

The Bilingual Voice of Colorado \* La Voz Bilingüe de Colorado

# LA VOZ NUEVA



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### Family farms declining

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As the first rays of sunlight land upon the jagged face of Southern Colorado's Sangre de Cristo mountains in the San Luis Valley, farmer-rancher Joe Gallegos is usually up to see it. Despite the fact that he has seen the sun rise in this tiny pocket of the state for as long as he can remember, it is something that just never gets old.

"I wake up to the beautiful environment, the clean air, the water ... I sacrifice living in a cold weather environment," he says of the land that he sees every day. But, with neither regret nor lament says he wouldn't change a thing. In fact, he wouldn't even think about it. "I'm gonna' die a farmer-rancher." The conviction in his voice paints his answer in unequivocal black and white.

According to the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, in this part of Colorado, families with names like Gallegos, Romero, Valdez and Trujillo, and others that can be traced back to the land grant days, make up the ownership of about 80 percent of the area's farms and ranches. That in itself makes it a unique community in Colorado.

The land, la tierra to the locals who populate this region, has been the lifeblood of these families since well before Colorado was even a state. But the question today for Gallegos and others like him is, for how much longer?

**In 2000, a group of Latino farmer-ranchers in a multi-state region, including Colorado, filed suit against the Department of Agriculture accusing it of discrimination. The suit alleges that the USDA has created an unfair playing field for Latino farmers with its farm credit and non-credit farm benefit programs. It also accuses the government of making Latinos show more documentation in obtaining loans than their peers, routinely delaying and denying applications and then sitting on the appeals these farmers would file when they were turned down. These plaintiffs allege the process is not simply unfair, but frequently a quick and painful path to insolvency. As one Texas farmer who is part of the lawsuit and who lost his land after going through this never-ending turnstile, 'I used to be a farmer...now I'm a farm worker.'**

**A regional USDA conference in Fort Collins last week at Colorado State University, that brought together farmers and ranchers from several states, yielded no hint as to when a court ruling might come.**

Gallegos and the other families who populate the tiny mountain hamlets of San Luis, San Francisco, San Acacio, La Jara, Questa and places with more nicknames than official ones, have been planting and harvesting crops like alfalfa, barley, grasses and raising cattle for generations that preceded statehood. In this part of Colorado, where winter temperatures routinely fall to thirty-below and growing seasons are short, success is far from guaranteed especially after factoring in the USDA policies Latino farmers are

alleging. To keep his land in production, Gallegos also works outside his farm. Still, he says the extra income is usually plowed back into the operation. "No one down here can survive on farming alone."

And while the fight he and his neighbors are waging against the government has lingered for nearly a decade, it is not without precedent. A similar suit filed against the USDA by African-American farmers alleging similar disparities was successful. The government paid out more than a billion dollars in damages.

But it is not just the government making a difficult life even more difficult, said Gallegos. It is also local money lenders. "Once a bank wouldn't lend a friend \$10,000 when he was putting down a \$20,000 car as collateral," he remembered. With these kind of obstacles, "I wouldn't want to see someone starting (in farming) today."

The majority of farmers in Costilla County operate what can accurately be described as 'family farms.' Most are not much bigger than 80 acres and yield, after expenses, "probably no more than \$20,000," said Gallegos.

But the farming that does occur at the foot of mountains like Culebra and Vermijo Peak and all along the Sangre de Cristos survives, in great part, because of an ingenious centuries-old system devised for sharing the springtime mountain runoff. Acequias, an Arabic word for water conduit, are a system for sharing the runoff through the growing season and providing the best opportunity for a good harvest. Down here, the water is stored in open, free-flowing ditches much as it was across the Mideast and Europe, especially Spain, centuries ago when the system was perfected. That system has been integral in the creation of wetlands and habitat for fish and wildlife. But it, too, is a commodity that has value that goes beyond crops and is desired by others whose roots are foreign in this valley.

It is estimated that by the end of the next decade, 60 percent of all family farms will be gone, with the land used for purposes that may or may not include farming, said Devon Peña, a professor at the University of Washington and seasonal farmer-rancher in the valley. Gentrification, in the form of the 'McMansion', is slowly creeping into the area and transforming fields that once produced abundant harvests into now fallow acreage. "McMansions in this region are a painful episode," said Peña. "We don't want to become another Taos," the former farming community and now upscale getaway to the south.

Another threat to this region and its residents is the mega-farm, operations run by multi-national companies for the mass production of crops like potatoes. For Peña, who can trace his family roots back 16 generations and calls himself a 'simple gardener,' there is plenty to fear. "Four or five McMansions lined up along las huertas," along with the huge farming operations that are eyeing the area, "could literally change the life," he said.

One of the things that Peña and his friends from el Valle often do when their farm work is done is exchange seeds, a tradition that goes back centuries. Some collections have seeds whose genesis can be traced to some of the region's original crops. As a boy, Peña couldn't understand why people did it. "My grandmother explained, 'the seed is the memory of the plant'."

Today, he and his friends, the people he calls Trujillo, Gallegos, Valdez and Romero, can only hope the land that they till and work and love is something they'll have for generations to come, something more than a seed, something far more than a memory.