

5 AGRICULTURE



OVERVIEW

Historically, agriculture has been the predominant land use in the rural parts of La Plata County, it has defined the area’s character. Agriculture plays such an important role in the county and the state that the State Legislature has adopted a “Right to Farm” statute which protects agricultural operations from nuisance claims (C.R.S. § 35-3.5-102).

Over the past several decades, however, declining agriculture commodity prices coupled with increasing land values (predominantly resulting from an in-migration of new residents) has made selling agricultural land for residential development a profitable enterprise. This leads toward a transition to more dense rural residential uses from, otherwise, historic agricultural uses. While this phenomenon is not unique to La Plata County, it has been recognized by many area residents who believe that the preservation of agriculture in La Plata County is essential to maintaining the working landscape of the County.

The Agriculture Element of the Plan describes La Plata County’s role to support and strengthen agricultural uses and ensure they remain a prominent part of the community. It is intended to outline current and proposed land development processes, as well as other tools that agricultural land producers can use to increase agriculturally based income from their land while at the same time continuing agricultural operations.

The intent of this plan element is to support and strengthen agricultural uses within the County.

BACKGROUND

In 2010, there were approximately 271,413 acres of land taxed agriculturally in the County. Despite this large amount of land, agriculture is a small component of the County’s economy. As of 2010, agricultural products and services accounted for 2.7% of jobs in the County. Table 7-1, and Chart 7-1 both depict agricultural receipts and net realized income for the County from 2005-2010. This data shows net income from agriculture as a loss for the identified period. Additionally, Chart 7-2 depicts a breakout of County Assessed property types, and Chart 7-3 further identifies those various types agriculturally assessed properties.

**Table 5-1
La Plata County Agricultural Income: 2005 - 2010**

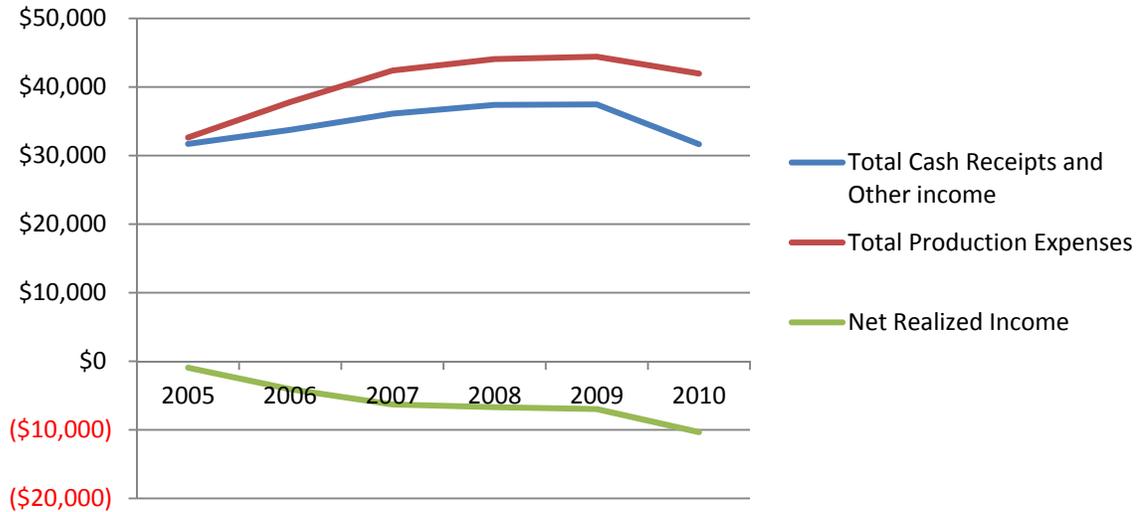
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Total Cash Receipts and Other	\$31,717	\$33,747	\$36,113	\$37,388	\$37,462	\$31,654
Total Production Expenses	\$32,648	\$37,801	\$42,394	\$44,068	\$44,419	\$41,974
Net Realized Income	(\$931)	\$4,054)	\$6,281)	\$6,680)	\$6,957)	(\$10,320)

