

AGRISUMMIT FIVE-YEAR

# Food Sovereignty Plan

# Chaffee County, Colorado

Prepared March 2026 | Generated with AI at the 11th Annual AgriSummit

## COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED PRIORITIES

1. Better connectivity and networking across food system stakeholders
2. Restorative rather than extractive agricultural practices
3. Year-round fresh vegetable access for all residents
4. More food access points with affordable local food
5. Holistic health priorities across social, economic, and environmental systems
6. More farms, ranchers, and producers — focus on the "agriculture of the middle"
7. Data-driven, research-informed food system planning

# Executive Summary

Chaffee County sits at the heart of Colorado's Upper Arkansas Valley — a high-altitude community of nearly 20,000 residents anchored by Salida and Buena Vista, surrounded by 14,000-foot peaks, irrigated hay meadows, and a heritage of ranching that once earned this valley the title "Iceberg Lettuce Capital of the United States." Today, the county's economy runs on tourism, outdoor recreation, and services, while agriculture — still woven into the landscape and identity — accounts for a declining share of land use and livelihoods.

**The headline finding:** Chaffee County has an unusually strong constellation of food system organizations — Guidestone Colorado, Foodshed Alliance, Valley Roots Food Hub, the Safety Net Leaders Group, and the Chaffee County Community Foundation — yet these assets operate largely in parallel rather than as a coordinated system. The county's most critical gap is not the absence of organizations, but the absence of shared infrastructure (processing, cold storage, year-round growing capacity) and a coordinated data framework that connects producers, distributors, and consumers into a resilient local food economy.

**The five-year vision:** By 2031, Chaffee County operates a connected, data-informed food system where local producers of all scales — from small-plot vegetable growers to mid-size ranchers — can access shared infrastructure, year-round markets, and affordable distribution channels. Residents at every income level can purchase fresh, locally grown food at multiple access points throughout the year. Agricultural practices across the valley prioritize soil health, water stewardship, and carbon sequestration. And the organizations already doing this work are linked by a shared governance structure, common metrics, and a culture of mutual accountability.

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# Community Snapshot

## Demographics

- **Population:** 19,900 (2023) *Source: U.S. Census Bureau / Data USA, 2023*
- **Median age:** 47.6 years — significantly older than Colorado's median of 37.1
- **Median household income:** \$70,909 *Source: Data USA / ACS, 2023*
- **Poverty rate:** 9.97% *Source: Data USA, 2023*
- **Racial/ethnic composition:** 84.5% White (non-Hispanic), ~12% Hispanic/Latino, ~3.5% other/multiracial *Source: Data USA, 2023*
- **Top employment sectors:** Accommodation & Food Services (1,259), Health Care & Social Assistance (1,245), Construction (1,000)
- **Housing:** 69.6% owner-occupied, 30.4% renter-occupied among 9,074 units

Chaffee County's economy is heavily tourism-dependent, with accommodation and food services as the largest employer. This creates seasonal employment patterns and a cost-of-living pressure that affects food affordability for year-round residents, particularly service workers and seniors on fixed incomes.

## Food Security

- **Food insecurity rate:** ~12% *estimated* — rural Colorado counties average 12.0% food insecurity, compared to 9.3% statewide urban average *Source: Colorado Health Institute, 2022*
- **SNAP enrollment:** ~1,200 households *Source: Chaffee County DHS, 2025*
- **SNAP participation gap:** Statewide, only 6 in 10 eligible Coloradans are enrolled in SNAP *Source: Hunger Free Colorado, 2023*
- **Emergency response:** The Safety Net Leaders Group coordinated emergency food distribution when federal SNAP benefits were delayed in late 2025, revealing both the strength of the local network and its fragility under federal disruption *Source: Ark Valley Voice, 2025*

Food insecurity in Chaffee County is compounded by high housing costs driven by tourism and second-home ownership. Many food-insecure households earn above SNAP thresholds but still struggle with affordability — the "cliff effect" that leaves the working middle without assistance.

