



March 2026 Update

Colorado Cooperative Council

March Issue

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From Surviving to Thriving

Colorado cooperatives are entering spring after a warm, dry winter. Moisture uncertainty has many watching the forecast more closely than usual, and when the margin for error narrows, capital decisions carry more weight. In years like this, planning conversations feel different. Risk is not theoretical. It is measured in inches of moisture and basis points of margin.

Spring preparation is already underway. Fertilizer is moving. Seed is lining up. Capital is being committed. Operational intensity is rising. At the same time, margins remain tight. Producers are disciplined buyers, and private competitors are aggressive. Many organizations are working hard simply to protect what they have built and maintain service levels in the communities they serve.

Survival requires focus.

Focus on execution. Focus on cost discipline. Focus on delivering value in a market that leaves little room for error.



At the same time, in initial cooperative meetings across the state, there is a growing conversation about what it would take to move from surviving to thriving. That shift is not about expansion for the sake of growth. It is about strengthening fundamentals before pressure forces a reaction. It is about governance clarity, leadership depth, thoughtful market positioning, and building capacity ahead of transition.

Thriving is not about size alone. It is about discipline, alignment, and long-term direction.

Thriving requires intention.

The Colorado Cooperative Council exists to support that movement by strengthening the leadership and education infrastructure that allows cooperatives to compete, adapt, and grow.

A Brief Introduction

The Colorado Cooperative Council is operating as an active 501(c)(3) with board representation that includes Directors and CEOs from five Colorado cooperatives, CoBank, and a former Colorado cooperative CEO. The foundation is in place, and governance oversight reflects real operational experience across sectors and regions of the state.

The current focus is disciplined listening. Rather than launching programs prematurely, the Council is prioritizing in-person cooperative meetings to understand regional realities, leadership challenges, and strategic concerns so that future direction reflects what cooperatives are navigating today.

For those I have not yet had the opportunity to meet, my name is Sarah E. Bower Spivey. For more than 20 years, I have worked with cooperatives across the country in finance, market analysis, mergers and acquisitions, leadership development, coaching, and strategy. I have worked alongside Colorado cooperative directors for nearly a decade and understand both the operational demands and governance realities unique to this state.



The Council's work builds on that experience with one goal: strengthen cooperative leadership from the boardroom to the field. Strong governance and capable management directly affect capital allocation, risk management, succession planning, and long-term competitiveness in local communities.

Our Goal: Intentional structure. Intentional process. Intentional progress.

Listening First

The first quarter focus has been simple: meet in person and listen.

Initial cooperative meetings are underway across the state, with additional visits scheduled through the second quarter. The goal of these conversations is straightforward:

- Understand current realities
- Identify education and leadership priorities
- Surface operational and strategic concerns
- Clarify what value the Council can provide

Before programs are designed or events are scheduled, the objective is to ensure that any future direction reflects what cooperatives are experiencing on the ground.

What We're Hearing So Far

While meetings are still ongoing, several consistent themes are emerging.

- **Director Development and Regional Timing**
 - There is interest in director education that reflects the operational realities of different regions of the state. Seasonal timing and workload matter, and training opportunities may need to reflect those rhythms.
- **Management and Leadership Depth**
 - Conversations have included strengthening management capability beyond technical expertise. Communication, accountability, strategic thinking, and navigating pressure are recurring areas of interest.
- **Peer Dialogue Among Leaders**



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- There appears to be openness to structured CEO peer conversation focused on capital investment decisions, competitive positioning, regulatory pressure, and margin protection. The emphasis would be practical and candid.
- **Market and Competitive Pressure**
 - Competition continues to intensify. Questions have surfaced regarding product margins, private retailer positioning, consolidation trends, and long-term infrastructure investment.
- **Human Capital and Succession**
 - Leadership transition planning, retirement timelines, and hiring challenges in rural communities are recurring concerns. Interest in structured assessments to support succession and hiring decisions has been mentioned.
- **Employee Development**
 - There is also interest in practical employee training that strengthens operational effectiveness and leadership readiness.

These insights will continue to evolve as additional meetings take place.

Where We Are Headed

The Council is following a deliberate process. Below is our current outline of 2026 deliverables:

January–June: Listening and On-Site Conversations

Continue cooperative meetings across the state to ensure broad input and representation.

July: Compilation and Analysis

Insights gathered will be compiled into a statewide summary identifying patterns, regional differences, and shared priorities.

August: Draft Recommendations

Based on findings, draft recommendations will be developed for review. These will reflect what was heard rather than predetermined solutions.



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September: Cooperative Feedback

Cooperatives will have the opportunity to review and provide input on the proposed direction.

October: Board Presentation

Findings and recommended priorities will be formally presented to the Council board.

Website Launch

Work is underway to establish a functional Colorado Cooperative Council website, with a target launch date of May 31. The site will serve as a central point for communication, education offerings, and updates as priorities take shape.

Heads Up: Colorado Equal Pay and Job Postings

As hiring activity increases this spring, a brief compliance reminder is worth attention.

Under the Colorado Equal Pay for Equal Work Act, employers with at least one employee in Colorado must include a good-faith salary or hourly rate range in all job postings. This applies to external hires, internal promotions, and remote positions that could be filled by a Colorado candidate.

In addition to the compensation range, postings must include a general description of benefits and any other compensation, such as bonuses or commissions. The fine for noncompliance can range from \$500 to \$10,000 per violation. Beyond the financial penalty, noncompliance may prompt investigation by the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment and invite broader review of employment practices.

As cooperatives compete for talent in tight labor markets, clarity and transparency are increasingly expected. A brief internal review of hiring templates and posting procedures can prevent unnecessary risk.

When margins are tight, avoidable fines are not helpful.

Cooperative Exchange: Questions from the Field



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Question: Where are you finding capable web designers, and how important is your website to your cooperative's long-term positioning?

Why? As communication expectations shift, many cooperatives are reassessing whether their websites reflect who they are and how they compete. Clear service information, accurate job postings, and reliable updates often matter more than visual complexity. Next month, we will share your responses to this question.

Have a question you would like insights on? Just ask, and I will dig in.

Closing

Moving from surviving to thriving does not happen through a single program or meeting. It happens through steady leadership, clear governance, and intentional development.

The conversations underway across Colorado are a strong starting point. As meetings continue and insights are compiled, the focus remains simple: strengthen the leadership and education infrastructure that allows cooperatives to compete, adapt, and grow.

Thriving is possible. It requires discipline. It requires clarity. And it requires working together where it makes sense. We look forward to continuing the conversation and the future of our Cooperatives.

Sincerely,

Sarah E. Bower Spivey, Executive Director