

# Recovery and Reinvention



This concept is a work in progress and always will be.

I grew up in La Plata County and worked on farms and ranches as a kid. Our family has gardens and we've raised rabbits, lambs, horses, and other animals, but **I AM NOT an agricultural expert**. The vision is to collaborate with those who are experienced experts and the community to foster broad-based, serious community dialog and action.

- Jack

## Beef, Beets, Buildings & Bikes

Food Security, Employment, Housing, and Quality of Life

There will always be importation of food to La Plata County and the surrounding region. Bananas, tuna fish, and other food types are not local under any circumstance, but what is our current status and potential for locally sourced food?

The coronavirus pandemic strained the supply chain for food and other necessities imported to La Plata County. As inconvenient as shopping with a facemask and regular shortages of some products are, if inbound trucks to grocery stores ceased operations, how long could the average family feed themselves?

Local farming and ranching families could survive for many months. In fact, they would have an excess of supply at times. Meanwhile the rest of us would run out of food in short order. Most La Plata County residents, like the rest of America, rely on a vulnerable production and delivery system that is not under our control.



**Food security and a measure of independence should be a priority for La Plata County and the region.** The risks exposed by coronavirus cannot be ignored or dismissed. We don't know whether the next threat to our food supply will be in a few months, years, or decades, but the threat is very real as we've learned first-hand.

Establishing food security and independence will take years of planning, cooperation, and action on behalf of local government(s), native tribes, the agricultural community, businesses, and citizens in general. It's only possible if we understand, plan for, and develop a long-term food security and independence plan that takes into consideration:

1. **Climate** and seasons,
2. **Land** availability, access, and cost,
3. **Water** quantity, quality, and delivery systems,
4. **Experienced producers** (farmers, ranchers, and personal [family] operations ),
5. **Potential (new) producers** and educational resources,
6. **Crop and livestock mix**,
7. **Agricultural suppliers and services**,



8. **Processing, inspection, packaging, and storage**,
9. **Local / Regional transportation**,
10. **Distribution** – Retailers, restaurants, markets, farm stands, CSA programs, schools, social service programs, food banks, detention facilities, and other(?),
11. **Consumers** – Education, support, and patronage,
12. **Advocate groups** – The Farm Bureau, Cattlemen's Association, granges, CSA organizations, food coops, 4-H programs, educational institutions, etc.
13. **Government** leadership and facilitation (local, state, federal) and intergovernmental collaboration, and
14. **More????**



- **Climate and season** – We've been in a drought for 20 years. Seasonal changes and altitude are factors for nearly every aspect of local production.
- **Land availability** – La Plata County and surrounding areas already have many thousands of acres under cultivation or in use for livestock, poultry, etc. Lots of land suitable for food production is not in use at this time but could be repurposed. Fallow private land, conservation easements, government lands, and tribal lands could be used for local food production.



Where do greenhouses and hydroponic facilities fit in the mix (both existing and those that could be built)? What about hatcheries and ponds for aquatic farming?

- **Water** availability, distribution and use, particularly in light of local climate factors, is a complex mix of nature's supply, statutory regulations, established rights, storage, delivery systems, irrigation, and conservation practices.

Water is a controversial and oft times tempestuous issue for the West. New thinking and cooperation will be required to make water available and efficient for food production.



- **Experienced producers and potential (new) producers** – Local farmers and ranchers are the cornerstone of food security and independence. Our farms and ranches vary greatly in size, production capacity, and the type of crops / livestock they are capable of producing.

Local agricultural enterprises range from multi-generational family operations to recent arrivals. Children learn at the side of their parents. Octogenarians work the same land as their ancestors and some folks are new to farming altogether. The diversity of age, culture, religion, and politics is as pronounced in the agricultural community as it is elsewhere.

Family, boutique, and community gardens can play a role in food security as well (think of the WWI & II Victory Gardens). No food source should be regarded as insignificant.



Everyone in the agricultural community has something to contribute to our food security and independence regardless of their beliefs, experience, or capacity. Plants and animals have no preference for Republicans, Democrats, or other political persuasions. Our success depends on cooperation and mutual support. We must learn from each other and lean on each other.

The value of farming and ranching must be taught and emphasized to a population that's grown distant from the land and has little understanding of food production. Beef and beets don't magically appear in grocery stores any more than money is free from an ATM.



**Producers must be paid fairly (or well) so their operations are profitable and sustainable.**

- **Crop and livestock mix** –Consumer demand and production efficiency require diversity in what’s planted and raised.

Great thought, planning, and cooperation must be given to the traditional mix of crops and livestock as well as the introduction of new plants and animal breeds.

Is there potential for aquatic farming? Hydroponic operations?



- **Agricultural suppliers and services** must be able to meet the needs of a reinvented local agriculture industry. Farm and ranch machinery, seeds, soil supplements, veterinarians, medications, and other products / services must be adequate for expanded production goals.

