

LOCAL FOOD PROCUREMENT CATALOGUE

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Executive Summary



Project Purpose

This Local Food Procurement Catalogue shares insights gathered through conversations with Colorado producers over the course of the 2023 Metro Caring capstone project.

In the short term, these producer conversations are intended to inform values-aligned purchasing for Metro Caring’s Fresh Foods Market. Long term, their purpose is to serve as a part of pre-development research into a Universal Basic Food (UBF) program.

Research Context and Themes

The producer interviews conducted during this research were developed by the capstone student and Metro Caring teams in collaboration. All interview questions were also informed by secondary research conducted on existing Colorado producer directories and surveys of state producers. Over the course of this project, our capstone team conducted interviews with producers in the Denver metro area and further north in Boulder and Fort Collins. Frequently discussed topics during these conversations included regenerative agriculture, food access, educational programming, soil health, and a desire to serve as a community hub. Numerous overarching themes emerged during these conversations, with producers highlighting the importance of dignified food, deepening relationships, land stability, transparency with consumers, and information and goods sharing to address farm and ranch barriers such as climate events and infrastructure expenses.

Next Steps

This capstone project represents the initial stages of a larger pre-development research process for the UBF program. The Local Food Procurement Catalogue is intended to serve as a foundation for future Metro Caring engagement with producers, and to share out the data collected in this first stage.

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Term Glossary

Community Food Utility (CFU)

Shifts access to food from a market commodity to a freely accessible public utility.

Producers

This terminology was chosen to include both farmers and ranchers and could in the future include those who create value-added products as well.

Regenerative Agriculture

Farming and ranching practices that center environmental concerns including soil health, carbon sequestration, ecological balance, crop and native plant diversity, pollination, and more.

Universal Basic Food (UBF)

High-quality, nutritious, and culturally rooted food chosen by community and provided free of cost at locations convenient to public transportation.

Values-aligned Procurement

Food purchasing that ensures the values of the producer match those of the organization or individual consumer purchasing food, according to the prioritized values established by both.

Value-added Products

Final products created when raw products (such as fruits, vegetables, meat, eggs or dairy) are cooked, preserved, distilled or processed in some way.

Introduction



Metro Caring: an Introduction

Metro Caring is an anti-hunger organization located in Denver, Colorado, that has provided food and advocacy for Denver residents for nearly fifty years. As a leading frontline anti-hunger organization in Colorado, Metro Caring works with their community to meet people’s immediate need for nutritious food while building a movement to address the root causes of hunger. Metro Caring offers innovative programming in Healthy Foods Access, Nutrition Education and Cooking Classes, ID Procurement, Urban Gardening and Agriculture, and Community Organizing and Development to not only address hunger, but broader social and wealth inequities.

What is a Community Food Utility?

Hunger in our communities is perpetuated by racial inequity, poverty, and the commodification of basic human needs, including food. These root causes of hunger exacerbate health inequities in communities of color, low-income communities, and other vulnerable communities. When market forces are allowed to drive access to basic human needs- like food- our food system becomes a vehicle for health, economic, and environmental inequities.

To address this, Metro Caring is leading an effort to establish a Community Food Utility (CFU) that moves access to nutritious and culturally rooted foods to a public good. As a utility, we can ensure that our food system is accessible, equitable, and centered on human dignity, not profit. To explore food as a utility, Metro Caring has launched a pre-development phase focused on community-centered research and data collection.

Summary of Pre-Development Research

One of the first goals in pre-development for the CFU was to engage in community-based research as a foundation for a Universal Basic Food Program (UBF). The UBF represents one of five core programs within a CFU and involves food provided to community members free of cost at locations they choose.

Recognizing a need for values-aligned food procurement as a basis for the UBF, Metro Caring aimed to engage both producers and consumers in pre-development research.

To begin this preliminary research, our capstone team organized a series of conversations with Colorado farmers and ranchers. The questions asked during these interviews were intended to help Metro Caring better understand and build stronger relationships with values-aligned Colorado producers.

Summary of Pre-Development Research

Gathering consumer perspectives involved creating spaces for dialogue with community members around their food preferences. Through these conversations, Metro Caring aimed to glean a better understanding of important food preferences, purchasing habits, and interactions with food and nutrition-based events. Our capstone team collaborated with Metro Caring to create a survey focused on these questions. This survey was then conducted during phone calls to Metro Caring’s community organizing base, tabling at the Fresh Foods Market, and QR code surveys at the Denver Fall Harvest Share. The final deliverable containing data gathered through this process is an ArcGIS Storymap.

Local Food Procurement Catalogue: Why?

Our secondary research on local food procurement in Colorado revealed numerous existing directories of state producers and guides on how to navigate local procurement. Many of these resources are intended to ease the complex process of local procurement for organizations and institutions beginning to learn about produce availability in their region, contact producers, and transition their procurement methods. At the time of this research, the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) was also in the process of updating their statewide producer directory.

After conducting a landscape analysis of the CDE directory and other resources, our capstone team pivoted away from creating a comprehensive resource on producers in Colorado as a part of UBF pre-development research. Instead, our research process focused on relationship building between Metro Caring and individual producers.

The result of this process and the subsequent interviews with producers is this Local Food Procurement Catalogue. This Catalogue contains an examination of values-aligned procurement, summary of research methodology, analysis of the questions asked during producer conversations, and a Producer Directory with those producers we spoke to over the course of this research.

Local Food Procurement Catalogue: Why?

Metro Caring’s objective in conducting interviews with producers is to better understand producers’ needs, values, and the challenges that face them as they expand and adapt their market streams to accommodate increased local food purchasing. Conversations with producers will also form the beginning of a list of producers with whom Metro Caring is developing procurement relationships, and who they might purchase from moving forward. This will allow Metro Caring to continue to align their food purchasing process with their organizational values moving forward.

By spending time on these individual conversations, Metro Caring also hopes to glean insight into the kinds of financial, delivery and other barriers producers might face to supplying the Metro Caring Fresh Foods Market, and in the future the UBF program. Gathering more detailed information on producers Metro Caring purchases from can help them to better serve these producers, whether that be purchasing through systems that are most convenient to them, helping to organize delivery when possible, or other means of building mutually supportive networks.

