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## Searching for solutions in the changing rural West

By Leah Todd

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Tanned and calloused, Floyd Archuleta's hands tell of decades spent gripping shovels, baling hay and planting seed.

On a recent afternoon, his hands turned the steering wheel of a rusty blue truck — his office, he said — as it rumbled along a highway outside Taos, a town of about 6,000 in mountainous Northern New Mexico. Archuleta pointed to land where his family has farmed alfalfa and raised cattle, pigs and sheep for three generations. Here's where his parents lived until they died. There stands his brother's house.

These days, the 66-year-old farmer looks across these fields and sees a troubling thicket of questions. The biggest uncertainty of all: Who's going to care for the land after Archuleta is gone? Though his family has farmed in New Mexico for hundreds of years, his own children don't share their parents' passion for agriculture. His daughters moved to California — one married a surfer. His only son, who he wished would take over the land, died in 2011.

"This is probably the hardest part of it all," Archuleta said. "I talk to my daughters a lot and say, 'You need to figure out what you're going to do when we're not around.'" Archuleta's story is familiar in the modern West, where agricultural employment has declined and farming families can often make more money in other industries. The immediate challenge is financial, but in a region where families pride themselves on cultivating land and protecting historic irrigation systems, those dilemmas are anchored in culture and history. The question, "What to do with my land?" lays at the intersection of past and future.

Farmers aren't the only people struggling with what comes next. Small communities across the Mountain West are confronting complex challenges. How to grow a robust economy and create good jobs without sacrificing the qualities that make a place special? How to prevent working towns from becoming little more than weekend playgrounds for the wealthy? How to foster happy, healthy families in rural areas plagued by entrenched poverty?

The solutions will be different in eclectic Taos, with its mix of modern outfitters and families like Archuleta's, than in Saguache, Colorado — a town of 500 at the northern end of Colorado's San Luis Valley. But while the answers vary, the questions are similar.

Over the next six months, seven newsrooms in New Mexico and Colorado will explore urgent challenges to the vitality of Western communities. The project, called "Small Towns, Big Change," will produce stories that not only examine problems, but also surface and assess emerging responses. We hope to catalyze discussion about what works, what doesn't and how individuals, institutions and communities might change things.

We're interested in people like 60-year-old Esther Last, owner of the Fourth Street Diner in Saguache, where old men in cowboy hats rub elbows with tourists driving between Durango and Denver. Summers keep Last's diner afloat, but slow winters threaten it. In April, Last

owed the state nearly \$14,000 in taxes. Though friends and customers raised \$5,000, the eatery is for sale today. Yet Last, a Michigan transplant who arrived in Saguache in the 1970s, loves the town for the same reasons her business struggles.

“I wanted a small community,” she said. “I like it where people know each other. I like it where it’s dark at night, where there’s not a lot of traffic.”

We’re interested in people like Josh Trujillo, 28, a former heroin addict who once stole from his family to support his habit. Today, four years after his last stint in jail, Trujillo is a certified peer support worker at Inside Out, a free wellness center in Espa-ola, where every staffer is in recovery. Last year, nearly 1,700 clients walked through the center’s doors — more than 4 percent of the county’s population.

Trujillo is now married with a 7-month-old son. “The minute that I held him in my hands, I knew how awful [my parents] must have felt for me to be in and out of jail,” Trujillo said. “I can’t ever picture my son being that way.”

As Last, Trujillo and others can attest, rural communities are trapped in a web of challenges. Economic questions often boil down to cultural ties. Environmental solutions are limited by financial realities, and community health is inseparable from employment opportunities. Many small towns confront the same difficulties as their more urban counterparts — but lack resources to solve them.

For his part, Archuleta hopes to have 30 more years of farming left in him. Though his father irrigated these fields until age 97, staving off bids from developers all the while, he knows a decision is coming. His best advice, he said, came from his 14-year-old grandson. “Do you think we should sell the land?” Archuleta asked the boy.

“Look, grandpa,” he remembered his grandson saying. “What are you going to do with the money? You’re just going to buy stuff.”

Archuleta paused.

“That’s the best answer that I got.”

***Todd is a reporter based in Taos for the Solutions Journalism Network.***



**Floyd Archuleta opens the headgate on his acequia May 24.  
Photo by Katharine Egli**