



UTAH COUNTY AGRICULTURE TOOLBOX ABRDIGED

Promoting and Sustaining Agriculture in Utah County



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Utah County Agriculture Toolbox: Abridged

Agriculture is a significant part of Utah County's heritage. As Utah County continues to grow, it will be ever more difficult to provide sources of local food that are sufficient to feed even a fraction of Utah County's rapidly growing population. The population of Utah County is predicted to double by 2040. Certain fruits and vegetables can only be grown in areas where the microclimate is favorable—in Utah, most of these areas are in Utah County.

Utah County has the land, water, knowledge, and ability to produce local food. However, current trends present some challenges, including the loss of agricultural land and water to residential and commercial development. Food-producing land is currently being developed at a rate that will leave no irrigated land in the future to grow fruit and vegetables. Utah County needs to preserve resources so that agriculture can survive and even thrive. This will require strategic action.

This toolbox contains **optional recommendations** from the Utah County Agriculture Toolbox Steering Committee to the Utah County Commissioners, the Utah County Planning Commission, and residents in the county's cities who hope to sustain and promote agricultural lands, water, and practices.

GOAL ONE: WORK TO MAKE AGRICULTURE MORE ECONOMICALLY AND SOCIALLY VIABLE

There are many ways to increase the viability of local agriculture in Utah County. Opportunities exist to increase agriculture through changes in production and distribution networks. Opportunities exist in the form of tax incentives and financial assistance for farmers and ranchers. Opportunities also exist through the expansion of new sources of income for farmers, like agritourism and value-added processing. Agriculture's viability can also be improved through more carefully considered succession planning and by increasing the visibility of agriculture to younger generations through education drives and exposure to urban agriculture.

SECTION ONE: OPPORTUNITIES FOR FARMERS AND RANCHERS

When provided with access to additional resources, farmers and ranchers can increase the viability of their operations in many ways. These agricultural producers can consider providing firsthand agricultural experience to community members in order to increase revenues through tourism. They can also begin to develop new products, using their produce to increase sale margins, or explore untapped markets in their communities. To protect the current and future viability of their lands, farmers and ranchers can also seek additional protections for their operations and plan who will take over their farms and ranches when they retire.

Promote Greenbelt Designation as a Way for Farmers to Save on Property Taxes, by Valuing Their Land Based on Agricultural Production Rather Than Market Value

The Utah Farmland Assessment Act allows Utah farmers and ranchers to have their agricultural property assessed and taxed based on its capability for productivity instead of real-estate market values.¹ The Utah State Tax Commission works with other entities to establish values for productivity that are applied statewide, giving farmland new land values to be assessed and taxed on.

Greenbelt designation is meant to more accurately reflect the true value of agricultural land and operations and lower tax rates to dissuade landowners from selling agricultural land to residential developers. As a result, greenbelt designation could improve both the economic viability of farming operations and the preservation of existing farmlands in Utah County.

Support Transitioning to Specialty Crops and Niche Products with High Returns Where Feasible and Utilize Value-Added Processing Methods

Utah County has an ideal microclimate for many specialty crops and niche products that are in high demand. Shifting from common crops like hay and alfalfa to other specialty crops can allow some growers to sell their yields at higher prices, improving farm revenues. Growers can also achieve higher revenues through value-added processing. Value-added processing refers to the on-site transformation of raw agricultural products into consumer-ready food products. Other potential ways of adding value to agricultural products involve utilizing each farmer's unique skillset and resources to implement strategies related to processing, packaging, or marketing.

Promote and Implement Practices That Reduce Operational Costs and Increase Revenue

Farmers can increase revenues by exploring new technologies. New and different practices in the production, upkeep, and harvesting of crops could reduce the costs of operating a farm.²

Farmers and ranchers may also be able to increase revenue by exploring products for niche markets. Farmers could work with other farmers, both local and nationwide, to develop new processes and improve existing products in order to create new and more valuable products. Agricultural producers could also team up with other small-scale farmers and ranchers to increase their purchasing and marketing power.

Help Farmers Develop Marketing Plans and Processes to Improve Revenues and Ensure That Their Products Are Sold

Marketing is a key aspect of agricultural production that is often overlooked. Marketing plans for farmers need to be substantial and holistic. Farmers and ranchers may benefit by expanding their knowledge of product marketing and not relying wholly on any one avenue for product sales. Using varied distribution channels may help farmers and ranchers better market their products and see increased revenue. To be successful, however, these marketing and selling methods require the support of other producers as well as the overall community.

