

The Pueblo Chieftain

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT



A five-day look at the state of farming today in Pueblo County

**By PETER STRESCINO
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

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FIRST IN A SERIES

Carl Musso Sr. relaxed recently under a catalpa tree on his Vineland farm, pondering a question about the prices of his crops, the fruits of his and his family's labors.

"It's hard to say (how people will react to rising produce prices)," he says, his deeply tanned hand mopping his weathered brow. "So far, they've been understanding."

Musso, who has farmed in Vineland since 1960, is helping to feed America at a time when food costs are spiking nationally and worldwide, when the price of fuel is on everyone's mind. But to Musso, and others like him here and in every agricultural area on the planet, fuel is just part of their worries. Fertilizer, seed and labor prices are also climbing quickly, making farming Ñ always a gamble Ñ an even more expensive proposition.

Hunger, which has gnawed at human beings since the beginning, is making a comeback in a big way worldwide.

Most Americans don't experience real hunger, and even those who do are within a social organization of being sustained, at least temporarily. Our supermarkets have been full of relatively inexpensive food since the 1950s. The distribution system is as reliable as a Denver Broncos fade in November and December.

Our poor are sometimes obese and our middle class eats like lords of the realm. If we choose to eat good food and not the convenient faux-food, that is.

But in the past few years, something's changed. It seemingly began with the need to turn corn to energy. Ethanol will consume about 35 percent of our corn crop this year, compared with 10 percent just three years

ago. Corn is competed for by everything from popcorn to corn syrup to fuel to livestock feed.

Corn drives us, sweetens us, energizes us and can even get us drunk.

Corn sold for an average \$5.16 a bushel in June, up 69 percent from the same time in 2007. Soybeans sold for nearly double Ñ to \$14.20 a bushel from last year. In 2006, a bushel of corn sold for \$2.14. The USDA predicts another 4 to 5 percent rise next year.

Speaking of drunk, the staggering dollar, which is down 37 percent of its value since 2001, is really hurting our buying power here and for imports. The dollar has reached its lowest level against Canadian currency since 1950, pound sterling since 1981 and the Swiss franc since 1985. Globally, many countries are beginning to shun dollars in trade.

Overall, the United States Department of Agriculture says that the overall cost of food and livestock has risen 16 percent compared with last year, led by eggs, dairy and poultry.

In the U.S., prices at the wholesale level are rising faster than any time in the past 27 years. American consumer prices rose 1.1 percent in June, 57 percent higher than predicted.

The United Nations says that 40 countries currently face food shortages. In East Africa, where war and tyranny reign, 13 million people are near starvation as the price of food has risen 500 percent in some places and the cost of rice is up 350 percent.

A fierce drought in Australia has crippled wheat and rice exports. Farmers there have said that when the rains return they will plant grapes for wine in lieu of rice because the profit is higher.

Globally, the world price index calculated by the UN Food Agricultural Organization surged 26 percent in 2007 after a 9-percent rise in 2006.

Demand, particularly in China and other developing nations, is helping cause the spike as rising living standards in those nations boost the demand for grains and higher-quality foods.

Josette Sheeran, executive director of the World Food Program, the largest humanitarian organization in the world, said higher food prices are pushing an additional 100 million people who previously bought their own food into hunger and poverty.

Much of the world is urging the U.S. and Canada to curtail subsidy programs to enhance trade.

Food futures are up 70 percent over the past four years, according to Archer Financial Services. Petroleum-based fertilizer is up 300 percent over the past two years.

India, Russia, Argentina and Vietnam are hoarding food, according to the Conference Board of Canada.

Commodity prices, based on contracts of March 31-June 30 rose as follows:

1. Cocoa, 39.3 percent for three months/290.2 percent annually.
2. Coffee, 16.1/87.3.
3. Butter, 7.2/34.1.

4. Orange juice, 6/27.9.
5. Sugar, 4.6/13.1.
6. Milk, 3.7/16.5.
7. Bacon, 2.9/12.6 (pork bellies).
8. Wheat, -9.2/-33.4.

Dairy feed was \$313 a ton in April 2004, \$488 a ton in April 2008, a 56 percent increase.