In addition, this catalogue can inform Metro Caring’s engagement with funders. Increasing quantities of funding have been made available over the past several years with the intention of supporting local farmers and building farm to institution networks. Knowledge of farm practices, values and demographics can help Metro Caring as they apply for this funding moving forward, both for their existing Fresh Foods Market and a future UBF program.





Values-Aligned Procurement

An underlying factor in shifting procurement methods in recent years- in Colorado and beyond- is the idea of values-aligned procurement. Values-aligned procurement is defined differently amongst the organizations, institutions, producers, and individuals who engage with the concept. There are also a number of similar terms (e.g., values-based procurement) that express a similar idea. At a foundational level, however, all these terms are intended to capture the idea that a purchaser chooses to procure their food from a producer whose practices and values reflect their own, with different purchasers prioritizing different values.

Identifying what values-aligned procurement might look like for Metro Caring requires a deeper understanding of organizational values, especially as they pertain to food systems. As we began this capstone project, members of the Metro Caring team discussed the values they wanted to prioritize in their procurement with our student capstone team during a series of introductory and research meetings. The Metro Caring team highlighted a desire to increase their food purchases from producers who are Black, Indigenous and people of color, women owned and run farms and ranches, first-generation and beginning producers, and producers who identify as a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Metro Caring team members also emphasized the importance of knowing the producers they purchase from as a way of being familiar with their labor practices. In terms of farm and ranch practices, Metro Caring team members expressed their intention to support producers using regenerative practices- regardless of certifications- and emphasized increased environmental sustainability as a priority.

Much like the idea of values-aligned food, a farm or ranch's environmental sustainability may be defined differently between producers as well as those purchasing from them. One common factor identified to increase sustainability is the reduction of food miles. For some purchasers, this may entail setting a maximum mileage for products, while others may work to decrease their procurement mileage where possible without establishing strict boundaries.



On-farm or ranch environmental stewardship represents another critical consideration in food purchasing sustainability. The broader framework of 'sustainable agriculture' encompasses a variety of regenerative agricultural practices, which can vary from one farm or ranch to another. Some common techniques include cover cropping, minimal tillage, organic sprays, no herbicide or pesticide use, rotational livestock grazing, and planting diverse crops. Environmental stewardship might also incorporate consideration of the ecology surrounding a farm, including creating space for native species, incorporating flowers into beds for pollinators, planting native species along borders or in hedges, and more.

While some formally recognized certifications like “Organic”, “Beyond Organic”, and “Biodynamic” recognize particular sustainable agricultural practices, these certifications can be expensive to achieve and maintain. There are therefore many farmers and ranchers actively utilizing sustainable or regenerative practices who do not have certifications to demonstrate this work. This is discussed in greater detail below in the “Producer Interview” section. The barriers to certifications means that relationship building between purchasers and consumers can be a more effective method to assess values-alignment when it comes to sustainability of farm practices.

In a 2022 capstone project entitled “Community Wealth, Local Procurement, and Food Sovereignty”, authors Rico Foucauld, Elias Berbari, Mackenzie Faber, and Camila Restrepo, in partnership with the East Denver Food Hub, focused on the meaning of values-based food procurement, especially as it relates to a food hub model. In a map specifically dedicated to a “Values-Based Local Food System”, they define values-based sourcing as “purchasing/aggregating food from farmers and suppliers- like other food hubs- who embody and share the values of worker dignity, animal welfare, environmental stewardship, and economic justice, and who are committed to a triple bottom line approach in their business” (1). This definition encapsulates not just the meaning of values-based procurement, but many of the values which purchasers may choose to prioritize.

Though often conflated, the concept of “local procurement” and “values-aligned procurement” cannot be used interchangeably. However, local purchasing may *enable* value-alignment between producer and purchaser due to increased familiarity with the values of a local producer and observation of farm practices. The relationships enabled by physical proximity represent a factor in Metro Caring’s decision to create a producer directory that reflects the producers they have had individual, values-based conversations with in and around Denver.

Organizational values may in some cases be most effectively aligned when procurement is done regionally rather than exclusively amongst producers within a set geographic distance. The restaurant Tocabe represents an example of this approach to procurement in Denver. Tocabe, an American Indian owned and operated Denver restaurant, works within a distinctly values-based model for procurement, prioritizing purchasing from Indigenous producers wherever possible and offering a site where individual consumers can purchase many of their products. This procurement strategy is aligned with Tocabe’s value of supporting and uplifting Indigenous ingredients and recipes. To do so, they have expanded their procurement beyond the 400-mile radius dictated as ‘local’ by the USDA, characterizing their style of procurement as “making regional shopping local” (2).

Figure 1

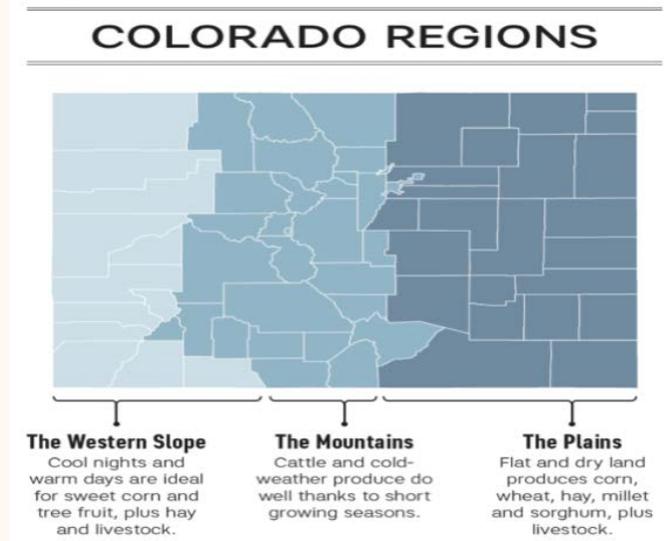


Figure 1: Colorado growing regions



What can be considered “local” procurement moving forward will also necessarily be informed by geographic location and climactic conditions. Different regions of the U.S. have different access to fruits, vegetable, meats and other products within a limited geographic range. Access to these resources is dependent on growing conditions, water availability and other environmental factors. Even within the state of Colorado there are distinct precipitation levels and climactic conditions in different swaths of the state, and therefore varying crops that can be grown depending on the bioregion. *Figure 1* above broadly characterizes these regions, though there are exceptions to these geographic categorizations (3).

