



Agriculture in the North Platte Basin

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CWCB Board of Directors - North Platte Basin Representative



The North Platte Basin is a 2,050 square-mile area that encompasses all of Jackson County (also known as North Park) and a portion of Larimer County. It is nestled up against the Continental Divide in north central Colorado between the Front Range, Routt County, and the Wyoming border. Our agricultural story is similar to other Colorado basins where floor elevations range between 7,000 and 9,000 feet. In the North Platte, production agriculture consists primarily of livestock and native hay production.

Adaptability is key to the sustainability of production agriculture. A quick look at a few comparative numbers illustrates the impact annual supply and demand variability can have on producers. (Colorado Agricultural Statistics, 2012, 2016; verbal reports for 2016 hay value)

Jackson County Grass Hay Production and Value

- In 2014, 42,900 acres of North Park hay was harvested yielding 56,000 tons valued at approximately \$11,200,000.
- In 2015, there was 47,000 acres of hay harvested yielding 69,200 tons valued at approximately \$12,871,200.
- In 2016, with the value of hay bringing at best, a meager \$100 per ton, 69,200 tons of North Park hay was only worth \$6,200,000, or about half the 2015 value!

Jackson County Inventory and Value for All Cattle and Calves

- In 2010, there were 32,000 cattle/calves with an average value of \$850 per head
- In 2015, there were 25,000 cattle/calves with an average value of \$1,670 per head

How do ranch families deal with such variability? Strategies vary by operation and available resources and can include management decisions, such as selling more or less cattle or hay in any given year, storing hay until prices improve, seeking alternative markets, shipping cattle out to feed outside the county during the winter, etc. All of these decisions must be carefully considered in order to maintain a viable bottom line in an effort to reduce negative impacts to the future years...when the tides will inevitably turn again!



Did you know that a beef cow drinks an average 32.5 gallons of water per day? Clearly, ample water is also one of the most critical factors to the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of the North Platte Basin.



Most ranch ways of life and agricultural enterprise activities are guided by the seasons and environmental conditions. Springtime in the high country offers a weather palette that varies from day to day and hour to hour between wet heavy snows and bright sunny days, while winter snow gradually melts and the ground thaws. Calving begins “on time” no matter the weather, typically the first half of April. Water is vital to producing a hay crop that is later sold for income or used to feed breeding stock over the long North Park winters. Irrigating begins when the water starts to run and varies each year, depending

on which part of the basin you live in. Most ranchers are irrigating by mid-May. Given ample moisture from snow melt and spring precipitation, our warm summer days prompt the rapid growth of a lush, highly nutritious mountain meadow grass hay crop, the type sought after by our horse loving neighbors on the Front Range, or that efficiently converts pastures full of ruminants into thousands of pounds of nutritious, delicious beef for Colorado consumers to enjoy. The summer hay harvest typically begins in July continuing into September in flurry of activity: mowing, raking, curing, baling, stacking, and hauling beautiful bales of various shapes and sizes that dot the landscape...small and large, squares and rectangles, round bales and loose stacks. Rather than harvest hay, some ranchers elect to pasture their less productive meadows, while some finish the harvest, then turn stock out onto the meadows to capitalize on regrowth. Regardless, summer passes in a flash and the widely used idiom, “make hay while the sun shines” is nowhere more literally true than in the North Platte Basin.

When the aspens start to turn color and the nights get cooler, the fall work begins. Gathering and sorting cattle along with irrigation ditch repair and maintenance fill the days until the leaves fall and the snow flies and all around, the ground gets covered and the country begins to freeze.



Ranch families sort and evaluate their stock and make critical decisions on how many and which cattle to retain or send to market. The routine of winter feeding begins and with it a daily round of chores: getting the tractor started on cold days, harnessing your team, chopping ice so stock can drink, hauling feed, plowing snow to get to the haystacks, and heating the shop to maintain and repair equipment. All the while, thoughts and talk revolve around making plans for next year.



Where does the money earned from production go in a ranching business? Most of what is earned cycles back into the local economy through property taxes, schools, local businesses such as part stores, grocery stores, fuel, vet supplies, ranch supplies, paying loans or building savings, and covering other expenditures such as college tuition. The younger generation works alongside their parents on

these ranches to earn money for college. Many local youth raise 4-H and FFA livestock projects that are sold each year at the county fair, while others raise breeding projects that help them build their own small herds that may eventually be sold in order to build their college funds or launch their own small businesses.



While many ranches are owned by absentee owners or corporations, a good majority are still owned by ranch families. Women in agriculture are vitally important and one of the most valuable assets to the family ranch. Women ranchers actively participate in every job that must be done on the ranch, from working side by side in all planned activities with partners to dropping whatever they are busy doing at any given moment to pitch in wherever their help is

needed. The division of labor blurs constantly on the ranch, especially when it comes to keeping up with raising the children, getting them to and from school, and traveling in and out of the county to attend extra-curricular activities.

We love to tell our story and offer an open invitation to our urbanite neighbors to take some time and come up to the country where you can see your food production in action. We welcome your interest and will gladly show you around. Come enjoy our open spaces, teeming with fish and wildlife, and gain a better understanding of the value of water to the North Platte Basin.

To learn more about the North Platte Basin, visit www.coloradowaterplan.com, click the Community tab and the North Platte Basin.



About the author: Ty Wattenberg was appointed to the Colorado Water Conservation Board in February, 2012. He is the current Chair of the Board. He also serves on the Jackson County Water Conservancy Board. A lifelong resident of North Park, Ty has had the privilege of being a part of his family's ranching business, which dates back to 1884.

Photos contributed by Wade Allnutt, Wattenberg Family, Dustin Cochrane, Lynnette Telck and Deb Alpe.