

# 5 AGRICULTURE

## 5.1 STATEMENT OF INTENT

Albany County's agricultural land is a non-renewable resource that sustains many of our other natural resources and open lands. Steps need to be taken to conserve our agricultural resources and heritage.

## 5.2 BACKGROUND/EXISTING CONDITIONS

Agricultural production is important to our cultural heritage, economy, and rural communities. Once decisions are made to develop agricultural land, the resource is almost always irretrievably lost. Also, University of Wyoming studies indicate that conversion of ranchland to residential uses results in a net financial loss to the County. (Source: *Cost of Community Services for Rural Residential Development in Wyoming*, R. Coupal, D. Taylor and D. McLeod, 2002)

Agriculture is important to Albany County. The raising of livestock, primarily sheep and cattle, and hay has been a way of life for generations. Farmland and ranchland also have inherent aesthetic appeal for many people. However, agriculture in the county has seen significant changes in the past 70 years. The loss of agricultural land and the farming/ranching tradition leads to loss of rural character, county identity, and a way of life.

According to the Albany County Assessor's data, there are approximately 1,179 properties associated with agricultural operations in Albany County. The Laramie Rivers Conservation District reports 287 operating agricultural units in the county, with an average size of 6,700 acres per operation. The Assessor's data shows 36 ranches in excess of 10,000 acres, 16 privately owned and 20 being leased from the Bureau of Land Management or the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Range grass, hay, and livestock production are suited for the high altitude and short growing season of Albany County. The Laramie Rivers Conservation District reports that approximately 95,000 acres of meadow are irrigated, primarily by flood irrigation. Irrigated and prime agricultural soils (soils with ratings above 5 on the 1-8 scale with 1 being the best) are concentrated along the Big and Little Laramie Rivers, Rock Creek, and other streams in the county. Although a small percentage of the landscape, these areas are extremely valuable and are often at great risk of being developed. Best agricultural soils are displayed in Map 5.1, Best Agricultural Lands.

Agriculture has seen many changes over the past several decades. Traditionally, the family-owned and -operated ranch was the norm. The entire family (parents, children, and extended family) was involved in the ranch operation, from feeding



the livestock, calving/lambing, maintaining and building fences, and haying, to taking care of the land.

Over the years, it has become more and more difficult for the small ranch to survive. The cost of feed, machinery, fuel, and equipment continues to rise and the price of land limits the ranchers' ability to expand and maintain operations. In order to make ends meet, ranchers often need to explore other avenues to increase revenue such as providing an out-fitting service, starting a bed and breakfast, running a dude ranch, and/or finding an outside job. Time spent gaining a second income means fewer hours spent maintaining the ranch.

The family ranch was typically handed down from generation to generation and the children of ranching families carried on the family tradition. However, because of the outside opportunities now available to our youth, the family ranch competes with today's 40-hour work-week jobs where incomes are higher, hours shorter, and benefits more attractive.

In addition to culture, heritage, and commercial benefits, farmers and ranchers tend to act as good land stewards. Agricultural land provides habitat for a variety of wildlife and typically does not impede wildlife migration routes.

### **5.3 AGRICULTURAL OBJECTIVES**

- AG1. Conserve and protect agricultural land and practices in Albany County so that agriculture can continue to be a viable industry.
- AG2. Concentrate agricultural land conversion around the City of Laramie and existing developed areas, and direct it away from other areas of the county.
- AG3. Continue support for locally accepted, traditional agricultural management practices and land uses.
- AG4. Create new opportunities for diversifying the agricultural economy, including agro-tourism, and the establishment of new, compatible uses such as alternative energy development.
- AG5. Encourage the conservation of agricultural and ranch lands through various voluntary and incentive-based programs and educational efforts.
- AG6. Promote good conservation practices through encouragement of good stewardship and best management practices.
- AG7. Promote such development as properly sited and designed wind farms, solar energy projects, and transmission infrastructure, in conjunction with good planning practices.
- AG8. Encourage continued use of existing water rights.



## 5.4 IMPLEMENTATION

### STRATEGIES

1. Protect agricultural uses by continuing to promote the “right to farm/ranch” philosophy as defined by the State of Wyoming. Consider incorporating a right to farm statement on all pertinent land use plats so that future land owners are made aware of the program. (1, 2)
2. Designate land uses, which are compatible with agricultural operations when applying zoning in the agricultural areas of the county. These land uses could include, but are not limited to, agro-tourism, ranching supplies, alternative energy development, and very low density residential development. (1, 2)
3. Provide mechanisms for the division of land in agricultural zones that ensure the continuation of agricultural production and accommodate low intensity development. Mechanisms may include sliding scale zoning. (1)
4. Amend subdivision regulations to include an option for cluster developments, with emphasis on continuing agricultural operations. (1, 3)
  - \* Promote preservation of water rights as the land is developed. (1, 2, 3)
  - \* Adopt agricultural setbacks to conserve rural character. (1)

### ACTIONS

- Develop creative policies to conserve agricultural land, including conservation techniques and incentives such as:
  - Transfer of development rights,
  - Tax incentives,
  - Conservation easements,
  - Restrictive easements,
  - Cluster development,
  - Building envelopes,
  - Open space acquisitions (1).
- Institute agricultural zoning on most of the undeveloped lands in the county outside of the designated growth areas. Such zoning shall provide for agriculture and related activities by adopting a minimum lot size in the Agricultural Zoning District. (1)

