

Outdoor Insights

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JEFFERSON COUNTY OPEN SPACE

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Agriculture on Jeffco Open Space *Land in Balance*

Photo by Will Lebzelter

Open space means many things to many people. Here in Jefferson County, Jeffco Open Space lands are prized as a prime settings for outdoor recreation, essential habitat for wildlife, and for being among the last best places in Colorado.

Before many properties became Jeffco Open Space land, agriculture was their primary use. As part of our commitment to practice responsible management of natural and historical resources, we look to the past use of the land when developing the vision for parks.

Jefferson County has a rich agricultural history starting in the mid-1800s, when hay and cattle ranching became a way of life. In the early 20th century, vegetable and greenhouse crops were grown, until much of the land was developed for other uses. In the last 25 years, many farms and ranches have been sold and the land developed for residential use as a result of population growth.

For more info about agricultural opportunities on Jeffco Open Space lands, contact Alicia Doran
adoran@jeffco.us or 303-271-5989

Reanna Burke and family walk past a field freshly mown for hay at Meyer Ranch Park.

Today we manage agriculture with the goal of preserving and enhancing the landscape. We strive to balance agricultural use with the needs of wildlife and visitors.

Partners in Ecology

Grasslands represent a significant ecological type that supports many natural systems. Our grasslands historically have been grazed by wildlife and have experienced fire events every 10 to 30 years. Removing vegetation by haying or grazing mimics those natural processes and allows grasslands to remain healthy.

We issue **Agricultural Licenses** for hay harvesting and grazing. The length of the license will vary and may be adjusted to meet current production and environmental conditions.

Haying: One cutting is permitted per year, with the requirement that stubble be left. This helps to prevent soil erosion and loss of moisture, and promote plant health. We evaluate the benefit of harvesting each year. In years when conditions are unfavorable, we do not allow harvests.

Grazing: We have worked with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to develop grazing plans for a number of sites. The plans provide a guide for the number of animals, time of year and duration of grazing. We seek to avoid having too many animals on the land for too long. Grazing is timed to have a positive effect on the vegetation, little impact to wildlife and minimal effect on recreation.



Coal Creek Canyon Park

Photo by Alicia Doran

of sites lack developed agricultural water supplies. Production levels fluctuate with the weather.

With the increased interest in urban farming, we may develop future agricultural opportunities. Water availability will be our main limiting factor.

Sustainable Practices

We strive to manage lands so that they will remain productive for both agriculture and native landscapes. Overgrazing and overharvesting contribute to erosion. If topsoil is lost, the grassland is less productive, species diversity is reduced, and non-native invasive plants may become established. Topsoil loss contributes to erosion and can cause silting in waterways. Silting harms aquatic plants, animals and invertebrates.

Water availability has always restricted agriculture in Jefferson County. Jeffco Open Space has limited water resources at some locations. The majority

Heritage Honored

Although there are always natural challenges to agriculture in the arid West, the biggest challenge may be the shifting of the human landscape. More people are spreading out. Meanwhile the number of farms in Jefferson County continues to dwindle. According to U.S. Department of Agriculture statistics, 19 farms went by the wayside from 2007 to 2012, reducing the total acreage farmed from 93,000 to 68,000 acres—more than a 25% reduction.

Amid these changes, continuing the tradition of agriculture on our lands helps sustain wildlife and natural systems, nurture local food production and preserve a way of life.

Ag History

Agricultural use has been documented at these Jeffco Open Space Parks, as far back as the 1850s.

Beef Cattle: Alderfer/Three Sisters, Coal Creek Canyon, Crown Hill, Elk Meadow, Flying J Ranch, Hildebrand Ranch, Meyer Ranch, South Valley, and White Ranch Parks. **Dairy Cattle:** Van Bibber Park



Hay cutting throughout the region. Continues today at Alderfer/Three Sisters, Elk Meadow, Flying J Ranch, Hildebrand Ranch, Meyer Ranch and South Valley Parks.



Turkeys
South Valley Park



Apples and Cherries
Lair o' the Bear & Van Bibber Parks



Vegetables
Crown Hill & Lair o' the Bear Parks



Silver Fox
Alderfer/Three Sisters Park



Outdoor Insights provides information on Jefferson County, Colorado's Open Space projects, programs and activities. For more information, contact Communications Manager Thea Rock, trock@jeffco.us or (303) 271-5902. Read editions on other topics at jeffco.us/parks.