- **Processing, inspection, packaging and storage** – When considering the entire population of La Plata County and the region, it’s highly unlikely that the majority of the food supply could go directly from farm to table. Production volume and cycles, seasonal change, consumer demand, and in-home storage capabilities require much of our food is processed, inspected for safety, packaged, and stored for a period of time.



- **Transportation** – Food must be moved from the production source, to processing, to storage, to distribution points where the consumer can obtain them. The good news is that the distance between producers and consumers is relatively short in our region and we have a good network of roads.

Conversely, most citizens are dependent upon a nationwide transportation network that’s vulnerable. Our population size and density is small and remote compared to most of America. For perspective, the nearest interstate highway is 150 miles from La Plata County.

- **Distribution** – Retailers, restaurants, markets, farm stands, CSA programs, schools, social service programs, food banks, detention facilities, and other(?) are where people get food. How do we work with these entities to accept locally produced food? What opportunities are there for new points of sale?



- **Consumers are the ultimate deciders.** Cost, convenience, and variety have been primary drivers of demand... until the pandemic. The experience of

empty shelves and uncertainty should be motivation for all of us to plan for, invest, and adapt to food security and independence as is reasonably possible.

Educating consumers to the quality and nutritional value of locally produced food will be a factor in creating demand, even if at a higher cost compared to bulk imports. The value of supporting local business will (hopefully) contribute to consumer buy-in.

As a greater proportion of the population supports food security and independence and producers fill that need, retail prices will come down and profits for local farmers / ranchers can be increased.



- **Advocate groups** – Already existing agricultural organizations such as the Farm Bureau, Cattlemen’s Association, granges, CSA organizations, food coops, 4-H programs, educational institutions, and other organizations must be tapped for their network of experts, influencers, and experience. There’s no need to reinvent or replicate where good work is already in place.
- **Government leadership and facilitation** – Elected officials and government employees must facilitate and expedite food security and independence, not block it.

Leadership must be visionary, driven, and trusted to bring stakeholders together. The goal must be to discover **HOW** to develop and protect our local food supply system, not **IF** we can be secure and independent.

President John F. Kennedy did not ask America’s greatest minds to see IF we could reach the moon. He called on our best and brightest to walk on the surface of the moon within ten years of his pronouncement.

**Food security and independence would be our moonshot. We have the resources and ability. Most important is that we have the need.**



This draft document is to serve as support for those organizations, businesses, and families who are active in local food production, some for many years. It’s based on contributions from locals I have known for many years and other folks of recent acquaintance.

# Next steps (whether I'm elected or not)

1. **Additional input and feedback** from experienced agricultural and distribution experts that have been provided this draft.
2. **Experts and key stakeholders** must be brought together and empowered to collaborate, research, discuss, and create a long-term plan. They will also be called upon to help educate and rally the public for support as many of them have been doing for years.



3. **Elected officials and staff** must encourage and facilitate food security and independence, not (effectively) block it. **Planning, review, and permitting, for example, must be streamlined** so that farmers, ranchers, and other stakeholders are not discouraged from engaging in a regionwide food security program.

Expansion, improvement, and / or creation of agricultural operations should not be subject to the same costs and administrative rigors of a country club development. Progress must be expedited, not throttled.

It may be necessary to rethink or adapt regulations for food processing, packaging, storage, transportation, etc. for the “*new normal*”.



4. **Interconnectivity** – Food security and independence is not a stand-alone issue. Any hope of success is dependent on the health economy and the public’s willingness and ability to afford and support local production.

Other business sectors are critical to the direct success and profitability for local farmers, ranchers, processors, suppliers, retailers, restaurants, and other stakeholders. Everyone, whether they live here or are visiting needs to eat. Everyone needs to be able to pay for what they eat.

I believe that a reinvented tourism program could be a significant factor in the success of food security. Agricultural tourism is growing worldwide, and we have unique opportunity in La Plata County. Farm stands, food trucks, and the local farmers and ranchers have high appeal to visitors from urban areas (domestic and foreign).

Our network of country roads and the potential to build hundreds of miles of bike trails across rural areas of the county would have the same potential that's been employed in many European and Asian countries. The emergence of Ebikes, exponentially increases the range and enjoyment of such adventures for a greater portion of the population.

Some farmers and ranchers may initially wince at the thought of additional traffic (especially tourists) on rural roads. No doubt there will be numerous safety and logistical issues for consideration. I believe it's possible to demonstrate that farmers and ranchers can be REWARDED through additional sales, easement fees, tax benefits, or other means that will increase their profitability, quality of life and agricultural sustainability.



5. **Leadership (and benefits)** – We can establish ourselves as leaders for other communities and regions across the United States. In addition to the inherent value of our efforts, we may be able to reap the benefits of media exposure, public relations, and inbound visitation, conferences, etc.

As an example, Whistler, BC was one of the first resorts to develop downhill biking as a recreational sport (vs. a sport for experts only). They have held many meetings, conferences, etc. for communities and resorts wishing to learn from their experience.