## Agricultural Landscape

- **Number of farms:** 273 (2022 Census of Agriculture) *Source: USDA NASS, 2022*
- **Farm size distribution:** 239 farms (88%) have less than \$50,000 in annual sales; only 2 farms exceed \$500,000 *Source: USDA NASS, 2022*

- **Primary crops:** Hay (8,175 harvested acres / 14,788 tons) and alfalfa (4,267 acres / 8,507 tons) dominate *Source: USDA NASS, 2022*
- **Agricultural land loss:** More than 30% of agricultural land has disappeared since 1982, driven by development pressure and water rights sales *Source: Ark Valley Voice, 2025*
- **Water rights:** Junior water rights holders face increasing curtailment during drought years; the Pueblo West Metropolitan District's 2008 purchase of ~1,900 acre-feet from the Hill Ranch in Nathrop illustrates the municipal-agricultural tension
- **Historical note:** Chaffee County was once known as the "Iceberg Lettuce Capital of the United States" — a reminder that intensive vegetable production has deep roots here

The agricultural profile reveals the core challenge: 88% of farms are small operations generating under \$50,000 in revenue, and the dominant crops (hay/alfalfa) feed livestock rather than local tables. The "agriculture of the middle" — farms large enough to supply wholesale but small enough to stay community-rooted — is nearly absent.

## Existing Assets

Chaffee County's food system organizational landscape is remarkably rich for a rural county of 20,000:

- **Guidestone Colorado** — Founded in 2007 in Chaffee County. Operates farm-to-school programs, the Community & School Farm, Farmhands youth education, the annual AgriSummit conference, land access programs, and the Local Food Guide directory. A cornerstone institution.
- **Foodshed Alliance** — Grassroots cooperative nonprofit operating the Salida and Buena Vista Farmers Markets, plus the Farmers Feed Chaffee program that procures from local producers for food-insecure families.
- **Valley Roots Food Hub** — Regional aggregation and distribution hub serving the San Luis Valley and Upper Arkansas Valley. Offers online grocery, CSA boxes, and wholesale delivery to Salida, Buena Vista, and Howard.
- **Chaffee County Community Foundation (CCCF)** — Administers food access grants in partnership with City of Salida, Chaffee County government, The Colorado Trust, and El Pomar Foundation. Phase 2 Food Access Grants (up to \$200,000) opening April 2026.
- **Safety Net Leaders Group** — Coordinated network of food pantries, meal providers, and social services that developed a Food Action Roadmap and emergency response framework.
- **Chaffee County Leadership Roundtable** — Cross-sector leadership body that convenes around community priorities including food access.
- **Winter Farmers Market** — Provides free weekly food box pickup for SNAP cardholders during off-season months.

## Environmental Context

- **Drought:** USDA designated Chaffee County as a Primary Natural Disaster Area for drought in 2025, with D2 (Severe) or higher drought intensity for 8+ consecutive weeks during the growing season *Source: USDA FSA, 2025*
  - **Elevation:** Valley floor at ~7,000–7,500 ft with a short growing season (approximately 90–110 frost-free days) *estimated*
  - **Water competition:** Agricultural water faces pressure from municipal growth, real estate development, and commercial bottling (BlueTriton permitted to extract 65 million gallons annually) *Source: CBS Colorado, 2025*
  - **Climate trajectory:** Earlier snowmelt, more variable precipitation, and hotter summers are shifting growing conditions and increasing wildfire risk throughout the Upper Arkansas Valley
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# Gap Analysis

## GAP SEVERITY RATING

### CRITICAL

No foundational infrastructure exists; the community must build from scratch to address this domain.

### SIGNIFICANT

Some assets exist but are declining, underfunded, or insufficient relative to the scale of need.

### MODERATE

Infrastructure exists and functions; targeted improvements can close the remaining gap.

## Production SIGNIFICANT

**Strength:** Chaffee County has 273 active farms, a strong ranching heritage, and organizations like Guidestone Colorado actively supporting new and beginning farmers through education, land access programs, and the AgriSummit network. The county's history as the "Iceberg Lettuce Capital" proves that intensive vegetable production is agronomically viable at this elevation.