Today, and continuing for the following four days, The Pueblo Chieftain will take a glimpse into the area's productive farming economy.

What does it take to FEED A FAMILY?

By GAYLE PEREZ
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

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SECOND IN A SERIES



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/NATHAN PAPES From left, Ricky, Richie, Timothy, Emily and Gayle Perez.



Going to the grocery store has become a lot more painful lately.

With the cost of everything from meat and dairy to produce, bread and poultry, experiencing significant increases in the past year, a trip to the grocery store means spending an average of \$240 every two weeks for our family of five (two adults and three children ages 11, 8 and 6).

That's an increase of anywhere from \$120 to \$160 per month over what we paid just a year ago. Back then we'd come home with even more food than what we do now.

In an effort to demonstrate how the cost increase of food has affected local families, Chieftain editor Peter Strescino asked if I would report on how the rise in prices has affected our budget.

According to a recent Consumer Price Index, food costs have increased 5.1 percent since May 2007. Some items, such as eggs (18.2 percent increase), dairy (11 percent) and cereal and bread (10.5 percent) have seen double-digit percentage increases.

The bottom line, the rising costs at the grocery store combined with the increases at the gas pump are having a significant impact on our pocketbook, as I'm sure they are for nearly everyone these days.

As part of this project, I took a very close look at our spending on groceries in the past month, particularly looking at prices, quality and quantity of the items that were brought home to the family. I soon realized that all areas have been affected.

My shopping habits have never been extravagant. Although, I may fudge on some things such as ice cream and some breakfast cereal, most of what I purchase is offbrand, on sale or the cheapest brand on the shelf.

I'm always looking for sales on products such as meat and produce, poultry, bread, cereal, dairy and some snack food items.

I'll shop at two or three stores seeking the best deals and I clip coupons, though not as diligently as I should.

However, lately it doesn't matter where I shop or what brand I buy, the cart seems to be lighter and the final bill is a lot heavier.

In order to stay within a reasonable budget, I'm finding myself adjusting my shopping habits to deal with the higher prices.

I've had to cut back on some of the cuts of meat like bone-in pork chops, which would cost more than \$10 to feed our family. I've also eliminated whole chicken breasts but did find a great buy in chicken tenders on sale for \$1.97 a pound.

I've also have had to eliminate some fresh fruits and vegetables. I used to purchase the ready-made salad mix (mostly as a time-saving measure) but at \$3.69 for one bag, I'm reverting to cutting up a head of lettuce and adding a cucumber and tomato, which I found can be bought for a lot cheaper at the farmers market this time of year.

I've also cut out certain cereal products, some types of cheese (including the snack size string cheese, now \$6.49 per pack), deli lunch meat, yogurt, orange juice, bagels and certain cookies, chips and other snack foods.

With large eggs at an average of \$1.75 per dozen, we're going to have to start to learn how to get by on a dozen every two weeks.

Even Ramen noodles have gone up. We used to be able to get eight to 10 packages for a dollar. The best you can get now is four for a dollar.

I've reverted to buying the store brand of bread, though not bad, it's still not as fresh as some of the name brand products.

One of the benefits of shopping this time of year is the abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables available at the farmers market, which have much better prices than the grocery store.

For example at the local grocery store, cucumbers were 79 cents each, but I was able to buy four garden fresh for \$1.39 at the farmers market.

Peaches, plums, apricots and other seasonable fruit also cost a lot less at the farmers market, but are still considerably more than a year ago. I used to be able to buy eight to 10 pieces of fruit at the same price that now buys only three to four pieces.

I'll continue to take advantage of the farmers market while it's available but know that once it's ended, our fruit and vegetable bins will become noticeably emptier.

Although the higher prices are changing the family's shopping habits, on the bright side of things I'm learning to be more creative with meal planning and cooking.

