Herrera credits Ernie Marx, Extension agriculture agent in Larimer County, and others within the Extension system for guiding him through the process of determining that cucumbers would be the best bet for a crop that could produce a good return per acre, and staying with him during all the steps of developing the co-op.

“We considered string beans, carrots, onions and peas, but cucumbers fit our growing season for this area so well,” Herrera said. A cucumber crop harvested for pickle production can provide a return of up to $1,000 an acre, compared to the $50 an acre return on other crops traditionally grown in the area, such as barley, sugar beets and pinto beans.

Dean Foods welcomed the idea of cucumbers grown in Colorado for the La Junta facility, rather than the Texas cucumbers they were buying, because fresher cucumbers generally mean better pickles. But even with a crop known to be successfully grown and harvested in the area, one of the biggest hurdles would be forming a co-op that worked. The advantages to a co-op, such as a shared contract with a food processor, sharing the purchase of expensive equipment and a pooling of experience and knowledge, are often not enough to overcome the obstacles, said Doyle Smith, Director of the Colorado Cooperative Council. Smith said many new co-ops fail each year in Colorado, mainly due to lack of proper planning and a shortage of capital.

Smith met with Herrera, Marx and others from Colorado State Cooperative Extension and encouraged them to try for greater up-front capital for the pickle co-op. Herrera and the other 15 grower members paid a per acre
fee to join the co-op and pay an additional fee per acre to self-insure the co-op against problems with the harvest. The co-op of farmers in the Johnstown, Berthoud and Milliken areas had 320 acres in cucumbers in 2004 and may increase that number for 2005, Herrera said, but added that this is a closed co-op because Dean Foods contracts for only a certain number of bushels of cucumbers.

During the process of finding farmers willing to join the co-op, determining the production cost per acre, negotiating with Dean Foods on a contract price for the cucumbers and learning the intricacies of mechanical harvesting, Herrera worked with Marx and other agents to find information and talk through the issues. "Their knowledge of resources and ability to run the numbers and find the answers was really invaluable, and they didn’t try to encourage or discourage us on a certain path, they asked lots of tough questions and then helped us find the answers," Herrera said.

“The Cooperative Extension agents and specialists are a tremendous asset to have, they have absolutely nothing to gain – they just wanted to see us succeed,” Herrera said.

Herrera’s original invitation to farmers in the area to learn about the co-op resulted in only a 10 percent response, so he had to try again to come up with enough farmers who were close enough together to make the sequenced harvesting work. When cucumbers reach peak pickle size they must be quickly harvested or they’re of no use to the processor. For the Northern Colorado Pickle Co-op, members agree to a planting schedule that allows for a staggered harvest so the three mechanical harvesters the co-op purchased can move from field to field in an orderly process.

Only three of the 16 co-op members had commercially grown cucumbers for pickles, so they had many questions. "Mechanical harvesters have been around since the 1960s and now about 60 percent of the cucumber crop is picked that way, but there are some adjustments and things we had to learn to be able to make it work for us,” Herrera said. They enlisted the help of Ed Kee, a professor and Cooperative Extension specialist with the University of Delaware and expert in cucumber harvesting, who has visited Herrera’s and other farms in the area several times to give advice. Marx and Herrera returned the favor with a trip to Delaware in January 2005, to talk with Kee and his colleagues about the pickle project in Colorado.

Marx said the credit for the pickle co-op success goes to Herrera for “the incredibly good job he did in researching and writing the business plan,” as well as Herrera’s credibility among area farmers. Herrera said he “can’t give enough praise and thanks to Cooperative Extension” for the part they played in the creation of the pickle co-op.

– Mary Pat Adams

Sequenced Harvesting Seals the Deal

With a food processor on board that preferred Colorado grown cucumbers, Cooperative Extension helped Herrera identify issues, run numbers and find answers that eventually convinced other growers to join the co-op. Since cucumbers have to be processed within hours after they’re picked, members of the co-op agreed to a planting schedule that would allow for staggered harvests and mechanical harvesting.