Recognizing the growing interest in values alignment when it comes to food purchasing, as well as a need for guidance in how to begin- and define- this process, a significant amount of research has been completed on local food procurement over the past several years. This includes the creation of decision making matrices intended to help identify the values most important to organizations, as well as national initiatives like the Good Food Purchasing Program (GFPP). The GFPP is focused on “providing a comprehensive set of tools, technical support, and verification system to assist institutions in meeting their Program goals and commitments” around values-aligned food procurement (4). In Denver specifically, the adoption of the GFPP paves the way for defining what “local” and “values-aligned” procurement can look like for the city. Acknowledging the complexity of local sourcing, GFPP recommendations allow for consideration of local economies, and require additional consideration of family or cooperative ownership, size, environmental sustainability, on-farm labor conditions, animal welfare, nutrition, and equity (5). Individual organizations have similarly compiled their own decision-making matrices in an effort to specifically identify and rank the values they would like to prioritize and help with the daily purchasing process.



Producer Interview Methods

I. Purpose

The purpose of conducting interviews with producers includes:

- Understanding farm and ranch values and practices to increase Metro Caring's values-aligned procurement
- Informing future Metro Caring grant writing for food procurement
- Increasing organizational knowledge on barriers facing the producers Metro Caring currently purchases from, or might purchase from in the future
- Gleaning information about local procurement generally, including interest amongst smaller, local farmers in selling to food access organizations and their capacity to do so

II. Scope

Farm or Ranch type

Our capstone team did not eliminate any specific production practices, farm or ranch sizes or locations within Colorado from the scope of this research. However, the methods we utilized to identify and reach out to producers inherently affected the producers we spoke to. These methods included utilizing existing producer directories to contact farmers, and therefore reaching out to relatively established farms (e.g. likely not in their first year). We also attended several in-person farmer coalition meetings and farm-related events to connect with producers. Each of these meetings were located within an hour of Boulder or Denver, limiting the geographic range of the producers we spoke to. Another primary method of connecting with producers was through existing personal and Metro Caring connections. This further limited geographic scope as the majority of these producers are located in or around Denver and Boulder.



In terms of farm size, we had several larger producers respond that they did not have the capacity to participate when contacted for this research, which further focused our research on small and mid-size farms. However, we did not explicitly ask producers to define their farm or ranch scale. There were several reasons why a question surrounding scale was not included. The first is that we wanted to avoid being repetitive of other ongoing surveys of producers in Colorado, and have found that questions of scale are frequently included in these surveys. The second is that Metro Caring does not have a specific requirement for the size of the farm as a part of their procurement values, so does not immediately need this information.

Geographic Limitations

Our research focused on producers within Colorado in order to gain a better understanding of the producer experience in the state and to focus our geographic range around Metro Caring's Denver location. The methodologies for reaching out to producers identified above further concentrated the geographic range around the Denver and Boulder areas.

III. Interviewee Information

1. Number of interviews
 - a. 9 total producers
2. Types of production
 - a. 7 farmers
 - b. 1 rancher
 - c. 1 combined vegetable and animal operation
3. Regions
 - a. Denver metro area
 - b. Boulder
 - c. Fort Collins



IV. Methods

Secondary Research

Before beginning the primary research (interview) process, our capstone team conducted secondary research on existing producer directories for the state of Colorado.

The initial purpose of conducting secondary research was to better understand information already available in Colorado for organizations like Metro Caring who are looking to increase their values-aligned procurement. However, it ultimately also informed the decision of Metro Caring and capstone team members to pivot away from creating a comprehensive list of producers in the state and towards making individual connections with producers.

Our secondary research took the form of a landscape analysis of existing Colorado producer directories. To complete this landscape analysis, we began by assembling a list of existing Colorado producer directories. These directories were identified through online research, snowball sampling and information provided during conversations with nonprofit and government organizations in Colorado.

Our capstone team had meetings with representatives from Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger, the Colorado Department of Education, Market Maker, and Rocky Mountain Farmers Union to better understand their ongoing work on local procurement. The research team also directly investigated organization websites to glean background information on each producer directory.

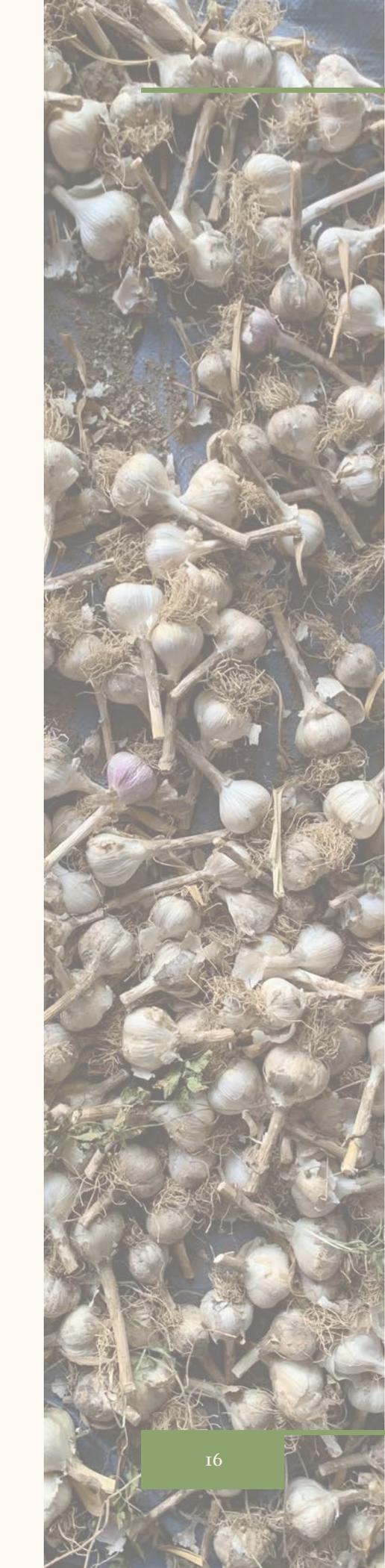


Ultimately we identified a list of 12 directories to study more closely: the FPAG directory, Farm Fresh Directory, Hunger Free Pantry Purchasing Guide, CO Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association directory, Tocabe online purchasing site, Valley Food Partnership directory, CDE Farm to School Producer List, Southwest Producers Directory, DUFH 2023 Farm Food Hub List, Colorado MarketMaker, Colorado Proud map, and the Colorado Local Beef Directory.