Explore a Variety of Food Distribution Systems to Help Local Food Thrive in Utah County

A lack of efficient, accessible food distribution systems can be a barrier for farmers wanting to distribute their food products locally. More effective food distribution systems will improve the sale of farm products, better enabling farmers to connect to consumers. Many underutilized crops may produce a greater return than current crops, but without processing

1. www.utahcounty.gov/Dept/Assess/Greenbelt.asp

2. www.uky.edu/Ag/CCD/introsheets/sustainableag.pdf

facilities in Utah or local distribution systems, farmers are unlikely to grow these crops. Local food systems provide the fresh, in-season products that Utah residents increasingly want and desire. Having strong local systems also improves the resiliency of Utah's food distribution, enabling Utah residents to buy more Utah products and rely less on importing food from places like California and Mexico.

Promote Agritourism

Agritourism refers to hands-on visits that allow the public to view or experience agriculture for recreational, entertainment, or educational purposes. Agritourism benefits farm owners by exposing their farms to the community and by providing a source of additional income (which can increase the economic viability of small farms). As they participate in unique, hands-on farming experiences, agritourists may learn to see food differently and develop a desire to protect local farms. Though agritourism

may not be viable for all farming operations, it has been valuable and successful for some farms in Utah County.

Develop Succession Planning, Training, and Education for Farmers and Ranchers

Succession planning is the process of formally transitioning management and ownership of an agricultural business from one generation to the next. Since individuals' relationships and situations vary, there is no single plan that can be used by every family or business. Succession planning permits a farming family to transfer management and ownership of their business in the way they want. Preparing farm operations for those who will take over ensures that the next generation will be able to continue Utah's farming legacy. It is important that farmers establish clear succession plans or identifying potential candidates to take over farm operations so that they are able to retire while keeping the land in agricultural production.

SECTION TWO: OPPORTUNITIES FOR STATE, COUNTY, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

State, county, and city governments can significantly improve the economic viability of agriculture in Utah County. State officials, for example, can expand the resources available to beginning and existing farmers and incentivize new technologies that make farming and ranching more viable at different scales. County and other local governments can promote infrastructure projects and urban agriculture as a way to increase agriculture's presence in both rural and urban communities.

Increase Financial Assistance and Access to Agricultural Lands for Beginning and Existing Farmers and Ranchers

Many individuals face significant barriers when trying to start a career in farming and ranching, such as limited access to lands and markets, inflation of land prices, high costs, and a lack of support networks. Financial assistance helps farmers overcome these obstacles and continue farming. New farmers and ranchers often have difficulty receiving financial aid, especially if they do not have the assets needed to invest in a farm or an established and extensive track record in the industry. Financial resources also need to be expanded to assist farmers who are established assets in local agriculture. More resources are needed to meet the financial realities of farming in Utah and to properly incentivize farming.

Treat and Promote Agriculture as an Important State Industry Cluster

Establishing agriculture as an industry cluster in Utah would emphasize its importance to the state's economy and better connect farmers to resources and other support. As a result, the agriculture industry will become more sustainable and economically feasible.

Expand Farmland by Adapting Systems and Building Water Infrastructure Projects to Bring Good Quality Water to Prime Farm Soils

Some areas in Utah County do not have enough irrigation water to make farming viable, or the water quality may not be good enough to sustain orchards or other high-value crops. Expanding and building water infrastructure will bring more high-quality water to farms and ranches and help Utah provide food to its growing population. The cost of building and expanding water infrastructure projects can be prohibitive, but if the projects are carefully planned and executed they can provide new farming opportunities in areas that currently have limited water availability and increase the amount of high-functioning agricultural lands available in the county and state.

Promote Urban Agriculture and Community Gardening

Urban agriculture refers to the growing, processing, and distributing of food and other products in urban rather than rural areas. Urban agriculture connects residents in cities to food-growing processes that would normally be inaccessible to them. Urban agriculture positively affects communities, providing both a source of local and healthy food and a place for people to come together and strengthen community ties and relationships.

Encourage the Development of Innovative Agricultural Processes and Technology

Many aspects of modern farms work differently than they did just a few decades ago due to advancements in technology. Technological innovation can increase the overall efficiency and economic feasibility of the agricultural industry. Though some federal tax credits and funding options exist at the federal level, state or county-level tax credits and other funding options should be used to help Utah farmers and businesses explore new technologies that could benefit agriculture across the state.

