

GROWING THE REGIONAL FOOD SYSTEM ONE SCHOOL MEAL AT A TIME

Taos Regional Farm and Ranch Food Security Collaborative Update

BY MICAH ROSEBERRY

A project designed to connect and strengthen regional food systems across northern New Mexico and the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado is continuing efforts to establish sustainable food security for the region. This collaborative effort, which received \$1.4 million in state funding through the Governor's Food, Farm and Hunger Initiative in 2022, represents a coordinated approach to addressing food sovereignty, farmer resilience and community health.

The award was part of a \$24 million statewide appropriation supported by state agencies and farm and ranch NGOs, working together in a coordinated legislative advocacy effort spearheaded by the New Mexico Food and Agricultural Policy Council. While the initial \$1.4 million was spent entirely on purchasing equipment for a local slaughterhouse project, many essential elements of the collaborative's vision remain in active development—and momentum is building.

A.I.R.E.: 10 Years of Building Food Security

The nonprofit A.I.R.E. (Agriculture Implementation Research & Education), a key member of the collaborative, has leveraged resources and managed partnerships to increase food security in Taos County for over a decade. The organization aggregates local production of fruits, vegetables and grains from 10 local farms through the Taos Community Farm CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program, providing weekly shares to more than 60 local families.

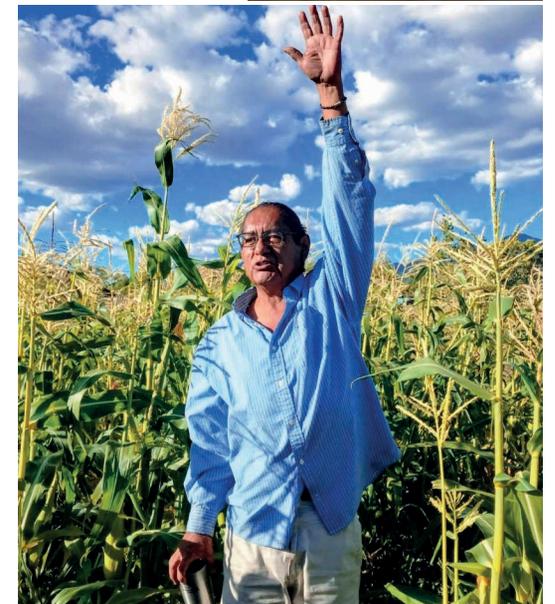
Perhaps most significantly, A.I.R.E. provides 800 local and organic USDA farm-to-school meals daily—160,000 annually—with preparation assisted by high school culinary interns at Amigos Locale, A.I.R.E.'s commissary kitchen. Across Taos County, A.I.R.E. maintains five school gardens, six greenhouse structures and educational programs reaching 3,800 students each year.

New Infrastructure Expands Regional Reach

A.I.R.E. has acquired a 16-foot refrigerated truck through a grant from Río Grande Colonias, and plans to expand regional aggregation by 50 percent by providing transportation and delivery of local produce, grains and meat from northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. This expansion addresses a critical infrastructure gap—many small and mid-size producers grow exceptional food but lack the capacity to transport it to larger markets while maintaining food safety and freshness.

Shifting local dependence for year-round fresh produce—including carrots, onions, beets, potatoes, apples and fresh greens—from California to northern New Mexico and the San Luis Valley will not only effectively cut the carbon

Photos (L-R): AIRE Halloween harvest; Pancakes made with local blue corn and flour from Big Wheel Farm; Making tamales at Amigos Locale commissary kitchen; Geronimo Romero with blue corn growing at Los Luceros; Romero and Vista Grande High School interns making tamales; Micah Roseberry spoke at the 10th annual National Farm to Cafeteria Conference about using local food in USDA school meal programs and providing hands-on opportunities in growing and cooking culturally relevant foods; Local rancher John Painter of Montoso Bison Co. delivers frozen meat; Amigos Locale Market features potatoes and red onions from Río Lucero Farm, carrots from Cultivo Farm, garlic from Cerro Vista Farm, apples from Freshies Farm, eggs from Yoder Farms, and sprouts from Kaizen Greens Farm; Interns weigh carrots; Local producers receive a larger profit share at the new Amigos Locale farm store.





Above: Mr. Gilroy's 8th grade Taos Middle School science class preparing beds and planting winter greens. Salad mix, radishes, turnips, spinach and kale will be harvested in February. Community donations support school programming; Arroyos del Norte students make salsa for harvest festival with tomatoes, chile, jalapeno, onions and cilantro grown in their high-tunnel greenhouse.

critical repairs to a walk-in cooler at Taos Pueblo Day School and provided carrots and apples to supplement school lunch programs.