The identification of existing producer directories and collection of secondary data on each one took place during the months of May and June. With more time, a greater number of procurement directories could have been researched, including smaller regional directories, independently owned and operated documents, and those procurement resources which are not easily accessible online.

Analyzing these directories, we focused on comparing number of producers, types of product listed (e.g., fruit and vegetable, meat, value-added products, beverages), regions covered, information included about the producers (e.g., certifications, price, minimum order quantity), language the directory is available in, directory format, as well as how producers join (e.g., membership fees or other requirements).

The questions that have been asked for existing procurement directories served as a reference as we developed the questions for our primary research. Metro Caring and student research team members wanted to avoid asking questions that have already been asked of state producers, or re-collecting information that was previously gathered. This helped to further focus the research on more values-based (rather than logistical) questions that could enable future relationship building between Metro Caring and producers.



Primary Research

The first step in developing our primary research process was a series of meetings with Metro Caring team members to determine the information they hoped to glean, and relationships they intended to build, through our interviews. These meetings culminated in a full-day research retreat during which we discussed the proposed producer questions one-by-one and edited, added and removed questions as necessary. During this process we also referenced the secondary information gathered, including discussing which questions might be repetitive given existing producer directories.

Once a final list of questions had been developed by the Metro Caring and student research team, prompts were determined for each to provide clarification if producers felt at all confused by the intention of a question.

A further explanation of why each of the questions was included is described in more depth below.

In addition to secondary research on producer directories, our capstone team also conducted general background research on the questions being asked to determine whether previous data exists either for the state of Colorado or nationally. If relevant to the research, this data is included alongside the context for each question.

Through conversations with the Metro Caring team on their internal interview guidelines, we established a producer interview honorarium of \$60 for a 45-minute interview. This rate was intended to recognize the time producers took during a busy part of the season, their professional expertise, and their willingness to share personal experiences. The student research team also offered to volunteer at the farms when possible.

Once each of the questions was finalized, our student and Metro Caring research team established a process for reaching out to farmers, providing honorariums, and exchanging research consent forms.



A list of producers to interview was created by reviewing existing local producer lists and committees, reaching out to farmers who expressed interest during local producer meetings, and through personal and Metro Caring team member connections. During interviews with farmers we were also able to gather more producer contacts for others they thought might be interested in participating in the interview process or in supplying Metro Caring with produce or meat.

In order to analyze the final producer transcripts, each interview was independently analyzed for key terms without a prior list of themes established. These key terms were then de-coupled from producer names and compiled for each individual question. Themes were then identified for each of the questions from the complete lists of key terms.

Research Disclaimer

The questions asked during producer interviews over the course of this capstone project are intended to add to Metro Caring's knowledge on the values and needs of Colorado producers, and their potential capacity to supply Metro Caring with food. In the future, this research may inform the role that Metro Caring plays in collaborating with these and other Colorado producers on local food procurement, food-related events and educational opportunities. It may also inform their organizational local food procurement strategies.

The data presented below is *not* intended to serve as a comprehensive list of the values, practices, or challenges that face Colorado producers. During this project, we had interviews with nine farmers- which is not a large enough number to draw specific conclusions about the questions asked. Furthermore, our methods for contacting producers, the timespan during which we conducted interviews, and other factors inherently influenced those producers who we were able to speak to.

Rather than a comprehensive overview, this research represents an endeavor to continue developing relationships between Metro Caring and Colorado producers, and to deepen organizational understanding of the values-based themes rising to the surface around each of the questions asked.

Farm or Ranch Values

Question 1: What farm or ranch values would you like to highlight to a potential purchaser or consumer?

Prompts Provided: Giving back to the community; food donation; teaching young farmers; education program; family tradition

Context

As we outlined questions for our producer conversations, several Metro Caring team members identified their goal as increasing organizational knowledge on producers' farm practices, labor practices, and farm or ranch values. These points of learning around values-alignment became the basis for the first interview question, as well as a foundation for the remaining interview questions. Importantly, the goal of the first question is to gain a better understanding of the values of local Colorado farmers and ranchers, not to rule out any producers based on the answers they provide.

In our secondary research surrounding procurement values, our capstone team came across a wealth of existing research. However, this research focuses largely on the priorities organizations, institutions, and individual customers hold when purchasing food. The emergence of new food certifications serves as an additional indicator of these procurement values. The development of newer certifications like "Non-GMO Project Verified" and the label "Certified Vegan", as well as the increased prevalence of the organic certification, indicate the evolving preferences of consumers (6).

Despite this research on procurement values of purchasers- whether demonstrated through certifications or explicit values-based questioning- our research team encountered greater difficulty finding large-scale, contemporary studies on the values of farmers and ranchers themselves. However, a number of organizations and farmer advocacy groups like the National Young Farmers Coalition (NYFC) have made significant progress in focusing on these kinds of values-based questions. In their most recent (2017) survey of young farmers in the U.S., NYFC found that 83% of young farmers and 87% of BIPOC young farmers report that "one of their farm's primary purposes for existing is engaging in conservation or regeneration" (7). As a part of the same survey 74% of Black farmers responded that "one of their farm's primary purposes is anti-racism work, or promoting healing from White Supremacy" (8). These kinds of large-scale surveys serve as an important way of understanding salient goals and values for U.S. producers.

