viable agricultural future.

Regional Partners in Agriculture



Rocky Mountain Farmers Union

<http://www.rmfu.org>

Grassroots association and advocating voice for farmers and ranchers in CO, NM, and WY



Colorado Cattlemen’s Association

<http://www.coloradocattle.org>

Association and advocating voice for Colorado beef production



Colorado Farm Bureau

<http://www.coloradofarmbureau.com>

Association and advocating voice for Colorado farmers and ranchers



Colorado State University Extension

<http://www.extension.colostate.edu>

Research, education, and programming for Colorado agriculture



Conservation District - High Desert

<http://www.hdcd.colorado.gov>

Conservation projects, technical assistance, outreach and education, soil sampling and testing, conservation supplies (seedlings, weed barriers), rental equipment



Conservation District - Mancos

<http://www.mancoscd.org>

Information, technical and engineering support; cost share programs for water, irrigation, noxious weed control, and conservation land management

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Regional Partners in Agriculture



Conservation District - Southwestern Water

<http://www.swwcd.org>

9 county coordinated water advocacy, data, education, grant programs, and projec



Good Food Collective

<http://www.goodfoodcollective.org>

Food systems regional convenings, coordination, and support; Food access and health equity; and producer-centered support and projects



Montezuma Land Conservancy

<http://www.montezumaland.org>

Land trust protecting open space, wildlife habitat, public access trails, and agriculture; Cross-cultural, community, education, land access, and agricultural programs



Montezuma Orchard Restoration Project

<http://www.montezumaorchard.org>

Fruit tree preservation, education and outreach, and cultural and economic revitalization for orchards



Montezuma School to Farm

<http://www.mstfp.org>

Food production/preparation and resource conservation education to Montezuma County school students from age 3 to 18. Fresh produce donations.



National Young Farmers Coalition

<http://www.youngfarmers.org>

Association and advocating voice for young and BIPOC farmers and ranchers



Nourish Colorado

<http://www.nourishcolorado.org>

Nutrition incentive programs, food to institutions, farm and food policy, nutrition education



Old Fort at Hesperus

<http://www.fortlewis.edu/the-old-fort/>

Farmer in Training program, incubator program, growing guides, CSA, agricultural education



Southwestern Colorado Livestock Association

<http://www.coloradolivestock.org>; Facebook - Southwestern Colorado Livestock Association

Association promoting, fostering, and protecting livestock businesses as a unified voice



Ute Mountain Ute Farm and Ranch

<http://www.utemtn.com>

7,700 acre agricultural project and mill producing cattle, alfalfa, and corn on the Ute Mountain Ute Reservation

