

Conejos Community Meeting

Agricultural producers from Conejos County gathered in La Jara Thursday night, along with the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition (LFC), to discuss local agricultural issues. This meeting, hosted by LFC and Cactus Hill Farm, was an opportunity to further foster the relationship between agricultural producers and the work of the Local Foods Coalition. The Local Foods Coalition serves the entire San Luis Valley and works to create an equitable local food system in the San Luis Valley in partnership with producers and consumers. Community ideas, producers' experiences, and challenges inform the strategic direction of the Coalition as it seeks to support community farms, increase farm-to-table practices and educate the public about the advantages of buying local. The many projects of the LFC include Farm to School in partnership with all 14 school districts of the SLV, the Rio Grande Farm Park, the Cooking Matters education program as well as the Valley Roots Food Hub which has helped connect food producers with markets around the San Luis Valley, Salida and other parts of New Mexico and Colorado.

Liza Marron, the executive director of the Local Foods Coalition, told the story of the priorities of the LFC through the enchiladas she had brought to the potluck. "The lamb comes from Cactus Hill Farm where the animals are pasture-raised and contribute to the health of the land. The tortillas come from Tortillaria la Unica owned by Martine Palma, a hardworking business owner in Center. The onions are grown by Antonio Garcia of Tierra Sana, known for his organic practices and care for the soil. The garlic comes from Hobbs Family Organic farm, where Dan Hobbs practices his love for the land and works to help others be successful in his day job. At the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union Cooperative Development Center. The tomatoes come from local Amish producer Allen Graber whose family is also known for their delicious baked goods. The tomatoes are made into a tasty tomato sauce at the Valley Roots Food Hub's commercial kitchen and then sold here locally. The chili powder comes from New Mexico chilies dried and ground in my kitchen. All these beautiful farmers' faces are connected to my plate, providing a rich story and taste of our special place; their farms and ranches provide our sustenance, and our relationships with them weave together the fabric of community."

Co-host Elena Miller, of Cactus Hill Farm, followed with a soil health presentation on the benefits of organic matter in soil. She said farmers are realizing that years of over-tilling, bare soils and chemical fertilizers have severely depleted and eroded our soils, and that more regenerative practices can help soil health.

"Carbon is terrible for the atmosphere, but carbon is amazing for the soil," she explained. Carbon is a major component of organic matter in the soil, it feeds microbes, builds soil structure and increases water retention. Agriculture has a huge potential to mitigate climate change while increasing the life and performance of the soil upon which all things depend for life.

One of the attending farmers, Tom Navarro of LPV Ranch near San Luis, agrees and is working to restore depleted habitats on his 170-acre place. "I remember when I was a child in the 60's, we hunted pheasants and caught frogs in Costilla County. They

aren't there anymore." He is working to introduce habitats that support pollinators and to build healthy soils to bring back the bio-diversity of his youth.

Other attending farmers included Matt and Meghan Stalzer, of Mudita Camel Dairy. They have recently purchased a ranch on La Jara Creek in Conejos County for their six camels. Camels may seem like a totally foreign animal to this alpine desert, however prehistoric camels were native to the San Luis Valley about 8,000 years ago. Camels adapt well to the cold winters and willingly eat the chico bushes and even cacti! The Stalzers milk the camels for their nutritious and much-sought-after dairy products, as well as utilize the fiber for hats and knitted items. The husband and wife duo recently moved their operation and son from Saguache County to the southern part of the San Luis Valley, not only for the beautiful property, but to join in the vibrant community they discovered in Conejos County.

Ben Valdez comes from a long tradition of ranching near Capulin, Colorado, and is looking to diversify the range-fed lamb operation of his parents. His family ranch is one of the oldest ranches in the Capulin area. Ben Valdez has a background as a chef and hopes to create new flavors with local food products.

Elliott Salazar has designed a greenhouse to withstand the harsh San Luis Valley winters and will discuss his design at a planned follow-up meeting in March. Cari Canari shared the workforce challenges that she has experienced in her small herb and vegetable business, with much nodding of heads from those at the table. Peter Wise, who works as the education coordinator for the Rio Grande Farm Park, talked of his time working with youth who are excited to learn about healthy eating, local foods, and agriculture.

The group was in agreement that in times of drought, challenging markets and day-to-day isolation, agritourism was a great opportunity for local farmers. The Mudita Camel Dairy has experienced great success with farm tours. Children and adults alike are delighted by the unusual and gentle camels. Three of the camels are expecting calves this summer. The couple participates in Hip Camp, an Airbnb version of camping, which has taken off among young people. Farm tours and farm stays may be the saving grace for tight farm budgets.

Elliott Salazar has his eye on the sun and appreciates the high-altitude exposure to many cloudless days and expounds on opportunities for solar installations and solar energy here. Everyone is looking for creative ways to make it in a time when water is scarce, and weather is extreme. In addition, our food is increasingly anonymous and cheap in big box stores while our community experiences economic struggles and ever-increasing effects of lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

The group explored ways to increase education around the health value of locally-grown whole foods and how to prepare them, and the need for consumers to understand their value to the community and environment. Locally-produced products contribute to reduced food miles traveled, therefore reducing the carbon footprint of food products. An informed food consumer can choose to support farms that care for the land and animals and build healthy soils. Supporting local producers can help build the local economy. We are a community of farmers and consumer investment in the local farms goes a long way to care for the land and build healthy soils.

Marron closed with a thought, “We are what we eat, so there is much hope for healthier community members as we increase access and relationships with those who care for the land and raise whole fresh foods and pasture raised meats for our nutrition.”

For more information go to www.slvlocalfoods.org or call 719-937-2319.