Since not eating is not an option and food prices don't appear they'll be decreasing anytime soon, I guess I'll need to continue to look for smarter ways to shop that will allow me to stretch our dollars as far as we can to feed our hungry, growing family.

THE FAMILY FARM

Working and living their lives together on Keeps family working, living their lives together

By KASIE PIGG
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

Tuesday, August 05, 2008

THIRD IN A SERIES



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/NATHAN PAPES The DiSanti Family, (left to right): Justin, Dominic, Rose Ann, Sara DiSanti Genova, Jim.

From a time when carrots and radishes were taken to market in a horse-drawn wagon, to shipping 27 varieties of produce across the region in two semitrailers, only the family has stayed the same.

The farm began in the 1890s, just up South Road from where it is now. DiSanti Farms has been raising quality produce in Pueblo County for more than 100 years. What started all those years ago as a family farm has evolved into a diversified operation including garden vegetables, commodity crops and livestock, but is still run by the DiSanti family.

Rose Ann and Jim DiSanti continued and expanded the family farm, which is now located on 29th Lane and South Road, but are handing the reins over to three of their four children. Justin DiSanti, 27, Sara DiSanti Genova, 23, and Dominic DiSanti, 21, will continue the family business

The oldest of the four, Justin, lives near the vegetable stand in the same house his father grew up in. Sara, recently married, plans on building a house and greenhouses on 28th Lane and Manning Road, or, as she says, "in the backyard." The youngest in the family, Dominic, is currently attending school at Colorado State University-Fort Collins but plans to make his home "somewhere on the farm." The couple's other son, Rocco DiSanti, will be moving to New York City in September.

"I think it's very unique, we're lucky they all love it and want to," Rose Ann said, describing her children's will to remain on the farm. "And they don't feel like they have to."

Living and working on the farm has afforded the DiSanti family an opportunity to stay close, and is an experience that is not common nowadays.

"You grow up with your parents and working with your family," Dominic said, describing why he feels his life

is a good one. "You get to see your family all the time and I don't think a lot of people have that."

In a time when family farms are becoming harder to find, the DiSantis have found ways to make their farm thrive.

"With the price of gas and freight, it's cheaper to buy locally," Rose Ann said.

"Now is the best time for us, the local market is booming," Dominic added. "Despite whatever is happening with corporations, we've always had the fruit stand on the farm, and we have the regular customers that keep coming back and that's always helped."

In addition, Dominic said they have found a niche for labor-intensive crops. Vegetables like yellow squash, which needs to be hand-picked, are things corporations do not have time for but consumers enjoy.

So what is the secret to having a successful family operation? Frank says it is the diversity.

"Keeping it diverse will allow the family to stay together," he revealed. "If they all do the same thing, it'll be too much family."

With the vegetable and commodity crop operation, the herd of mostly Black Angus cattle, the fruit stand, Sara's Fainting goats, and up-and-coming greenhouses, there is plenty to keep everyone busy. The diversity also helps keep things going if a certain market drops.

"If the vegetables start doing bad, then we have cattle," Jim said. "If the cattle aren't doing well then we have the farm."

From an outsider's perspective, what the DiSantis have is special, not only because they run a thriving operation but because the future of their farm is in good hands. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, today the average age of farmers in Pueblo County is 55, a grim number for the future of agriculture.

Larry Duall represents Pioneer Seed Company, and stops in to check on the performance of his product at DiSanti Farms, as well as other operations across the state.

"You don't know how special you've got it," Duall said to the five family members during lunch. "I can honestly say I don't know of a family with three kids involved."

With the future of DiSanti Farms in their hands, Justin, Dominic and Sarah do not plan on changing much.

"Just continue the same diverse vegetables, commodity crops and livestock," Dominic said.

So in a time when other families barely have time for one another, or live across the country, DiSanti Farms has been able to entice another generation to stay in production agriculture.

"You feel like that's where you need to be," Dominic said. "It's a great place to raise a family."

But perhaps the best way to understand why the three will continue their family's farming legacy comes from Sara.

"It's all you know."