The Taos Middle School greenhouse represents more than infrastructure—it is an investment in food sovereignty for the next generation, connecting students from kindergarten through high school to hands-on learning about where food comes from and how to grow it sustainably.

Building Food Sovereignty Through Education

A.I.R.E. has received funding from the Keeler Foundation to launch bi-weekly, after-school, farm-to-school nutrition, garden and cooking classes at Enos García and Ranchos elementary schools. The program includes scratch-cooked dinners served during after-school care, with families and students sharing monthly meals together that showcase recipes made by students using ingredients from school gardens and greenhouses.

Vista Grande High School students interning at Amigos Locale through the CTE (Career and Technical Education) program will assist with mentoring younger students and preparing dinner meals. This pilot program could ex-

footprint of thousands of pounds of fresh produce; it will support a regional food system that strengthens the local economy.

To support local ranchers, A.I.R.E. has also secured grant resources to purchase a freezer trailer, enabling ranchers to transport local beef, lamb and bison from processing facilities to local markets more efficiently.

When state grant funding was reduced, private donors stepped forward. Community contributions funded a new hoop-house greenhouse at Taos Middle School, ensuring students are able to continue learning agriculture year-round while growing fresh vegetables that appear in their own school lunches. These same donations also funded

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pand to produce 1,000 meals daily, serving as a model for state-funded CACFP (Child and Adult Care Food Program) after-school dinner meals delivered to sites throughout the county.

The commissary production model has proven its value beyond regular meal service—it can also be rapidly deployed for emergency food response, such as meals that were needed during the Calf Canyon fire.

Training the Next Generation of Food System Leaders

To support increased production and aggregation at scale, A.I.R.E. is partnering with leading food safety organizations. Pueblo farmer Geronimo Romero, sixth-generation rancher Robert Martínez and 10 Vista Grande student interns are earning food safety certificates from the Food and Drug Administration. This program includes a collaboration with Cornell University, in partnership with the FDA and USDA, hosted through New Mexico State University. This training provides the expertise needed to aggregate and prepare food to meet state standards.

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Addressing a critical workforce gap, UNM Taos is interested in expanding its Culinary Arts program to build a workforce of cooks who can prepare scratch-cooked meals for school cafeterias. Currently, despite the intent of the governor's healthy universal school meal program, only 50 percent of New Mexico schools are able to provide scratch-cooked meals made from locally sourced products; the remainder rely on shelf-stable, ultra-processed food sourced from outside the state.

Honoring Traditional Agriculture

Plans for spring 2026 include establishing a local tortilleria to process local wheat grown at Big Wheel Farm in Costilla and local blue corn grown by Taos Pueblo farmers. Geronimo Romero, a Taos Pueblo traditional baker and farmer, currently trains interns to bake bread, make tortillas and prepare tamales with blue corn. The tortilleria will produce flour and blue corn tortillas for the school lunch program and the local community, connecting traditional agricultural practices with contemporary food security needs.

A Vision for Regional Resilience

Building food security and production in northern New Mexico through collaboration is more than an agricultural project—it is a step toward supporting food sovereignty for our children, increasing resilience for farmers and ranchers, and strengthening northern New Mexico communities for generations to come.

The Taos Regional Farm and Ranch Food Security Collaborative demonstrates that when communities invest in local food infrastructure—refrigerated trucks, refrigerated storage, commissary kitchens, school greenhouses, processing facilities and workforce training—the benefits multiply across the entire system. Students learn to grow food and prepare meals. Farmers gain reliable markets. Families access fresh, regional produce. Carbon emissions drop. Communities become healthier. Food dollars stay local. And the next generation builds the skills needed to sustain these systems into the future.

As this collaborative work continues to unfold, one thing becomes clear: Food security is not built through single programs or isolated grants. It is built through sustained, coordinated investment in the complete food system—from seed to soil, from farm to school, from kitchen to table. Northern New Mexico is proving it can be done. ■

For more information about A.I.R.E. and the Taos Regional Farm and Ranch Food Security Collaborative, or to contribute to A.I.R.E., email MICAH@AIRETAOS.ORG or visit GROWINGCOMMUNITYNOW.ORG.

Micah Roseberry has been farming in New Mexico since 1988. She is currently the director of A.I.R.E. and owner of Farmhouse Café and Bakery in Taos, N.M.

Developing a regional food system that strengthens the local economy