

State ag leader: Outbreak has exposed challenges producers have long faced

BY MIKE TAYLOR

Even in the best of times, uncertainty is a fact of life for Colorado's farmers and ranchers. The repercussions of COVID-19 are just an extension of perennial concerns like weather and fluctuating market prices. One of the most visible disruptions among many was the coronavirus outbreak at the JBS meat-packing plant in Greeley in early April, prompting temporary closure of the plant after 50 positive tests and two deaths were reported at the 3,000-employee facility. Other plants across the country were shut down.

"Colorado stock producers are dealing with a lot," says Colorado Department of Agriculture Commissioner Kate Greenberg. "There's a lot of uncertainty in the commodities markets as it is, and then you add this uncertainty on top of it - facilities either shut down or reeling in their operations due to outbreak. There's only a limited number of options for livestock producers in terms of where they ship their livestock, and Colorado's a big hub for that."

COVID-19 has impacted producers of livestock and crops, large and small. Greenberg says the state's direct-to-consumer market - local farmers connecting with consumers via farmers markets and community supported agriculture (CSAs), for example - have seen huge changes as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

"In a lot of ways, they're more nimble because of the scale and infrastructure of the local food system," Greenberg says. "A lot of those producers have really been hustling to pivot their market opportunities. Those who are

reliant primarily on restaurants, of course, lost the bulk of their revenue and have been looking at other models like CSAs - pre-boxed, direct to consumer."

Greenberg notes that farmers and ranchers around the state are forming regional coalitions to exploit marketing opportunities at a time of mandated social distancing. One example is the Southwest Producers Directory (southwestproducers.org) formed by farmers and ranchers in the Four Corners area to connect directly with consumers at a time when farmers markets and many restaurants have been forced to close temporarily. Coloradoproud.org lists wholesale distributors statewide.

"They're essentially building a whole new food system in the middle of all this," Greenberg says. "There is an incredible amount of innovation and creativity going on. That does not mean we're not dealing with all sorts of challenges left and right. But what producers are doing is thinking, 'We've got product; we've got food coming out of the ground.' It's the marketing channels that are different."

In pre-COVID-19 times, 40% to 50% of meals were eaten outside the home, according to some estimates. Now, about 90% of meals or ingredients are bought at retailers and prepared at home.

"The supply chain really can't flip on a dime," Greenberg says. "We've got ample supply. Our producers are doing an amazing job producing food. The question is, throughout our various supply chains, can we pivot to continue

getting that food to the consumer? That's what everybody across Colorado agriculture is doing in one way or another right now."

In some ways, COVID has merely exposed vulnerabilities that ag producers have been dealing with for years, if not generations.

"I think where the rubber's going to meet the road is how we emerge from COVID-19," Greenberg says. "We're in this immediate crisis that has us marking time by days or weeks. But really, for our food system, it's going to be a question of where consumers want to be putting their food dollars. Producers are getting creative and collaborating and cooperating to reimagine in real time Colorado's food system at all scales. But I think what's really going to be telling for us is to what extent consumers are in this with us."

Perhaps consumers will emerge from these times of COVID-19 with a heightened appreciation for their access to good, safe, healthy and abundant food. That's Greenberg's hope.

"If there's a silver lining, it's that producers and consumers and all of us across the supply chain had the opportunity in this pandemic to recognize our inherent reliance on each other, and that, as the state moves through this, we'll see that agriculture and the people who work the land - the farmers, the ranchers, the farm workers and the land itself - are all part of our identity as Coloradans. And I think that will help determine what market avenues and market infrastructure we need to keep agriculture thriving in Colorado."



Kate Greenberg

Property-management firm creates role to ease tenants through uncertainty

BY MIKE TAYLOR

With nearly 280,000 unemployment claims filed in Colorado over a four-week stretch ending April 17, the ripple effect on tenants and landlords seems inevitable. Rental prices across much of the state have posed a challenge to many, even before COVID-19 restrictions put hundreds of thousands out of work.

Anticipating the difficulties in the event of prolonged unemployment, one property-management firm designated a liaison specifically to keep communication lines open with tenants facing financial hardship. Denver-based Atlas Real Estate, which manages 3,200 properties, appointed Erika Ojeda-Louvier to the newly created role of resident resources manager in early April. Among her objectives is to steer financially strapped residents to benefits they may qualify for and, if necessary, arrange payment plans.

"Obviously we're concerned with finding a compassionate way to deal with this outbreak, keeping in mind we want to protect both owners and tenants," says Ojeda-Louvier, who is fluent in Spanish and English. "We have a high percentage of residents working in food industries and retail, and they have obviously been impacted. The first thing we want to do is keep communications open. We want residents to feel confident in sharing their stories with us. If we have an understanding, looking at this case by case, of what is holding them back or how long it will take this specific family to get back on track, it's easier for us to work out payment plans and direct them to resources that are available to help them."

Stories in the media may have led some tenants to believe they're not responsible for

rent. That's where compassion with directness - and understanding the specific tenant's predicament - comes in.

Ojeda-Louvier says when she's told, 'I heard on the news you cannot evict me,' it gives her a chance to explain, "OK, yes, for now. But you're still responsible for rent. And here's how we can help you."

Ojeda-Louvier's role will become more critical if the ranks of the unemployed continue to climb. Like everyone, she hopes for a return to some semblance of normalcy - including normal employment levels.

"Once this pandemic is over, we want to be able to look back and feel confident we did everything in our power to help our community as a whole," she says. "That's the main message: We're in this together."

COLORADO COVID-19 TIMELINE