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

5 AGRICULTURE

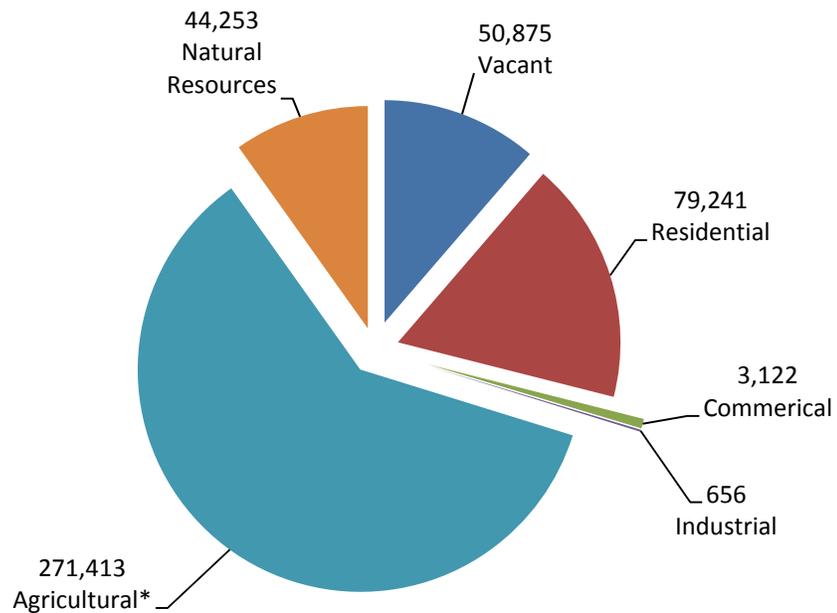


**Chart 5-1
La Plata County Agricultural Income: 2005 - 2010**



Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis

**Chart 5-2
La Plata County Property Assessment by Acreage: 2010**



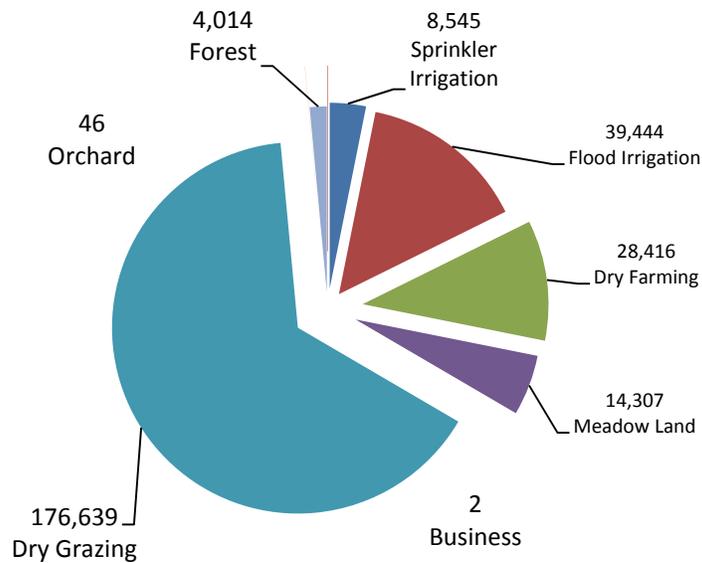
*See Chart 5-3 for detailed breakout

Source: La Plata County Assessor's Office

5 AGRICULTURE



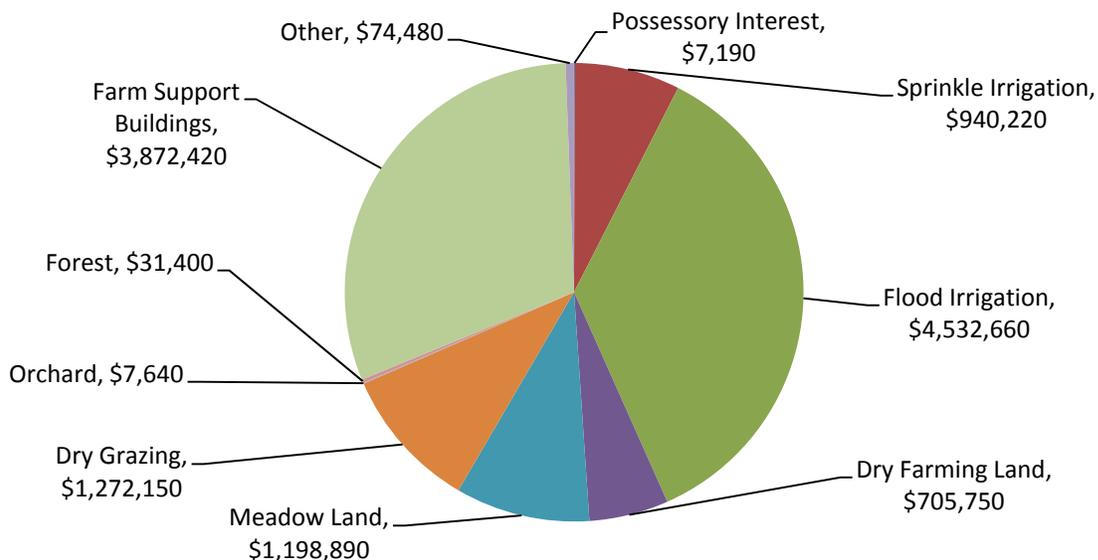
Chart 5-3
Agricultural Property Assessment by Acreage: 2010



Source: La Plata County Assessor's Office

Coupled with high real estate values, the data from Table 5-1 creates an attractive option for farmers and ranchers to sell all or part of their land leading to the higher density rural residential population growth discussed earlier. The simplest and fastest means of selling land is in tracts of 35 acres or larger, which are not subject to County development review. This approach overall results in a transition of the rural landscape in La Plata County.