Create Local Agricultural Commissions that Can Specifically Promote Agriculture in Individual Communities

Agricultural commissions are standing committees, created by individual cities that strive to increase the visibility of agriculture in communities. They represent and advocate for the farming community, encouraging the pursuit of agriculture, promoting economic opportunities for farmers and ranchers, and preserving their community's agricultural businesses and lands. Utah County farmers should continually take advantage of the increased networking, educational, and economic opportunities provided by agricultural commissions. These commissions allow farmers to be more involved in the decisions of local government and increase communication between farmers, politicians, and city leaders.

SECTION THREE: OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Providing agricultural education at a variety of scales is crucial for promoting agriculture in Utah County. To improve agriculture's economic and social viability, Utah's universities should continue to research technologies and provide agricultural education alongside primary and secondary school districts. State governmental organizations and nonprofit organizations should also explore ways to better educate residents about local food production and to educate lawmakers regarding the importance of agriculture to the county and state.

Strengthen Relationships with Utah Universities to Research Agricultural Strategies, Economics, and Technologies; Model Agriculture Futures; and Promote Agricultural Education

Local research conducted by academics and researchers will help Utah County farmers better understand and improve agriculture in their region. The circumstances for farming are constantly changing in Utah County and across the state as urban and suburban development expands and economic markets continue to shift. Researchers at Utah State University should model a variety of agriculture scenarios to help plan for the future of farming in Utah County. They should also establish new strategies that will benefit food growers and expand the state's agriculture industry.

Educate Utah Children About Agriculture

The best way to ensure that agriculture will be valued by future generations is to connect children with farms in ways that will leave a lasting impression. Through creating unique educational agricultural experiences, future generations will receive valuable education about local food and about the food-production process. These experiences will help children understand where their food comes from while also opening up communication among farmers, teachers, and community members and promoting agriculture as a possible career path.

Educate Landowners and Residents About the Value of Agriculture and Local Food

Understanding and connections to agricultural lands has steadily decreased among urban residents. Outreach efforts should be made to help people learn about the challenges farms face, understand that converting farms into urban lands negatively affects the state's ability to produce local food, find out where fresh food can be purchased, recognize the environmental tradeoffs associated with having food produced far away versus locally, and appreciate the value of having fresh food available in the region.

Educate Elected Officials Across the County About the Importance of Agriculture and Their Role in Promoting Its Future

Support for agriculture in Utah County among elected officials can vary widely, especially as new people with new ideas are voted in during every election cycle. Though agricultural education is crucial for younger generations, older generations should not be overlooked in farming education efforts. Elected officials in Utah County should be continually educated about the current conditions and future possibilities of agriculture in the county.

GOAL TWO: ENCOURAGE DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS AND IMPLEMENT MEASURES THAT PROTECT AGRICULTURAL LAND AND WATER

The physical loss of farmland is one of the biggest challenges agriculture is facing nationwide and is often irreversible. As residential development continues to require large shares of Utah County's water supply, the availability and allocation of water has become another concern and source of tension for both agricultural and residential users. If Utah County wants to provide local food and agricultural products to its residents in the future, it needs to protect existing and future agricultural lands and water.

Protecting Utah County's agricultural lands and preserving natural resources like water and soil should be priorities now more than ever. Existing farmland can be protected from encroaching development through a variety of means, especially if residents, developers, and lawmakers understand the actual social, economic, and environmental value of agriculture.

SECTION ONE: PROACTIVE PRESERVATION MEASURES

Cities often treat farms and ranches as places to store land and water until they are needed for new housing developments and businesses, providing revenue for the city. Patterns for residential and commercial development determine how quickly farms and ranches will disappear in the county. When development is compact, for instance, more land and water stays in agriculture. If policymakers want to preserve agriculture in Utah County, however, they must be more proactive. The following strategies can help policymakers address and combat the problems that threaten agriculture's survival.

Use and Fund Conservation Easements to Protect Farmland

To protect land for future generations, state and local policymakers should work together to fund conservation easements. A conservation easement is a legally binding agreement that restricts the uses of land and/or prevents a piece of property from being developed. Conservation easements can shield farmers from pressures to sell land to developers and allow them to continue their farming operations or retire with significant income, passing their agricultural operations to those who will continue farming on the land. The reduction in property value resulting from the easement makes selling the land to a farmer, rather than a developer, more feasible.

