Colorado State University Cooperative Extension programs are helping Coloradans
• understand and meet the challenges of rapid growth and changing land-use patterns;
• increase knowledge and skills related to the challenges of living on a few acres;
• address growth-related issues and develop land-management plans.

The Costs...
• The state demographer predicts that Colorado will continue to experience a significant population growth in the upcoming decades—from 4,335,000 in 2000 to 6,000,000 by 2020. Colorado has 5 of the U.S.’s 10 fastest growing counties. The Denver Regional Council of Governments says that the Denver-metro area is expected to grow more than 33% from 1995 to 2020. In that same period, the amount of developed land is expected to grow by more than 100%, or over three times the amount of population growth.
• A 2001 CSU survey found that implications of growth on local land and natural resources were the most pervasive concerns of Colorado County Commissioners. A 1999 Talmey-Drake Research Poll of Colorado registered voters revealed that growth and sprawl issues were their top concerns. Low-density sprawl has been shown to eliminate open space, increase traffic congestion, displace wildlife habitat, cost cities and counties millions of dollars in increased infrastructure and services, and often destroy the very features of the natural landscape that were valued in the first place.
• The Colorado Department of Agriculture reports that agricultural lands were converted to urban expansion, low-density residential, or other uses at the average rate of 270,000 acres a year for the past ten years.

Helping Citizens Manage Property Investments & Address Land-Use Issues

Colorado is part of the region that is characterized as the fastest growing area on earth (measured by population increase). Moderate climates, scenic features, natural amenities, and access to recreation stimulate rapid population growth in all areas of the Rocky Mountain West. What were once considered primarily ranching and farming lands are now dominated by urban sprawl.

For some long-time residents, the growth process is painful as traffic increases, open space sprouts new housing developments, neighborhood shops are replaced by “super stores,” housing costs rise, and communities grapple with the need for additional services and schools. Many new immigrants take up residence on small acreages and find themselves responsible for managing unfamiliar parcels of land and meeting new rural challenges. In some traditional rural communities, residents struggle to survive as the traditional agricultural economic base changes and they often watch young people migrate to cities in search of higher-paying jobs and greater opportunities. In this climate of disparate values, management of land and natural resources poses particular challenges to the people and communities of Colorado. One audience targeted for Cooperative Extension programs in meeting land-use challenges is the “small acreage” owner. More than 20,000 Colorado landowners manage more than 1 million acres in small farms, ranchettes and tracts of land ranging in size from one to 100 acres. Cooperative Extension’s goal is to assist them in becoming more proficient in management of land and natural resources, more knowledgeable about the challenges of Colorado rural living, and more aware of the economic opportunities their land might provide.
A group of Cooperative Extension educators from eight western states including Colorado, developed the program, “Living on the Land,” targeted at “lifestylers”—those who live on small acreages for the pastoral, back-to-the-land lifestyle. The comprehensive curriculum helps staff teach soil, water, plant and animal management in a way that can be customized to meet local needs.

(CSU Cooperative Extension ePOWER, 2004)

Last year in Colorado, almost 6,600 small-acreage owners requested land-management assistance. Of those, 52% reported they adopted best management practices for successful rural living including livestock nutrition, pest control, and pasture and weed management; 48% reported an increase in their knowledge on how to maintain or enhance the quality of natural resources on their land; 33% of those who attended programs on economic opportunities appropriate for small operations indicated they learned about enterprise possibilities, and 26% said they increased income by adopting new economic activities for their acreages.

(CSU Cooperative Extension ePOWER, 2004)

The Payoff...

- With more and more residents choosing to live on the land, demand has increased for information and technical assistance to help this growing and diverse audience understand the importance of land stewardship. In northwestern Colorado, Cooperative Extension’s Small Acreage Team undertook a major effort to provide small-acreage owners education about water and soil issues, weed and pasture management, property rights & fencing laws, organic-crop production, pesticide safety, living with wildlife, and horse care and management through workshops, newsletters, bulletins, news articles, Web sites and videos. With Agricultural Experiment Station staff they also designed “The Western Small Acreage Expo,” a multi-county event that attracts 600-800 people annually and offers hands-on demonstrations, lectures and exhibits to help regional small-acreage owners improve land management.

- Extension staff in many of Colorado’s Front Range counties designed educational programs for realtors and appraisers—usually the first point of contact with new landowners—to provide continuing certification credits and up-to-date information on rural land management, weed and natural resource issues and local land-use requirements. 100% of the participating realtors noted that they would incorporate one to three topics into their work with landowners in the immediate future including fencing & zoning requirements, water usage, animal carrying capacity and weed control.

- Rural landowners who own forest acreages have benefited from collaborative efforts among Cooperative Extension, the Colorado State Forest Service, Colorado Division of Wildlife, Natural Resources Conservation Service and others. For the past several years, this group has offered in-depth workshops to address the challenges of maintaining forest health, timber management and fire prevention on private land. A survey of participants showed that 100% increased their understanding of the challenges of rural living and 70% increased their knowledge about natural resource and forest management, including tree thinning practices.

- Southwest Colorado has a high influx of new residents who are interested in niche-market operations for specialty crops and high-quality agricultural products from their small acreages. Collaborative efforts between Cooperative Extension, government agencies and the private sector established demonstration plots, weed-management symposiums, field days and commercial applicator workshops. A new position for an Extension horticulture agent in that area of the state allowed renewed relationship building, a focus on organic and other sustainable practices for smaller operations, creation of a farmer’s market, participation in community-supported agriculture and increased viability of small-scale agriculture.

- Following workshops aimed at helping Front Range small-acreage owners improve their land management practices, a survey showed that 100% of respondents said they would develop a weed-management strategy for their property, 88% said they would adopt xeriscaping practices, and 60% said they would develop a wildlife plan.