**Gap:** Production is overwhelmingly concentrated in hay and alfalfa (12,400+ harvested acres), with minimal diversified vegetable production for local consumption. 88% of farms earn under \$50,000/year — the "agriculture of the middle" (farms with \$50K–\$500K in sales) barely exists, with only 32 operations in that range. More than 30% of farmland has been lost since 1982. There is no season-extension infrastructure (high tunnels, greenhouses) at a scale that could support year-round vegetable production for local markets.

## Infrastructure CRITICAL

**Strength:** Valley Roots Food Hub provides regional aggregation and distribution connecting producers to wholesale and retail buyers. Foodshed Alliance operates two farmers markets (Salida and Buena Vista) as direct-to-consumer channels. The Winter Farmers Market extends market access beyond the summer season.

**Gap:** No licensed commercial kitchen, cold storage facility, or food processing infrastructure exists in Chaffee County. Producers who want to add value to their products (frozen vegetables, shelf-stable goods, meat processing) must transport to facilities outside the county. Year-round growing infrastructure (heated greenhouses, high tunnels) is negligible. Without post-harvest handling and storage, seasonal produce surpluses go to waste while winter months bring scarcity.

## Workforce SIGNIFICANT

**Strength:** Guidestone Colorado's Farmhands programs provide youth education and agricultural awareness. The AgriSummit conference convenes aspiring and established producers annually. Guidestone's land access programs connect land seekers with landowners. CSU Extension's Chaffee County office provides technical assistance on agriculture and natural resources.

**Gap:** No formal apprenticeship pipeline moves aspiring farmers from education to land access to capitalization. The median age of 47.6 (county-wide) and an aging farmer population mirror national trends. Housing costs driven by tourism make it extremely difficult for beginning farmers to live in the county. There is no structured mentorship program pairing established ranchers with new producers — a critical missing link given that the knowledge of restorative grazing and high-altitude growing is highly local.

## Policy & Governance MODERATE

**Strength:** The Safety Net Leaders Group and Chaffee County Leadership Roundtable provide coordinating bodies for food security response. The Food Action Roadmap (developed through community strategic planning) establishes shared priorities. CCCF's food access grant program (up to \$200K in Phase 2) provides dedicated funding. The county and City of Salida are active partners in food access initiatives.

**Gap:** There is no dedicated food policy council or formal food system governance body that connects production, infrastructure, access, and equity under a single strategic framework. The existing bodies focus primarily on emergency food access rather than full food system coordination. Agricultural land protection policies (conservation easements, agricultural zoning) need strengthening given the 30%+ land loss. Water policy advocacy at the county level is fragmented despite water being the single greatest threat to agricultural viability.

## Equity & Access SIGNIFICANT

**Strength:** The Farmers Feed Chaffee program (Foodshed Alliance) directly connects local producers with food-insecure families. SNAP-accessible Winter Farmers Market provides off-season access. CCCF food access grants prioritize community-driven solutions. The Safety Net Leaders Group demonstrated strong emergency coordination during the 2025 SNAP delay.

**Gap:** Hispanic/Latino residents (~12% of the county) are underrepresented in food system leadership and decision-making. Affordability remains the primary barrier: local food is priced for tourists, not service workers earning accommodation-sector wages. Geographic access is limited — food access points are concentrated in Salida and Buena Vista, leaving unincorporated communities (Nathrop, Poncha Springs, Johnson Village) underserved. The SNAP participation gap (40% of eligible Coloradans not enrolled) suggests significant untapped need. Seniors on fixed incomes and seasonal workers face distinct barriers that current programs don't specifically address.

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# Five-Year Phased Roadmap

YEAR 1-2

## Phase 1 — Foundation: Connect, Measure, Protect

### Network & Governance

- Expand the Safety Net Leaders Group's mandate from emergency food response to full food system coordination — establish a **Chaffee Food System Council** as a working group under the Leadership Roundtable, bringing producers, distributors, retailers, nonprofits, and county government to a shared table.
- Launch a **shared data dashboard** — partner with CSU Extension and Guidestone to track key metrics: local food production volume, food insecurity rates, SNAP enrollment, producer counts by scale, and acres in restorative practices. Make it publicly accessible and updated quarterly.
- Commission a **local food economy baseline study** — how much food is produced in Chaffee County, how much is consumed locally, and where do the gaps concentrate? Use this to inform all subsequent infrastructure decisions.