Identify Specific Uses for Agricultural Lands and Prioritize Which Lands Should Be Preserved or Undergo Long-Term Conservation Efforts

The county should determine the value of agricultural lands by analyzing and comparing the attributes of farmable lands. This process, combined with community feedback, would help officials identify the most promising farmlands in the county and determine which lands should be preserved. In order to establish a meaningful valuation of agricultural lands in Utah County, data needs to be gathered to better understand where different types of crops grow best and where there is potential for farm expansion on underutilized land. Spatially identifying these critical lands is an important step in helping policymakers make decisions about preservation.

Establish Agriculture Protection Areas in Utah County to Support Farm Operations at All Scales

Agriculture Protection Areas (APAs) help protect farmers against nuisance lawsuits, unreasonable restrictions from state and local agencies on farm structures and practices, changes in zoning designations, and roads cutting through their farms. APAs help prevent smaller farms from being sold to developers, which makes more small farms available to beginning farmers and helps mitigate some of the inherent risks of small farms. These protected areas enable farmers to run their business with greater peace of mind and less worry about external forces disrupting their livelihoods.

Develop Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) Programs

Transfer of development rights (TDR) programs are market-based tools that encourage and facilitate the voluntary transfer of development from places, such as farmland, where development is undesirable to locations where development is encouraged. Transferring development rights helps preserve critically important lands, but for a TDR program to work efficiently the government must clearly define the process of facilitating transfers.

Encourage More Efficient Agricultural Water Systems and Practices

Different cities, communities, and individuals should work together to use water more efficiently and to conserve water on a basin-wide scale. However, many of these efficiency and conservation efforts need to first

be explored and incentivized by the county, its cities, and regional water agencies. Though some conservation measures may decrease the amount of water diverted, they may also increase the overall depletion throughout the basin. Assisting cities in managing their water rights will help preserve water, encourage a broader understanding of water in the basin, and avoid artificial shortages when allocating water to different uses.

Use Alternative Water Transfer Options to Stop “Buy and Dry” Practices

As residential and municipal development puts pressure on lawmakers to secure water rights, cities will sometimes purchase agricultural water rights and lands, transferring them away from agricultural uses. Because of this pressure from development, producers are incentivized to sell their water rights, often having to take their lands out of agricultural production. Alternative water transfer options will allow cities to allocate water while still preserving agricultural lands.

Control Invasive Species That Are Using Large Amounts of Water

Because of the amount of water some invasive species use, removing them from along Utah's rivers and lakes could greatly improve the amount of water available for urban and rural uses. For example, removing the phragmites along the Great Salt Lake would add the same amount of water to the lake that the construction of the Bear River Pipeline would remove. The water currently being used by these invasive species across Utah County could be better utilized for farms and ranches if invasive populations are reduced and kept in check.

SECTION TWO: ZONING AND OTHER PRESERVATION MEASURES

Government action should focus on several specific issues to benefit agriculture in Utah County. For example, land use patterns (enforced by ordinances and zoning) that encourage building new housing and businesses more compactly result in less consumption of land and water. Such patterns also allow the market to provide a wider range of housing options. In addition, regulatory burdens can be removed to better support farming. Making changes to existing plans, regulations, ordinances, and codes can significantly improve how land is developed and how cities view agriculture.

Establish a Minimum Size of 40 Acres for Homes Built in Agricultural Zones to Discourage the Conversion of Farming Operations into Low-Density Residential Lots

Farming operations are generally more effective and easier to protect and preserve when they take place on larger scales. Once land around smaller agricultural lots begins to be developed, it becomes easier for urban and suburban developments to expand, threatening to consume productive farmlands. Land currently belonging to hobby farms could be better used as part of larger, more productive farm. However, small farms are crucial to the agricultural industry, especially for beginning farmers looking to gain experience before moving to larger-scale farming efforts. The county needs to carefully evaluate the impacts of its agriculture zoning practices in order to better balance the needs of small-scale farmers with the needs of large-scale operations; for instance, agricultural land should be allowed to be subdivided into smaller farms but prevented from being turned into low-density residential subdivisions.

Encourage Developers to Cluster Growth and Promote Denser Development, Leaving Larger Portions of Farmland Intact When Farms Are Developed

Cluster development is the concentration of small-scale development in a smaller portion of a designated tract of land. Cluster development preserves contiguous tracts of farmland or open space through easement, covenant, or deed restriction. Farm owners looking to sell some of their

land can look into cluster development as a way to cash in on some of the value of their land while still preserving much of the functioning farmland. If clustered growth is developed correctly on a large parcel, farming operations can continue despite added development.