Several studies have assessed producer values specifically within the state of Colorado, especially as they relate to specific topics such as climate and biotechnology. In one, a series of survey responses and interviews were used to draw connections between farmer values ("attitudes") and their decision to employ conventional or alternative (either "organic" or "holistic") farming practices (9). The resulting paper identifies "rural sustainability, stewardship, and economic viability" as commonly shared values amongst conventional and alternative producers in Colorado (10).

Farm or Ranch Values: Interview Findings

The terms included in the interview findings table are extracted from coded interviews with producers. Throughout these conversations, values tended to fall within several broad themes, including: farming to increase environmental health, a desire for deeper connections with community, establishing a safe working environment, and providing high quality food to food access organizations.

Prioritizing food access rose to the surface in each of our producer conversations. A desire to increase overall community health served as a motivating value for the work producers do—both as a reason they initially entered the career, and what inspires them day-to-day. Donation in and of itself was a frequent subject, but was also frequently tied to a desire to move away from systems of donation where ‘seconds’- or goods in some way considered of lower quality whether due to damage or freshness- make up the bulk of donated food. Instead, producers repeatedly foregrounded the idea of donating the highest quality food.

Direct relationships with food access organizations, including sales agreements, were identified as a potential way to increase donation of high quality, fresh food. However, several producers brought up the difficulty of knowing when various local food access organizations have access to funding for fresh food purchasing, coordinating with these organizations, and piecing together networks of organizations to pay for all of their food. These planning barriers can be exacerbated when some of the most frequently donated food is surplus farmers and ranchers realize they have relatively last minute.

Several producers highlighted the importance of having their farm be not only a welcoming community space for visitors, but a safe and trauma informed work environment. A number of the producers we spoke to do not have employees, while more had less than five. However, they consistently brought up the significance of being able to pay these employees adequately, and provide rest and space when necessary. One producer mentioned the difficulty of balancing the necessary unpredictability of a farming schedule with a desire to provide consistency for their employees.

In addition to on-farm relationships, connections with consumers were also a common theme during these conversations. Producers expressed that they are motivated by the shared experiences of joy and gratitude created around fresh, high-quality food, and several brought up specific moments of connection with purchasers, shoppers at a food pantry, or community members stopping by their farm or ranch as examples of the values that drive them. The importance of these connections is discussed further in the analysis of our “Consumer Relationships” question below.

Production Practices

Question 2: Any specific farm or ranch practices you would like consumers or anyone using a Colorado producer guide to be aware of?

Prompts Provided: Fair labor practices; regenerative agriculture practices; Indigenous plant species, other heirloom plant species, any certification standards that you follow

Context

There were several reasons the Metro Caring and student research team chose to include a question on production practices in our conversations with producers. The first was an attempt to recognize the barriers to achieving many commonly recognized farm and ranch certifications. The second was that many of the most prominent food certifications do not yet recognize the extent of the regenerative practices that producers follow.

Currently, producers who would like to achieve a USDA organic certification must both meet a stringent set of USDA established requirements and pay anywhere between several hundred and several thousand dollars to complete the certification process (11). This expense presents a significant barrier to recognition as an organic farm or ranch—even for the many producers who are already practicing what some refer to as “beyond organic” practices.

These barriers to certification disproportionately impact Black and Indigenous producers and producers of color. In their 2022 report on organic farming in the U.S., the National Organic Research Agenda (NORA) found that 31% of survey respondents identified certification costs as a barrier, while 58% of BIPOC producers cited them as a barrier (12). This is exacerbated by the historical discrimination that BIPOC producers have faced when applying for USDA grants, which can be used to alleviate certification costs (13). BIPOC producers have long been denied USDA loans at higher rates, and while lawsuits such as *Pigford v. Glickman* (and *Pigford II*) have taken steps to address this reality, recent studies reflect producers’ ongoing experiences of farm loan discrimination (14). As recently as 2022, only 36% of Black farmers received the USDA direct loans for which they applied—significantly lower than the 76% of white farmers who applied (15).

Another reason to highlight farm or ranch practices is that the certifications currently available may not recognize many of the day-to-day practices that producers consider most important. For example, while some certifications have begun to emerge to highlight regenerative farming practices, they may not be as identifiable to consumers as better-known certifications like USDA organic. Seeking input from producers about their practices is an important element of values-aligned procurement. This approach can help to ensure that the practices followed by Colorado producers are acknowledged, regardless of certification barriers.

Production Practices: Interview Findings

"We grow using all organic practices. Neither of us have ever grown otherwise. We're not organic certified, it wouldn't make sense at this scale. We're primarily CSA, so there's a transparency with our members."

Land and Resource Based Practices

Human Centered Practices



Production Practices: Interview Findings

The mind map on the previous page visually displays some of the most common practices highlighted during producer interviews. We broke the practices highlighted into two larger categories during our analysis: land and resource practices or human centered practices. These categories are intended to encompass the emphasis we heard on both land and human care through food production.

The “human centered practices” producers highlighted were frequently considered not only an important ‘practice’ but were also woven into their values and motivation to pursue and continue farming or ranching. These practices included providing a healing working environment for themselves and employees, supplying dignified food for all they serve, increasing overall community food access, and serving as a space where community members can learn more about their food. Several producers emphasized that the grounding nature of farming and ranching, in combination with the daily challenges and problem-solving that they entail, were what brought them to the field, and that bringing others into this space represents a core component of their production practices.

Of the “land and resource based practices” foregrounded, most producers emphasized health of the natural environment and preservation of resources and beings. Specifically, soil health was foregrounded in every producer interview through a wide variety of practices including rotational animal grazing, cover-cropping, rotational planting and minimal tillage. The health of on-farm beings including pollinators and even farm ‘pests’ like rabbits was also mentioned repeatedly. Several farmers mentioned planting flowers or active bee-keeping in order to encourage on-farm pollinators, while another farmer brought up that they intentionally plant clover as a way to feed rabbits- both to lessen damage to their crops and to respect existing natural systems.