### Land & Production

- Strengthen Guidestone's land access program with a **formal agricultural easement initiative** — work with Chaffee County and Colorado Open Lands to protect at least 500 acres of productive agricultural land from conversion.
- Launch a **high tunnel/greenhouse pilot program** — fund 8–12 season-extension structures for small and mid-scale vegetable producers to test year-round growing viability. Partner with USDA EQIP's High Tunnel System Initiative for cost-share.
- Convene the region's hay/alfalfa producers to explore **diversification pathways** — what crops could complement (not replace) existing operations and supply local markets?

### Access & Equity

- Conduct targeted **SNAP enrollment outreach** through Hunger Free Colorado's One Touch model — aim to close the 40% participation gap, particularly among seniors and Spanish-speaking households.
- Pilot a **mobile market or farm stand route** reaching Poncha Springs, Nathrop, and Johnson Village — communities currently without walkable food access.
- Ensure bilingual (English/Spanish) participation in all food system planning processes.

Milestone: Food System Council convened with 15+ member organizations by Month 6

Milestone: Baseline food economy study published by Month 12

Milestone: 8 high tunnels funded and installed by end of Year 2

Milestone: Mobile market pilot launched serving 3+ unincorporated communities

Milestone: SNAP enrollment increased by 15% among eligible households

## Phase 2 — Build: Infrastructure, Markets, Workforce

### Infrastructure

- Develop a **shared-use commercial kitchen and cold storage facility** in Salida or Buena Vista — this is the single most impactful infrastructure investment. Enable value-added production (frozen vegetables, shelf-stable goods, prepared foods) and post-harvest storage to bridge the gap between summer surplus and winter scarcity.
- Expand season-extension infrastructure to **30+ high tunnels and 2-3 community-scale greenhouses** capable of winter greens production.
- Work with Valley Roots Food Hub to establish a **Chaffee County aggregation point** — reduce transportation barriers for local producers accessing regional distribution.

### Market Development

- Negotiate **institutional purchasing agreements** with Salida School District, Buena Vista School District, Heart of the Rockies Regional Medical Center, and major hospitality employers — commit to measurable local food procurement targets (start at 10%, scale to 25%).
- Scale the Farmers Feed Chaffee model into a **permanent nutrition incentive program** — Double Up Food Bucks or similar model at both farmers markets and participating retailers.
- Develop a "**Chaffee Grown**" **brand and certification** — create consumer-facing identity for local food that works across markets, restaurants, and retail.

### Workforce & Producer Pipeline

- Launch a **structured farm apprenticeship program** through Guidestone — 2-year track pairing new farmers with established operations, including housing assistance, business planning, and land access support at completion.
- Create a **restorative agriculture mentorship network** — connect ranchers practicing regenerative grazing, cover cropping, and soil health management with producers transitioning from conventional methods.
- Partner with Colorado Mountain College to develop a **food system certificate program** — production, processing, food safety, business management for ag entrepreneurs.

Milestone: Commercial kitchen + cold storage facility operational by Month 30

Milestone: 2 institutional buyers purchasing 10%+ local food by Year 3

Milestone: 10 new producers enrolled in apprenticeship/mentorship by Year 3

Milestone: 30+ season-extension structures operational

Milestone: Year-round weekly food access at 5+ locations county-wide

## Phase 3 — Scale & Sustain: Ownership, Revenue, Replication

### Community Ownership

- Transition the commercial kitchen/cold storage into a **community-owned cooperative or social enterprise** — revenue from processing fees, commercial rentals, and value-added product sales should cover 60%+ of operating costs by Year 5.
- Explore feasibility of a **community-owned grocery or food co-op** — if data supports demand, begin site selection and capitalization planning.
- Formalize the Chaffee Food System Council as a **permanent governance body** with adopted bylaws, annual work plan, and county recognition.

