



Resilience in New Mexico Agriculture

Las Cruces Regional Meeting

Summary

Introduction

The **Resilience in New Mexico Agriculture** regional meeting in Las Cruces was convened on January 7, 2016. A diverse group of 65 people from nine different counties attended the meeting, including farmers, ranchers, commercial producers and marketers, educators, researchers, financial lenders, grantmakers, government professionals, soil and water experts and advocates.

The purpose of the meeting was to elicit input from key stakeholders on the trends having the most significant impact on the agriculture industry, as well as challenges and potential solutions. These ideas will contribute to the industry and stakeholder research that will result in a long-term plan for a robust food and agriculture system in New Mexico.

Throughout the meeting, participants worked in table groups to discuss the following trends, challenges and solutions. Once information is gathered from all the regional meetings, it will be synthesized and potentially verified.

Trends

Participants were asked to identify key trends that are having an impact (either positive or negative) on the agriculture industry, in general. The trends represent individual opinions of participants in attendance at this meeting and not necessarily the group as a whole.

Positive

- *Technology & Methods*—Many farmers are producing higher yields per acre due to microbe research which improves soil quality and genetic science which strengthens seed traits. Improved methods of production (e.g., reduction in the use of chemicals and pesticides, improved irrigation systems, self-sufficient solar systems) and the planting of more perennial, higher value crops have led to improved soil fertility and water use.
- *Markets*—New niche markets, including international markets, and specific New Mexico branding have opened up new markets emphasizing specialty products such as pecans, chili, cheese and wine. This has also helped small farmers reach specific consumer groups and get their products into larger retail stores. Increasing consumer demand for fresh, local produce and increased food assistance support have benefited local farmer's markets.
- *Conservation*—Using holistic approaches and good stewardship of water and land, farmers and ranchers can produce more sustainably.
- *Industry Support*—There are stronger collaborative efforts and willingness within the industry to address issues and make changes. In terms of education, research, funding the development of new technologies and markets, and outreach to commodity groups, state and federal agencies and institutions have shown increased support of the agriculture industry. Agriculture advocacy groups that represent local producers and communities are interested in bringing together stakeholders to discuss policies and regulations. There is more public awareness and interest in the connections between water, land, food, health and a sustainable environment. Policymakers are recognizing the need for a diverse agriculture industry and to develop policies that support it.
- *Economics*—There has been an increase in certain commodity prices, especially beef.
- *Youth Interest*—There is increased focus on encouraging and supporting members of the next generation to enter the agriculture industry. Many are savvy, enthusiastic, well-educated and excited about the technology and science associated with the industry.
- *Population*—The population of the world is increasing and will need the products of the agriculture industry.

- *Climate*—New Mexico is blessed with a long growing season, fewer cold spells and less pests and disease than other regions.

Negative

- *Water*—Access to clean and abundant water will continue to be uncertain for the industry due to climate change, drought, population growth, unresolved water rights, legal issues and planning policies. This becomes a disincentive to make plans and investments.
- *Regulations*—Participants believe that state and federal regulations that are incompatible continue to create uncertainty for producers, processors and marketers. They report one-size-fits-all regulations interfere with innovation, technology transfer and crowd out local solutions resulting in higher production costs and destroyed markets. Participants are concerned that state officials at the executive and legislative levels need to better understand agriculture practices, challenges and needs in order to foster a more balanced, business-friendly environment.
- *Producers & Succession*—As the current generation of producers retire, the next generation of producers will find it more difficult to remain in or return to the industry. The high cost of education and land and the lack of access to capital inhibits entrepreneurship.
- *Land*—Encroachment of agricultural land by urban areas and the sell-off of land to developers leads to higher land prices and higher risks to producers from lawsuits. In addition, soil health is being damaged due to lack of soil management training, compaction, invasive species, pests and practices that increase salinity.
- *Economics*—The rising cost of land, infrastructure, inputs, and transportation and flat or decreasing commodity prices endanger the industry's economic viability. Small farm and ranch operators find it more difficult to compete with larger corporate operations.
- *Public Perception*—Consumers and policymakers are not fully aware of the importance of the agriculture industry and have misconceptions regarding industry practices (e.g., carbon foot print, water use, genetically modified food). Participants believe environmentalists and other advocacy groups often criticize the industry without the science to back up their claims, and agriculturalists often mishandle their response to negative or misinformed comments.
- *Workforce*—Although some services for migrant and seasonal farmworkers have been funded for next five years, support for educating this worker population is a challenge and workers have difficulty accessing services.
- *Import/Export Policies*—Many polices benefit the agriculture industry outside of New Mexico more than inside the state (e.g., NAFTA). The price of imported products undercut local prices, and some imports are being labeled and marketed as New Mexico products. In addition, the transportation infrastructure needed to support trade partners contribute to the decline in agricultural land and create eminent domain conflicts (i.e., railroad extension from Mexico into Dona Ana County).

Challenges

These trends lead to a number of challenges which were prioritized by the participants.