While none of the farmers or ranchers we spoke with are certified organic, all of them utilize organic practices (or beyond organic practices). One farm utilizing all-organic practices is waiting on certification. Despite certification status, almost all of the farmers we spoke to emphasized that they do not utilize any forms of chemical sprays- organic (OMRI) certified or not. Instead, several farmers stated that they use physical pest deterrents such as intercropping or row cover for insects, in addition to strategies like rotational planting. Multiple farmers brought up the difficulty of achieving organic certification, and highlighted that this certification is largely unnecessary for them as long as they are able to develop relationships with their consumers- especially through a direct-to-consumer model. Through these relationships, they are able to better inform their purchasers of practices and build trust without the need for a certification.

Consumer Relationships

Question 3: What would help you strengthen your relationships with consumers?

Prompts Provided: Do you feel like you have enough face to face with consumers? Or do you not have enough time or a space to interact with them?



Context

Another organizational goal in creating a procurement catalogue specific to Metro Caring was to help strengthen relationships between producers and consumers. Metro Caring team members expressed a desire for their community members to feel a greater connection to the food they eat and its production, and hoped that the organization as a whole could cultivate stronger relationships with local producers in an effort to both support them and procure values-aligned food.

In a study published in January, 2022, the University of Michigan College of Food, Agricultural and Natural Resource Sciences found that “only 24% of U.S. adults have a high degree of trust in the information they receive about where their food is grown and how it is produced” (16). This percentage declines even further for Generation Z, whose trust level was measured at only 17% (17). The same study indicated that only 27% of those who completed the survey hold a “very favorable” view of agriculture and food production in the U.S. (18).

Another nationwide survey conducted in 2011 surveyed both consumers and producers, finding that the disconnect between the two was highlighted as an issue by both groups (19). Of the producers surveyed, only 2% reported that they believe the average U.S. consumer has “a significant amount of knowledge” about modern farming and ranching, while 70% responded that they have “very little knowledge” (20). The study also indicated that 69% of consumers “think about food production at least somewhat often”, while simultaneously 72% reported knowing “nothing or very little about farming or ranching” (21).

Given this disconnect between many producers and consumers, we chose to include a question on how producers view this barrier and potential solutions as Metro Caring approaches conversations on how to bring their own community into closer relationships with local producers.

Consumer Relationships: Interview Findings

“We often say we do CSA because we love the relationship aspect of farming and it’s worth so much more to us when we can meet everyone we’re growing with...

We want to maybe have a passenger van come out here and have people just come see their food and connect them.”



Coded Terms	Dominant Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breaking down barriers Capacity for more workshops Contact time Diversity of products Face-to-face Importance of interface More employees On-farm time Regulars Season extension Supply Transparency Trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship building Need for employees Educational opportunities

Consumer Relationships: Interview Findings

The table above demonstrates some of the most prevalent themes that emerged in conversations surrounding the relationship between producers and consumers. The producers we spoke to consistently highlighted the role that relationships play in both their motivation to farm and in developing support systems.

Consumer Relationships: Interview Findings

Several producers that we spoke to specifically prioritize a direct-to-consumer model for sales in order to develop stronger relationships with their consumers. These producers emphasized that maintaining these relationships not only represents a valuable connection, but also a way of addressing on-farm and ranch barriers, including climate events. Transparency with purchasers- and being able to discuss any issues that arise on the farm- creates a mutual understanding when climate events or unexpected circumstances lead to lower yields or damaged crops.

Multiple producers expressed interest in having more frequent events to facilitate these connections, including the possibility of offering vans or buses to bring community members to the farm.

Similarly, building a strong network of fellow farmers and ranchers was highlighted as a critical support system. Producers emphasized that these relationships facilitate the exchange of knowledge, with one producer stressing that “I’m going to need the intelligence of other people growing... ‘farming by the masses makes diversity and diversity makes resilience.’”

Support from fellow producers can also come in the form of produce or meat in the case of crop failures. One producer told us that “after the recent hail events which decimated some small local farmers... people that never really were in contact during the season were checking in and offering up plants, helping each other out... In terms of pressure on the resource of land and dealing with a changing environment and climate, we’re going to have to help each other out.”

In addition to the sharing of knowledge and goods, producers also mentioned potential relationship-based solutions to common on-farm barriers. One example was centralizing some of the paid positions that can be difficult for an individual farm to maintain, such as administrative positions that handle marketing and event planning.

While most producers highlighted that they value face-to-face time with their purchasers, they also identified some of the root barriers that prevent them from having this time. Not having enough people working on their farm or ranch means that several of the producers we spoke to rely on a do-it-yourself CSA pickup, don’t have sufficient time to invite community members to their farm for events, or simply don’t have capacity for longer conversations at farmers markets. More employees was consistently identified as a route to having more, high quality time with consumers.

Finally, beyond producers’ desires to increase their individual engagement with community and fellow producers, a theme that arose repeatedly was a desire to cultivate excitement about farming amongst young people. The producers we spoke with are concerned with being a part of bringing more young people into the farming career, “we want them not to drive by the farm, but to stop and work and learn about the farm.”

Producer Barriers

Question 4: Please describe any barriers you are facing on your farm/ranch? This can be as broad or specific as you feel comfortable sharing.

Prompts Provided: Reaching diverse markets, transportation, shortages of labor, access to capital, access to internet/broadband, government assistance

Context

Our research is by no means the first exploration of the barriers facing producers in Colorado. While Metro Caring set out to ask this question in order to build organizational knowledge that can inform their procurement relationships, other organizations have previously published research, and engaged in storytelling, to understand the challenges that face Colorado producers.

Currently Frontline Farming, a nonprofit urban farming and farm worker advocacy organization with locations in and around the Denver metro area, is in the process of completing research on the barriers that face producers in the state (22). Frontline Farming researchers are engaged in the daily work of growing food as well as in anti-hunger work, policy advocacy and data activism. In collaboration with Project Protect Food Systems Workers and the University of Denver's Ethnography Lab (DUEL), one research project Frontline has published is *Esencial Colorado* (23). This collection of interviews, transcribed conversation, and written testaments represents an effort to better understand the lives of Colorado farm workers through storytelling and to capture first-hand accounts of the challenges they face, particularly during COVID (24).