Develop Compact Infrastructure to Encourage Land Development Where Services Already Exist Rather Than in Outlying Areas

Creating and maintaining new infrastructure (roads, water lines, pipes, power lines, etc.) can be costly to cities and developers when constructing new housing developments, especially when those developments are located away from existing road, sewage, and power systems. Maintaining and expanding existing infrastructure in urban areas is often less expensive than funding costly expansions in outside areas. As a result, building developments becomes less expensive for developers and could make Utah's housing stock significantly more affordable.

Encourage the Development of Vacant or Underused Parcels Within Existing Urban Areas

Many parcels within urban areas in Utah County are vacant or underutilized. By developing these parcels before creating new developments at the fringe of urban areas, fewer agricultural lands will be threatened by encroaching commercial and business developments. Redeveloping urban centers and already inhabited areas is crucial to maintaining the quality of life Utahns have come to appreciate in their communities. Urban redevelopment preserves agricultural lands and reduces blight in urban areas, creating more appealing communities and a friendlier, more vibrant street life.

Update City Plans and Zoning Practices to Encourage Agriculture, Changing Regulations to Foster Farming and Better Manage Water

Cities can help preserve local agriculture by updating their city plans and zoning practices to address and encourage agriculture and water management. Because agriculture is a major component of Utah County's economy and heritage, specifically addressing agriculture and water will likely result in added protections and a greater emphasis on agriculture in city plans. Cities can provide significant assistance to farming operations, especially if, in their city plans, they make an effort to include farmers' interests, preservation strategies, and other resources. Long range regional and city plans can promote the identification of prime farmlands that should be protected for future generations.

Accommodate More Growth on Less Land

One of the best ways to preserve agriculture is to develop compactly, which reduces the consumption of undeveloped lands (often agricultural or open spaces) and irrigation water for residential, commercial, and office construction. More dense development is currently in demand because it is more affordable and increases travel convenience.³ To foster more compact growth patterns, development within current and existing urban areas needs to be encouraged. By doing so, the county is able to channel most development away from key agricultural open lands.

Ensure That Urban Growth Occurs Where Appropriate and Establish Buffers Between Homes and Agricultural Lands

Utah County's crucial agricultural lands are being threatened by constantly-expanding urban growth. To help preserve agricultural land and greenspace, local lawmakers should encourage growth in places that are better suited for development. The lakes and mountains of the Wasatch Front serve as natural boundaries to growth in the Salt Lake City and Provo–Orem metropolitan regions. However, population growth and the subsequent need for development is placing pressure on many of Utah County's natural resources and agricultural lands. Agricultural buffers provide additional protections for typical farming practices, allowing them to continue production and better coexist with encroaching development.

Establish a tax-base sharing program to encourage preservation of agricultural lands

Agricultural lands are considered to be one of the lowest tax generators for a city, despite contributing more in revenue than they require in expenditures. Tax-base sharing programs can help cities cooperate with one another and act in a way that benefits the entire region, instead of fixating on just the interests of their own communities. Cities would be less likely to over-allocate commercial development and unnecessarily destroy farmland because they would be confident that they would receive some portion of the region's taxes, regardless of what businesses they have. Changing the tax revenue structure will also allow the market to work more effectively, ensuring that the amount of retail in the region matches the actual demand more closely.

FEDERAL CONCERNS:

There are many ways to preserve and improve agriculture in Utah County, but current laws, attitudes, and conditions across the state and country make it difficult to address certain challenges. This section reviews federal strategies that, though outside of the scope of the rest of the toolbox, could benefit Utah County's agricultural industry in the future.

Work With Congress and Federal Agencies to Address Regulatory Concerns to Increase the Viability of Farms and Ranches

The most effective regulatory programs are generally run on the state or local levels in cooperation with the farm industry and provide flexibility wherever possible.

Currently, many regulatory programs increase the cost and difficulty of compliance for existing farmers and ranchers, which is then either passed on to Utah consumers through higher grocery bills or taken out of agricultural producers' already thin margins. By decreasing the complexity of existing regulatory systems, elected officials can begin to tackle significant barriers to entry into the agriculture industry that would have otherwise dissuaded new farmers and ranchers who lack the experience, capital, or economies of scale necessary to comply with the existing regulatory framework. Examples of federal regulatory programs include: agricultural employment visas, the Endangered Species Act, Pesticide Worker Protection Standards, Food Safety Modernization Act, and grazing on federal lands.