1. Continued access to water
2. Regulatory over-reach and interference
3. Accurate consumer/policymaker information and education regarding food, health and the agriculture industry
4. Urbanization and other diversions of agricultural land
5. Need for agricultural industry education
6. Local impact of import/export polices and related infrastructure
7. Finance and lending opportunities for purchasing land, equipment and stock, especially for new producers
8. Improved production methods and technology
9. Continued diversity of operations in the industry (i.e., large- and small-scale production) and improved return on investments

Solutions

Given the challenges, participants were asked to recommend potential solutions that would make the most positive difference in the industry.

Water

1. Increase conservation efforts.
2. Utilize new technologies to increase water availability and access.
3. Support more research and education to increase awareness of water issues and options.
4. Increase urban rainwater harvesting.
5. Increase water retention and recharge through soil health infiltration.
6. Increase understanding of water retention, harvesting and recycling.
7. Transport, via a pipeline, excess water from the eastern part of the country to western reservoirs.
8. Find ways to recharge aquifers by decreasing runoff and returning rainwater and irrigation water back onto aquifers.

Regulatory & Business Climate

9. Advocate for more local and state-level land management.
10. Meet with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service to get involved with their planning efforts upfront.
11. Apply a regional focus to share resources through the Western Governors' Association.
12. Build case studies showing the economic impact of certain environmental regulations (e.g., spotted owl protection and fire suppression).
13. Invite our federal delegation to agriculture sites to familiarize them with the industry's issues.
14. Organize members of the agriculture industry to get involved, be proactive and speak up about their issues.
15. Advocate through social media to engage stakeholders in the issues and get them involved in action.
16. Support the leaders of organizations that support the industry (e.g., NM Department of Agriculture, Farm Bureau, NMSU-Cooperative Extension Service) and build links to legislators to impact the business climate.
17. Demonstrate the economic impact for individual producers by providing science and economic data (e.g., tie local food production to healthcare costs).
18. Demonstrate economic growth opportunities for all sectors of the industry.
19. Set up the capacity for industry stakeholders to testify remotely at the state legislature.
20. Expand the Gate to Plate program to involve other commodity groups.

Consumer & Industry Education

21. Educate consumers about the smart business people who are producing their food.
22. Expand opportunities to educate the public using a cross-sector approach.
23. Enhance the use of mass media to illustrate the industry's stewardship role.
24. Enhance existing formal agriculture education and youth leadership programs.
25. Promote community events and programs such as Ag tourism, Ad days and community/school/backyard gardens.
26. Take individual responsibility to share industry concerns with the public.
27. Create agriculture internships.
28. Brand New Mexico products and contract with national suppliers to sell local products.

Land

29. Strengthen and pass the Right to Farm legislation.
30. Require developers to provide subdivision reviews disclosing all issues represented by the local Soil and Water Conservation District, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, etc.
31. Involve agriculture stakeholders in local land use planning and zoning committees.
32. Develop policies regarding the appropriate size of land divisions.
33. Strengthen markets for products that will increase land value and offset the development cost discrepancy.

Import/Export Policies

34. Support NMSU to educate others about global markets, trade policies and economic impact.
35. Build relationships with media (e.g., broadcast, print, and internet) to inform the general public and increase voter knowledge.
36. Develop and implement an education plan for policymakers.
37. Increase communication between policymakers and land owners.

38. Encourage local, state and federal officials to attend meetings like this one.
39. Ensure transparency of decisions and make policymakers accountable when they support a policy that negatively impacts constituents.
40. Develop impact assessments.
41. Increase communication among land owners regarding trade policies.

Producers & Succession

42. Provide state and federal tax incentives to encourage lenders to offer interest rate discounts.
43. Improve on-going young producer programs from lenders.
44. Encourage internships at lenders for future producers.
45. Improve communication regarding the different operations offered to future and new producers.
46. Improve education opportunities for future producers.
47. Improve and expand mentorship programs for future producers.

Production Improvements for Large and Small-scale Operations

48. Improve the production quality of land by increasing cover crops, moving to low- or no-till practices, etc.
49. Improve effectiveness of current cost share programs.
50. Use innovative farmers and ranchers to educate others.
51. Increase the capacity of NMUS-Cooperative Extension Service and USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service to organize producer-led demonstrations of conservation practices more often.
52. Provide incentives for producers to engage in soil fertility markets and soil carbon markets.
53. Restructure federal crop insurance.
54. Develop local and regional markets for new products to encourage crop diversity (NOTE: free trade agreements both drive and suppress diversity).

Meeting Demographics

Stakeholder Groups	# Participants	Counties	# Participants
Advocacy	6	Bernalillo	2
Commercial Production & Marketing	2	De Baca	1
Education & Research	22	Dona Ana	47
Farming/Ranching	12	Grant	1
Financial Lending & Grantmaking	3	Luna	3
Government Support & Regulation	14	Otero	6
Soil & Water	3	Sandoval	2
Staff (NMF)	3	Santa Fe	2
		Socorro	1