By KASIE PIGG
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

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FOURTH IN A SERIES

It takes tradition and innovation to run the modern ranching business



CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/NATHAN PAPES Reeves and Betsey Brown observe their cattle in a field on the 3-R Ranch in Beulah.



Cows graze in a field on the 3-R Ranch in Beulah.

When the word ranching is spoken, thoughts of dusty cattle drives, Texas Longhorn cattle and characters out of a John Wayne movie come to the minds of many.

The reality of modern-day ranching is more about feed efficiency, supreme genetics, market speculation and a solid business plan. While keeping tradition in mind and maintaining a passion for ranching, Reeves and Betsey Brown, owners of 3-R Ranch in Beulah, said it is important to not let tradition be the only guide in the ranching business.

The 3-R Ranch has deep traditional roots. Its beginnings are as old as Pueblo's. The land on which it is located was part of the Thatcher-Everhart enterprise that encompassed more than a million acres at one time.

"If you let tradition guide you, you're making decisions in 2008 based on practices from 1808," Reeves Brown said. "It's a dynamic industry and history is a part of it but you can't let tradition guide you."

The Browns have found that in order to be successful, three areas must be maintained: the resource, the animals and finances.

In an effort to manage the land on which their operation sits, the 3-R Ranch uses what Brown called a holistic approach to pasture management. They rotate their 800-plus head of cattle throughout sections of grassland every three or four days, Mrs. Brown said the idea follows the way buffalo grazed this area many years ago.

"We get so many benefits in addition to sustaining our resource," she said. "We've gone from having a short gramma grass to longer grasses, and we have a longer grazing season."

As far as the animals go, those have to change with the times as well. The breed of cattle raised on the ranch depends largely on what the market calls for.

"We try to stay current with the market. In the '90s, the market called for a hybrid. Then we started breeding Black Angus to get premiums for animals on the kill floor," Brown said, explaining that even though the shape of the economy will cause the current domestic market to call for fewer premium cuts of beef, Black Angus is still the breed of choice. "U.S. Premium Beef is the largest exporter; those (international customers) pay for what they want. We'll still be paid more on the export market and now that we have what we have (a mostly Black Angus herd), they will still bring a premium in any market." With current corn prices rising sharply and the price of beef increasing only steadily, the Browns said the future of any operation lies in the ability to manage finances. Reeves Brown recalled the story of a friend who obtained a bachelor of science degree in an agriculture field and then went to Stanford to obtain a master's degree in business as the perfect example of the mindset needed to raise cattle.

"He would tell people who questioned him being a ranch kid in a business school, 'We don't run a ranch, we run an agribusiness,' " Brown said. "If you're gonna survive, you have to look at it like a business. That attitude will dictate what you do with your business to make it profitable."

Marketing the product raised while ranching is also key, and the National Animal Identification System will be a major component of marketing beef.

"We'll have age - and source - verified beef, where the marketplace shows where it came from and how it got there," Brown said. "If you don't have that, the consumers are going to get what they want and it won't be yours."

The largest problem for the future of ranching is keeping people interested. Brown said that soon the profit in ranching may be squeezed so tight that young people will not want to continue to produce cattle.

"This is just the American way, you just have to make it work," he said. "It's the biggest inconvenience for people following their dreams of producing cattle."

Farmers differ on the **FUTURE OF OUR FARMS**

By **PETER STRESCINO**
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

August 07, 2008 02:06 am

FINAL IN A SERIES



CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/FILE Joey Musso, whose family has been working its Vineland farm since 1960, stacks watermelons in a cart at the Pueblo Farmers Market last month.



Vic Mauro



Shane Milberger



Carl Musso



Donny Cooper

Donny Cooper used to worry about weeds on his Boone farm along the Bessemer Ditch.

Now, he worries that the entire Pueblo farming area will one day be a weed patch.

Cooper, 79, has never worked off his family's farm except for "one time we got hailed out and I worked for a bit at a filling station." A member of a family that worked the land for decades, the third-generation farmer's own two sons received advanced educations and do not farm.