The conversations included in *Esencial Colorado* cover a range of subjects, and extend beyond barriers facing farm workers to detail achievements, stories, and moments of joy (25). However, many of the conversations provide a first hand perspective on the challenges that farm workers in the state face. Issues around work conditions and treatment of employees emerge repeatedly. Farm workers share stories of employers not providing adequate water during the extreme heat of summer months, facing racism in the workplace, working overly long hours, and grappling with the perception of the work that farm workers do, among many other personal experiences (26). Drawing attention to these issues has been essential in recent years as advocates across Colorado worked to pass the Agricultural Worker Bill of Rights (Senate Bill 21-087). This Bill established far-reaching protections for the states' many agricultural workers, including requirements for overtime pay as well as standards for working conditions and access to service providers (27).

Understanding the barriers that producers and farm workers face in their careers represents an important research focus in Colorado and across the U.S., both as a way to build community and understanding in procurement relationships, and to begin taking steps-including legislation- to directly address the challenges identified.

Producer Barriers: Interview Findings

“Land access is a huge barrier; I’m personally very interested in things like talking to nonprofits and the city about establishing agrarian trusts, where farmers can invest very small amounts to rent that land so that people can get involved in farming for a very small upfront cost.”

Coded Terms	Dominant Themes
Access to capital Avenues to sell Debt Events or market coordinator Exhaustion Farm could be taken at any time Lack of refrigerated van Limited hours in a day Markets that fit well Skilled labor Stability of leased land Time to prepare land to grow	Infrastructure
	Market Matchmaking
	Financial challenges
	Land stability



Producer Barriers: Interview Findings

Over the course of our interviews with farmers and ranchers they identified a number of different barriers within the larger themes of land stability, financial challenges, market matchmaking, and infrastructure. Within each of these themes, the ways that each producer experiences these barriers, and how they impact their farming career, varied greatly.

Several of the producers we spoke with talked specifically about the difficulty of leasing land, and the lack of stability that can come with this option. While producers discussed the advantage to being able to access land without purchasing it outright, they also noted the challenges- including uncertainty about where they might be located after their lease expires- and concerns about increasing land prices. We also heard about the ways in which leasing rather than owning land can serve as a disincentive to making long term investments in that land- whether that be in the form of infrastructure or soil health improvements.

The theme of financial challenges arose repeatedly through our conversations. Multiple producers spoke to the difficulty of not having enough people to work on their farm or ranch- a challenge that creates the cascading effect of not having enough time for the marketing, delivery coordination, and other administrative tasks that are necessary at the end of the day.

The theme of market matchmaking is closely linked to that of financial challenges, as it is tied to having fewer employees. Producers stated that with few or no farm or ranch employees, it can be difficult to find the time to research and coordinate appropriate avenues to sell product, and therefore to expand the amount that they sell.

Infrastructure was a final barrier that encompassed challenges such as refrigerated vans for delivery, structures to facilitate on-farm sales or events, and processing capabilities that might allow for value-added products and season extension. Expanded access to infrastructure was identified as a potential pathway to allow for increased on-farm connections with community members, and to alleviate some of the market related barriers discussed above.

Delivery

Question 5: If you are currently unable to offer delivery, is there a quantity ordered that would make delivery worth it for you or an arrangement that would make delivery possible?

Prompts Provided: Quantity ordered, infrastructure, resources



Context

As we began researching existing Colorado farm and ranch directories, and having conversations with those creating and updating these resources, we frequently heard infrastructure and transportation identified as primary barriers to local procurement. Given the distributed and often rural nature of farms in Colorado, delivery distance represents a common limiting factor for farm and ranch sales.

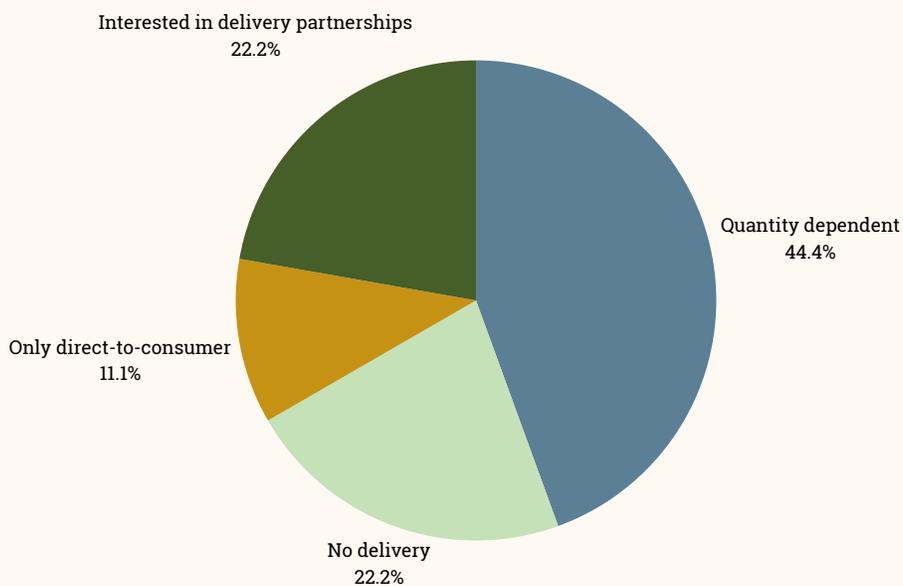
Even for those farms and ranches located in or near an urban area, the expense of purchasing a truck for delivery to purchasers, and the time it takes to drive between various restaurants, groceries stores, individual customers, markets, or any other purchaser, can be prohibitive. For those organizations, institutions and individuals interested in purchasing from a local farmer, driving to a farm or farmers market may similarly represent a barrier to consistently purchasing from them.

