

Experts: Agriculture still drives our economy



Journal-Advocate file photo

A truck is loaded with corn during the 2004 harvest near Sterling. Elected officials heard from area residents what they believe is need to improve local economies during a summit Thursday at Morgan Community College.

Education, new technology and renewable energy sources are vital

By Chris Marchesot

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FORT MORGAN — A lot of aspects go into successful rural economic development, and some of the most crucial include education, new technology, renewable energy and promoting agricultural products.

Sen. Wayne Allard, R.-Colo.; Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo.; Deputy to Rural Development Undersecretary Allan Johnson and state Rep. Cory Gardner, R-Yuma, heard some of these aspects Thursday at Morgan Community College from a number of local government entities, business entities and elected officials at the Allard Rural Economic Summit.

"I think of the farm, Main Street and the

future when I think of rural Colorado," Musgrave said. "I want to see a future for our rural children within our rural communities."

The summit featured three panels of four or five members each that presented the lawmakers with ideas, concerns and suggestions as to what can be done at the federal level to create successful economic development.

Most panel members agreed they all needed help.

GOVERNMENT ENTITIES

The first panel was made up of government entities, and although Clarke Becker, executive director of the Colorado Rural Development Council, said he's not necessarily representing a government entity, he

has seen the challenge of job retention in rural Colorado become difficult.

Agriculture is key for northeast Colorado, Becker said, adding his council can be the eyes and ears for the politicians. Dr. Michele Haney, president of Morgan Community College, told the politicians that all community colleges in Colorado need federal assistance, and she said Colorado is facing the demise of public higher education.

"Without community colleges, which are crucial to rural economic development, I don't know where you're going to get professionals like nurses, police officers and EMTs," Haney said. "We (community colleges) feel a little under attack."

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Allard

Wisdom: More loans needed for farmers

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Joe Hostetler, U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development state director, said he has two goals: Increasing economic opportunity and improving the quality of life for rural economies, and he would like to see federal assistance to help achieve these goals.

Genoa Mayor Pat Vice said she is coming from a small-town municipal view, and she sees difficulty in defining what rural is, as the area she lives in is small enough to where it is considered a frontier.

"Communities like mine are at the beginning of rural economic development, and this is exactly when they need your help," Vice said. The one-size-fits-all idea clearly doesn't fit in rural economic development.

State Rep. Diane Hoppe, R-Sterling, sees the opportunity coming to rural communities, but is concerned with the communities having to share water with the rest of the state.

"I want to stress the importance of the type of people we have here," Hoppe said, indicating people who

want to see economic development in the area.

BUSINESS

Lewis Frank, state director of the Farm Security Agency, deals with commodity programs and farm loan programs and wants to see more help to younger farmers starting out.

"Out of 280 loans we've made for farmers, 98 of them were made to get young farmers and ranchers going," Frank said.

Jay Wisdom, owner of Wisdom Natural Poultry, sells his turkeys and chickens throughout the state and has seen difficulty since he has been farming with sustaining his business.

"To survive you have to keep a home-place environment," Wisdom said. "But I'd like to see more loans made available for farmers like me."

Mike Towne of Century Tel, a communications provider for rural communities, said although the company only provides service for 10 percent of the people in Colorado, the service covers 60 to 70 percent of the land

"The success of our business depends on the level of economic vitality," Towne said. "Agriculture is a driving economic force, and we need to avoid the one-size-fits-all concept."

Ross Hansen of Mountain View Harvest spoke of the success of his business and how federal aid is crucial in boosting success of businesses like his, who produce bread for large chain restaurants.

OPPORTUNITIES

Gardner emphasized that there are an enormous amount of opportunities out there for rural economic development and the input given Thursday was very timely because there is no better time to capitalize on these opportunities.

Allard said the next step is taking the ideas and concerns given Thursday and passing them through legislation. Allard and Johnson also presented ceremonial checks totaling more than \$26 million in loan and grant funding to several northeast Colorado entities, including \$24.5 million to finance construction of a new hospital in Yuma