PROJECT INTRODUCTION
In the past decade, Southwest Colorado has seen an influx of new and beginning farmers. To better understand how these businesses are performing, La Plata County Extension proposed a detailed survey of direct-market fruit, vegetable and livestock producers in the area. This assessment aimed to obtain information about producers’ financial security as well as to evaluate agricultural market stability.

The survey was focused on producers in La Plata and Montezuma Counties, and was developed to help identify gaps, links, and potential educational opportunities. The intention was to provide a better understanding of how Extension can work with other community organizations to encourage growth and long-term viability in the agricultural sector.

This evaluation will allow local organizations to examine the agricultural system as a whole to address issues of food security while maintaining farmland profitability.

INTERNSHIP GOALS
One main objective of this project was to create a needs assessment that could give local organizations direction around how to educate the community on steps needed to retain a viable agricultural economy. This needs assessment can additionally be used as a marketing tool for local producers.

The principle goal of this farm assessment was to create a clear picture of producer strengths and weaknesses in order to help community stakeholders understand opportunities for strategic support and investment that will help farmers, and in turn strengthen regional food systems.

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR EDUCATION
As a horticulture master’s student, I am interested in the role Extension plays in promoting and preserving local agriculture. I am also pursuing a Teaching in Extension Certificate with the goal of becoming a Colorado Extension agent. Working with Darrin gave me a window into the day to day operations of an Extension office, which will be valuable for me as I plan my future career.

This project has provided insight into the challenges faced by farmers and ranchers in Colorado. It has also allowed me to gain a clearer understanding of how Extension can best support local producers through educational outreach and strategic investment. I hope to be able to play a part in this effort after I finish my graduate studies.

WHAT YOU DID
This project began with a review of previous food assessments in La Plata and Montezuma Counties. I summarized the findings of these studies and collected secondary data from the 2017 Agricultural Census to compare demographics from the two counties to the state and national data.

Next, we developed a set of survey questions aimed at looking into land acquisition and use models, business management techniques, estate management, and infrastructure needs and challenges. These questions were adapted from previous assessments such as the 2015 Local Food Marketing Practices Survey, in order to facilitate comparisons with state and national data. The survey was sent out to producers in La Plata and Montezuma Counties. To encourage participation, we offered $20 gift cards to producers who filled out the survey.

Finally, I began drafting a needs assessment report to present survey findings to community stakeholders. We weren’t able to get as many responses as we had hoped to during the summer months, as producers were busy throughout the hectic growing season. Because of this, we decided to extend the assessment to give more time for farmers to participate. The intention is to send a reminder about the survey after the first frost in the hopes of getting a more representative sample of producers in the area. I will be tying this final report into my master’s research as well.

WHAT YOU LEARNED
Southwest Colorado is geographically isolated, depending on trucks from cities such as Denver and Albuquerque to supply most of the goods for the area. However, local agricultural producers represent an important source of fresh food as well as a significant part of the region’s economy.

High land prices and water scarcity lead to relatively high production costs for farmers in La Plata and Montezuma Counties, and many producers are operating on razor thin margins. Because of this, many farmers depend on government assistance payments to break even or turn a profit.

Extension plays an important role in making sure that producers have the information they need. This is crucial not only when they face unforeseen problems, such as pest outbreaks, but also to connect farmers with various resources to support long-term financial viability.

Southwest Colorado Agricultural Demographics

- Nearly 1/3 of producers in the region are new and beginning farmers
- More than half of the farms in La Plata and Montezuma Counties are less than 50 acres
- Crop production operations are smaller than the state average, and are dominated by vegetable and fruit production as opposed to agronomic crops
- Livestock and poultry operations make up slightly less than half of all agricultural product sales, though 68% of farmland in the area was pastureland
- Only 10% of agricultural sales in 2017 were direct-to-consumer, however this is expected to change in 2020 due to reduction in wholesale outlets since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic

NEXT STEPS
Moving forward, we are hoping to encourage more responses from farmers now that the season is winding down. I will be finishing up the needs assessment report, including the remaining data. This report will be distributed to various local organizations that work in agriculture and food security in the area. It will also be shared with the participating farmers and ranchers.

This assessment will give direction to Extension and other community stakeholders around how to provide support for agricultural producers in Southwest Colorado. There is also potential for the report to be used as a marketing tool for a buy local campaign.