### Restorative Practice at Scale

- Target **5,000+ acres** enrolled in soil health, cover cropping, rotational grazing, or regenerative practice programs — build on USDA EQIP and CSP participation.
- Develop a **county-level water stewardship compact** among agricultural users — shared principles for conservation, efficiency, and keeping water rights in agricultural use.
- Integrate **carbon and ecosystem service payment programs** as supplemental revenue for producers practicing restorative agriculture.

### Data & Replication

- Publish a **Chaffee County Food System Report Card** — annual public accounting of progress against baseline metrics from Year 1.
- Document the model for **peer mountain communities** — Lake County, Park County, and Fremont County face similar challenges. Share playbook through Guidestone's regional network and AgriSummit.
- Conduct a **5-year economic impact analysis** — quantify jobs created, dollars retained locally, food insecurity reduction, and farmland preserved.

Milestone: Kitchen/cold storage cooperative achieving 60%+ cost recovery

Milestone: 5,000 acres in restorative practice programs

Milestone: 15+ new producers operating in Chaffee County since plan launch

Milestone: Food insecurity rate reduced by 25% from baseline

Milestone: Annual Food System Report Card published with full metric tracking

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# Capital Investment Summary

The following estimates reflect benchmark costs for mountain-community-scale infrastructure in Colorado. All figures are directional and require local contractor quotes, site assessments, and engineering studies before commitment.

INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT	ESTIMATED COST RANGE	PHASE
High tunnel / greenhouse structures (30 units)	\$450K – \$2.4M	Phase 1–2
Shared-use commercial kitchen & cold storage (3,000–5,000 sq ft)	\$450K – \$1.5M	Phase 2
Mobile market vehicle (farm stand truck)	\$75K – \$150K	Phase 1
Farmers market infrastructure improvements (2 markets)	\$50K – \$200K	Phase 1–2
Chaffee County aggregation point (warehouse/cooler space)	\$200K – \$500K	Phase 2
Irrigation efficiency upgrades (50 farms × avg. \$3K/farm)	\$100K – \$250K	Phase 1–3
Data platform & food economy baseline study	\$50K – \$100K	Phase 1
Apprenticeship program (housing, stipends, operations – 3 years)	\$200K – \$400K	Phase 2–3

**Total estimated 5-year capital investment: \$1.6M – \$5.5M**

This range reflects the spectrum from essential-only investments (high tunnels, mobile market, kitchen) to a comprehensive buildout including community-scale greenhouses, aggregation infrastructure, and workforce

development. The Phase 2 Food Access Grant from CCCF (\$200K) can catalyze early-phase projects while larger federal and state grants are secured.

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# Funding Strategy

## FEDERAL

- **USDA Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP)** — up to \$500K for food hub development, local food marketing, and supply chain coordination. Strong fit for aggregation point and "Chaffee Grown" branding.
- **USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP)** — up to \$250K for market development and direct-to-consumer channels. Ideal for expanding Foodshed Alliance operations.
- **USDA High Tunnel System Initiative (EQIP)** — cost-share for season-extension structures. Individual producers apply through NRCS; can be batch-promoted through Guidestone network.
- **USDA Value-Added Producer Grants (VAPG)** — up to \$75K planning / \$250K working capital for value-added product development. Key for commercial kitchen users.
- **USDA Community Facilities Direct Loan & Grant Program** — for the commercial kitchen/cold storage facility buildout in rural communities under 20,000.
- **USDA Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP)** — payments for restorative agriculture practices on working lands. Target enrollment for ranchers transitioning to regenerative grazing.
- **EDA Public Works & Economic Adjustment** — for infrastructure projects that create jobs and diversify rural economies.

