

Agriculture in Boulder County

The League of Women Voters is primarily a grassroots lobbying organization. All of our positions are designed to give us criteria to influence government action. So the involvement of government in agriculture is of great concern to Leaguers. We offer some background for Units to be held February 14-16, 2011.

Of the 474,347 acres in Boulder County, 324,001 acres are “protected.” That is 68.3% of the land in Boulder County. In descending order of magnitude, protection is provided by: US Forest Service (137,308), County Open Space (53,817), City of Boulder Open Space (32,308) [plus 6,300 acres of Conservation Easements and 2,638 City of Boulder Parks], County Conservation Easements (30,903) [plus 5,287 joint county municipal Open Space], Rocky Mountain National Park (27,313) and municipal watersheds (10,971). The rest of the protected land is Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and other federal, state and municipal lands.

Boulder County Parks and Open Space (POS) has 26,154 acres under Agricultural Lease. That’s about 5.5% of the land in the County. The leased land is controlled by direct ownership/purchase of the land (called fee simple) and by purchase of development rights. Only fee simple government-owned land is removed from the tax role. A Possessory Interest tax is levied on those lands that produce income, but it is much less than the property tax would have been. As far as the agricultural land is concerned, the County government generates income from leases, so the fiscal impact is hard to determine. Rent income counter balances tax revenue lost but that income stays within the POS department to keep the operations going. So less money goes into the County treasury, but the POS department self funds a lot with the farm income so it doesn’t require as much money from the property tax to fund itself.

Because of a state amendment, leases can only be one year, but the county gives a verbal renewal for more years (usually 3 years although this varies) and lets the tenant know this is contingent on their being a good steward. If the stewardship is inadequate, the county agreement will end after a year. Relative to the possessory tax, a shorter lease is considered to have less value to the state (gives tenant more value).

How do leases come up to bid? The county has different types of agreements with the former landowner. The agreement could be that the county leases the property back to the former owner. This property would then not be open to bidding. If no lease-back, the county may contact adjacent or nearby landowners to ask them to manage the property rather than opening to bid.

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) are a very hot topic among consumers and producers. Currently in the U.S., 93% of soybeans, 78% of cotton, 73% of corn, 95% of sugar beets, 90% of canola, 80% of papayas and 13% of zucchini are grown from genetically modified seeds. GMO tomatoes were taken off the market because of poor sales. GMO rice may be grown next year. Genetic modification is being used to make crops insect resistant and/or herbicide tolerant. The

potential exists for numerous other traits to be engineered. These include modifying the crops so that the produce is at its peak when it reaches market (slow-ripening fruit), developing resistance to plant viruses and fungi, modifying oil content of plants (providing healthier food oils or oils for industrial use), increasing vitamin content, producing pharmaceutical products, making plants salt, drought, flood or cold tolerant, removing allergens, converting annual crops to perennial crops, and improving yield and overall nutritional value. GMO opponents question the benefits that may be derived from genetic modification of plants. They are concerned that insufficient testing and corporate sponsored research may be leading to an inadequate understanding of the potential damage that GMO's could do. GMO corn may be grown on farmland controlled by the County POS but sugar beets have not been approved yet. At the Agricultural Units in February, we will discuss the basics of GMO's, the concept of "substantial equivalence," and the controversy over the health and environmental impact of these crops.

To raise organic animals and produce organic dairy products is a complicated, daunting task. Livestock must be prevented from eating any feed that is not organic and be provided outdoor access and pasture. Ranchers must refrain from antibiotic and hormone use in animals and sustain animals on 100% organic feed. "Natural" is an easier label to achieve and involves rations of certain free choice feeds. Neither organic nor natural animals can receive growth hormones, antibiotics, steroids or animal by-products, but natural can be fed non-organic feed. The difference is the amount of time an animal is maintained under the required conditions, and the choices of feed and treatment of the animal, organic being much more stringent than natural.

A main ingredient for farming and agricultural practices is water. In Colorado, the majority of agricultural properties are irrigated with ditch water, and legally that was one of the first beneficial uses. Boulder County has approximately 89 ditches that can be accessed for water. The County holds the majority of shares in about a half dozen ditch companies. Annually, the County pays about \$350,000 in water assessments to the ditch companies in order to get the water to their land. The County works cooperatively with the tenants to clean the ditches in order to receive the water. The revenue received from tenants pays for operations and management, crop share, and the water itself, but not staff.

There are several ways the farmer or rancher can irrigate with the water: flood irrigation, drip irrigation or pivot head sprinklers. Although the county staff believes pivot head sprinklers are more efficient on large properties, they are expensive to purchase and many farmers do not have the revenue, nor does the County. Drip irrigation is used on small parcels of land typical of organic farms. The county does partner with a division of the USDA, to gain money for sprinklers.

We anticipate a lively discussion at Units and will post our resource material on the LWVBC's website after the Units. Note that there is not unanimity among the committee members on some of the issues, and we will pose some unanswerable questions. ---Louisa Young