Chart 5-4
Agricultural Assessed Property by Value: 2010



Source: La Plata County Assessor's Office

5 AGRICULTURE



There are several realized consequences over time, stemming from the division of agricultural land into residential lots. They include:

- A reduction in available land for farming and ranching;
- Reduction in groundwater recharge as a result of reduced agricultural irrigation;
- The proliferation of noxious weeds, as a result of infeasibility to maintain the larger property for residential uses;
- Diminished sense of agricultural landscape;
- Creation of parcels too small to accommodate larger scale farming and ranching;
- Fragmentation of wildlife habitat; and
- The reallocation of water rights previously used for only agricultural purposes.

It is clear that strategies, in addition to a streamlined subdivision process, will be required if the County commits to preserving agriculture as an integral part of the community.

Recognized as an issue of concern for quite some time, the loss of agricultural lands to development came to the forefront in the early to mid-1990s as the economy strengthened. In Colorado, a continued influx of new residents has put significant development pressure on local communities and agricultural producers. Additionally, public roads have historically been, and are still, used for moving livestock between summer and winter ranges. These perceived conflicts continue to lead to myriad of initiatives at the State and local level to find ways to help preserve agriculture and the working landscape.

In 1995, La Plata County established the *Agricultural Protection Task Force*, made up of members within the farming and ranching community. The purpose of the Task Force was to determine what actions the County could take to help protect agriculture activities and property while also helping to protect open lands. Several changes have already been initiated, including the refinement of the eligibility requirements for home-based businesses and the revision of eligibility requirements for Minor Exempt Subdivisions (3 or fewer lots).

A number of La Plata County initiatives have occurred since 2001, which include the modification of subdivision regulations and the adoption of district land use plans that have designated areas for higher density development in areas served by central services while maintaining lower density in outlying more agricultural areas.

In 2009, a group of agricultural producers were convened to provide guidance and suggestions on steps the County could take to support agricultural producers. The committee identified a number of recommendations that could be implemented to make agricultural operations more diverse and productive. Based on broad suggestions that came from the group:

- Encourage agricultural operations to establish or expand, regardless of parcel size;
- Develop a subdivision option that allows for more lots (smaller acreage) than the current MES process, in exchange for expanded agricultural land retention;
- Establish and expand “uses by right” that are compatible and supportive of agricultural operations. Examples could include: onsite sales of agricultural products (farm stands), home office, vet clinic, outfitting operations, wholesale greenhouses and nurseries; and

5 AGRICULTURE



- Strengthen local protections for agricultural operators.

AGRICULTURE GOALS

Goal 5.1: Encourage the continuation of agriculture as an integral part of La Plata County; recognizing the rights of operation, freedom of choice as to the methods of cultivation, crops/livestock, rotation of crops and other functions within agricultural management.

Objective 5.1.A: To identify and recognize, sound agricultural practices, which promote the long-term viability of agriculture.

Policy 5.1.A1: The County should promote the diversification of agricultural operations and explore ways to promote businesses directly related to the working farms and ranches.

Policy 5.1.A2: The County should consider applicable resource protection programs and regulations in order to support various agricultural operations.

Policy 5.1.A3: The County should create and maintain/regularly update an inventory of irrigable or other important agricultural lands identified for continued farming/ranching.

Policy 5.1.A4: The County should establish a land use process that provides farmers and ranchers with additional alternatives to 35-acre subdivisions.

Policy 5.1.A5: The County should work with project applicants to promote site planning that maximizes the protection of agricultural lands consistent with County regulations and the landowner's development goals.

Policy 5.1.A6: County residents should recognize that the generation of noise, smoke, odor and dust is a natural consequence of normal agricultural practices provided that agriculturalists exercise reasonable measures to minimize such effects.

Policy 5.1.A7: The County should encourage and support the development of water infrastructure which is necessary for continued agricultural operations.

Objective 5.1.B: To establish voluntary and/or incentive/compensation-based programs for supporting and strengthening agriculture in La Plata County.

Policy 5.1.B1: The County should support open space acquisition programs that would assist with agricultural land preservation.

Policy 5.1.B2: The County should support the agricultural community's own efforts to improve the economic viability of farming/ranching in the County.

5 AGRICULTURE

Policy 5.1.B3: The County should consider segregating annual agricultural property tax revenues for exclusive use in agricultural preservation strategies, such as funding costs associated with managing conservation easements or expanding the existing noxious weed abatement program.

Policy 5.1.B4: The County should explore the possibility of strengthening the local protections for agricultural operations that would protect smaller or newly established operations from nuisance claims.

Policy 5.1.B5: The County should coordinate with interest groups, such as land trusts, to assist in land owner education regarding the physical and financial benefits of agricultural land preservation, including the provision of information regarding potential tax benefits to agricultural land owners.

Policy 5.1.B6: The County should consider a subdivision option that allows for more lots (smaller acreage) than the current MES process, in exchange for expanded agricultural land retention.