## STATE (COLORADO)

- **Colorado Blueprint to End Hunger / Provecho Collective** — community food grants and technical assistance aligned with state hunger reduction goals.
- **Colorado Department of Agriculture** — specialty crop block grants, farmers market grants, and agricultural land conservation programs.
- **Colorado Health Foundation** — food access and health equity grants, particularly for equity-centered food system work.
- **Colorado CDHS Nutrition Programs** — state-level SNAP-Ed funding for nutrition education tied to local food access.
- **Conservation Trust Fund** — for agricultural land preservation and conservation easement acquisition.
- **Colorado Water Conservation Board** — agricultural water efficiency grants and alternative transfer method pilots.

## PHILANTHROPY

- **Chaffee County Community Foundation** — Phase 2 Food Access Grants (up to \$200K, April 2026). The primary local funder with established food access commitment.

- **The Colorado Trust** — already a partner in CCCF food access work; strong prospect for multi-year food system investment.
- **El Pomar Foundation** — active partner in Chaffee County food access grants; statewide funder with rural focus.
- **W.K. Kellogg Foundation** — national funder of community-based food systems, racial equity in food, and beginning farmer programs.
- **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation** — health equity and social determinants of health grants, including food access.

## REVENUE / SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

- **Commercial kitchen rental fees** — hourly and monthly rates for food entrepreneurs, caterers, and value-added producers.
  - **Institutional purchasing contracts** — stable revenue for producers through school, hospital, and hospitality wholesale agreements.
  - **CSA subscriptions and online grocery sales** — direct revenue through Valley Roots Food Hub and individual producer CSAs.
  - **"Chaffee Grown" licensing** — modest fees for brand use by participating producers and restaurants.
  - **Ecosystem service payments** — carbon credits, water quality payments, and habitat conservation payments for restorative agricultural practices.
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# 90-Day Quick Starts

1

## **Convene the Chaffee Food System Council**

Within 30 days, invite Guidestone, Foodshed Alliance, Valley Roots Food Hub, CCCF, Safety Net Leaders Group, CSU Extension, Chaffee County Public Health, and 3–4 producers to a founding meeting. Adopt a simple charter: shared mission, quarterly meetings, data-sharing commitment. Build on the existing Leadership Roundtable structure rather than starting from scratch. Assign a rotating convener.

2

## **Apply for CCCF Phase 2 Food Access Grant**

Applications open April 1, 2026 (deadline April 30). Prepare a joint application from 2–3 partner organizations for the mobile market pilot and high tunnel program. The pre-application information session is March 12, 2026 — attend and align with CCCF's stated priorities. Awards up to \$100,000 per project.

3

## **Launch the Baseline Food Economy Study**

Partner with CSU Extension and a graduate research team to scope a "Where Does Our Food Come From?" assessment. Key questions: What percentage of food consumed in Chaffee County is produced locally? What is the total market value of local food sales? Where are the biggest import-replacement opportunities? Budget: \$10K–\$25K. Target completion within 6 months. This data will drive every subsequent investment decision.

4

## **Host a Producer Diversification Workshop**

Within 60 days, Guidestone convenes a half-day workshop specifically for hay/alfalfa producers interested in adding vegetable, specialty crop, or livestock diversification to their operations. Bring in 2–3 successful diversified mountain farmers from similar Colorado counties (Lake, Park, Eagle) as peer presenters. Focus on economics, not ideology: what pencils out at this altitude and scale?

5

**Pilot a SNAP Enrollment Push and Nutrition Incentive Match**

Partner with Hunger Free Colorado and Chaffee County DHS to run a 90-day targeted SNAP enrollment campaign — table at post offices, libraries, schools, and churches in Salida, Buena Vista, and Poncha Springs. Simultaneously pilot a Double Up Food Bucks match at the Buena Vista and Salida Farmers Markets: every SNAP dollar spent earns a matching dollar for fresh produce. Track enrollment numbers and market redemption weekly.

*"Restoring Relations: Rooting Down and Reaching Out"*

Generated at the 11th Annual AgriSummit | Guidestone Colorado | Salida, Colorado  
March 2026 | This plan was produced using AI-assisted analysis and community input  
Data sources include USDA, U.S. Census Bureau, Feeding America, and state agencies