"I think we'd better be worried," Cooper said recently. "Housing has taken over farm and grazing land.

"Someone will eventually get the water and then this will be a weed patch. It's just going to be pathetic."

Cooper recalled when most farming was done by hand, a labor-intensive era (pre-history to recently, actually) when many more workers were needed than now.

"All the hand labor caused machinery to be manufactured," he said. "And all the quality to be given up. Now it takes two guys to do what used to take 50."

If the recent past is any indication of the future of farming in Pueblo, it might be instructive to listen to a report by a longtime St. Charles Mesa resident who does some farming but asked that his name not be used for this story.

"Somebody might find out I'm still alive and come looking for the money I owe," he joked.

"The St. Charles Mesa was all Italian vegetable farmers in the 1930s and '40s," he said. "Zinno, Morrone, Giadone, Tucci, Mosco, Bartolo, DiSanti, Genova.

"Most of the old farms were 10, 20, 25 acres. It was amazing how much they grew. But, eventually, you had to get big or get out."

He said most of the youngsters didn't want to farm and left. Thirty-five years ago, there were seven producing dairies in the farming area from Salt Creek to Avondale. Now there is one.

"Without the Bessemer Ditch," he said. "We would not be farming."

Carl Musso Sr. has farmed his Vineland acres since 1960. Besieged by high production costs, the veteran farmer wrapped up his feelings about the future of farming in the county in one word: "Weak." But Musso's son, Carl Jr., 45, works the farm, and two of Carl Sr.'s grandsons, who are 22 and 17, plan to continue to grow vegetables.

"I'll take the farm to Roselawn (Cemetery)," Carl Sr., 67, joked.

"I'll work it as long as I can," said Carl Jr.

"We will see farms in Pueblo County for several generations," said Marvin Reynolds, director of Colorado State University Extension Service in Pueblo County. "The future is strong."

Because there's water and that housing is easy to build on farm land (it's level, less rocky), Reynolds said more development will come. But that same water makes the 24,700 acres of irrigated land prime farming county.

Reynolds does say he worries about the average age of the farmer in the county, which is 55.

"I'm here for the long haul," said Mesa farmer Gary DiTomaso, 42. "I don't want to do nothing else."

He has two daughters who run his summer farmers markets, and said maybe if he gets grandsons some day, they might take over the 300-acre farm.

"I might eventually get out of vegetables," said DiTomaso. "I might grow field corn, hay, large crops that don't take as much labor. But I see myself farming until I can't."

But Phil Prutch said he's the last in line for his 250-acre Vineland spread.

A third-generation farmer, Prutch, 57, said "I'm the last generation. I hope I can stay in business long enough. But I'll sell out."

Shane Milberger, 39, did not grow up on a farm, but his 280 acres on the Mesa may eventually be worked by his son, Dalton, 13.

"This is my career," Shane Milberger said. "It's a hard life. There's better jobs."

He said he wants Dalton and a younger son to get educations, but Dalton already is running his farmers market road operations.

"Dalton wants to farm. He's very involved. So we may continue to farm."

Milberger said he is looking into expanding his reach, perhaps selling frozen chili in bigger Colorado cities.

He said 20 years ago there were 15 truck farms on the Mesa, and now there are three - his, DiSanti Farms and DiTomaso Farms.

Vineland farmer Vic Mauro, 37, said his son is too young at 3 to understand the tough life.

"I'll let him decide what he wants to do," said Mauro, who farms 232 acres. "I'll never force him, but if he wants to farm, yeah!"

Mauro is a fourth-generation farmer.

"I understand how the older farmer feels in relation to selling. It's a lot of hard work. If I'm their age, I might think differently.

"But it's very peaceful out here. Either you like it or you don't. I'm here and staying here."

But Donny Cooper, who rents out his acreage but still lives on the property, said he'll eventually sell his place.

"I'd have been better off going to work for wages (in 1947, when he bought the farm from his father)," he said. "I have no 401 (k). I have no pension.

"So this farm is my 401 (k)."