In Colorado, a number of food hubs have emerged to address this challenge of food aggregation and distribution. The East Denver Food Hub, from whom Metro Caring already purchases, emphasizes on their website that “farmers need a reliable distribution network that provides access to markets and facilitates distribution logistics”, and Colorado hubs serve this important need (28).

In an effort to explore potential solutions to this issue for those producers who may not yet be involved with a Colorado food hub or have the capacity to join either a food hub or market, Metro Caring hoped to directly ask producers about delivery logistics. This question begins to answer the question of how Metro Caring and associated food access organizations can most effectively contribute to addressing the barrier presented by transportation.

Delivery: Interview Findings

“Last year I did drive down to East Denver Food Hub a few times, and I didn’t do a minimum for them because they ordered an amount that was worth it to me. I was selling about \$500 worth of produce to them per week, so it was worth it to me to take the afternoon off and drive the produce to them. They also did pickups from us.”



Many of the producers we spoke to highlighted the important role food hubs and other aggregators including the **East Denver Food Hub** and **GoFarm** play in their delivery capacity and overall farm operations.

Most producers interviewed prioritize direct-to-consumer sales, whether or not they offer delivery. Several producers stated that the times offered for delivery pickups by external organizations or a lack of infrastructure such as refrigerated vans to complete independent deliveries represent delivery barriers for their farm. The most prevalent factors in delivery included: order size, distance, specific arrangements with friends, and agreements or trades of some kind.

Product Sold

Question 6: Could you estimate approximately what percentage of your product is getting sold?

Prompts Provided: Are you selling everything you are producing or is some of it going to waste?

Are you currently looking to expand to other market streams, or do you feel that you are at capacity and not currently looking to either expand or switch markets?

Context

A producer's inclusion in the Metro Caring directory was not contingent on their farm or ranch having the immediate capacity to sell significant amounts of fresh fruits, vegetables, meat or value-added products to the Metro Caring Fresh Foods Market. However, this interview question was intended to address the logistical question of whether a producer might be interested in being contacted at a later date for procurement needs. In addition, understanding whether these local producers are already selling as much product as they need to, or whether the creation of new, local markets and further directories is necessary from the perspective of producers themselves represents an important component of continuing to develop these resources.



Product Sold: Interview Findings

"If I've harvested the food, I'd say 90% is sold. Anything that doesn't go through a primary market goes to the food bank. And I'm really diligent about leveraging that... I've asked them if everything gets taken, and they say yes it all goes [and people are really excited about it]. I do leave some stuff in the fields... and that's a really hard one to measure."



80-90%

90%

95%

10%

To the left are the most common percentages that farmers and ranchers estimated for the quantity of product they sell in an average season of the total produce that is harvested and meat that is slaughtered. Each producer also noted some pre-sales loss due to extreme weather, pests, disease, or insufficient time and labor to harvest all produce. Almost all producers reported that they donate any remaining, harvested product that goes unsold. Programs such as delivery vans that arrive at farmers markets as they are closing to donate remaining produce were specifically identified as helpful in reducing any food waste.

Role of a Procurement Guide

Question 7: How could a better local food procurement guide help with farm improvements?

Prompts Provided: Expansion, reaching different consumers, a change in your practices, time off, or quality of life changes

Context

From the perspective of the organizations, institutions and individuals across Colorado who are interested in increasing their local purchases, the value of having access to a producer directory may be evident. By gathering basic producer information into one place, these directories can simplify the ordering process and help to better understand the production landscape in Colorado. However, over the course of this project the Metro Caring team also expressed interest in better understanding the benefits of these directories to producers themselves, and their perception of how they might use them. The goal was to better understand how these directories can best serve producers to inform the creation of a Metro Caring specific producer catalogue.



Role of a Procurement Guide: Interview Findings

“A guide would be great because we could find information right there. We believe in sharing right now- we’re a little shy on a few things for the CSA and other farmers... can provide us so we can spend a few hundred dollars and get some extra zucchini.”

Coded Terms	Dominant Themes
Avenues to sell Centralizing Connect customers to local farmers Farming together Farm profiles or bios Help track farm numbers Inclusion of values Intelligence of other people growing Raising the profile for small farmers Remind consumers of options Selling all of our food	Product Sharing
	Sales avenues
	Collective intelligence



Role of a Procurement Guide: Interview Findings

While common themes were identifiable in a majority of the questions we asked during our interviews with producers- even as unique topics also emerged in each conversation- our final question regarding the role of procurement guides elicited a wider range of responses. We also received fewer responses overall for this question. This was due in some cases to producers offering very brief responses, or not having prior involvement with a local procurement guide or producer directory. In other cases this question was not asked due to time constraints. However, those producers with whom we did discuss this question pointed to the connection with purchasers and other producers that a local food procurement guide can offer. Several farmers noted that having a clear landscape of all of the farms in their area, and their contact information, can facilitate the exchange of produce and advice.

Currently, several of the producer directories available- especially those that require fees for producers to be included- are advertised largely as marketing opportunities for producers to reach more consumers. However, our conversations with producers indicated a desire for more catalogues to include the kinds of values-based information discussed throughout our interviews so that consumers can better align themselves with, and understand, producers.

On one farm, we discussed the ways in which a consumer understanding of organic and regenerative practices, and the challenges that producers are facing, can better equip them for some of the challenges that can come with ordering locally rather than from a large grocery chain or food supplier. Our conversations also covered the number of small urban farms that have cropped up around the Denver area, and how easy it is even for farmers themselves to be unaware of a producer in the same neighborhood as them. Having accurate maps and catalogues that include farms and ranches producing at a range of scales emerged as a potentially beneficial resource for producers themselves.

Another farmer brought up the difficult weather conditions inevitable in farming- and exacerbated as climate change worsens- and pointed out the possibility of purchasing from other producers if they face a crop failure. The resource sharing enabled by an easily accessible and up-to-date producer directory extends the benefits of these guides beyond use exclusively by consumers and institutional purchasers.

One producer also highlighted that a frequently updated and accurate directory of producers can help communities to better understand trends related to numbers of farms. They noted their hope that in coming years, these guides will serve as evidence of a strengthened local food system as more small, diversified producers appear on maps and in directories.

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