

Quarterly Food Systems Updates from Colorado State Agencies

Q1 (Jan-Mar) 2024

As part of the quarterly meetings of the Colorado Food Systems Advisory Council (COFSAC), our members representing state agencies provide updates on new and ongoing policies and programs related to food systems. These high-level briefings are one of the ways our council's efforts support cross-sector collaboration and coordination, and timely communication across our Colorado food system initiatives.

Colorado Department of Agriculture (CDA)

CO Proud and CO Wine

CO Proud and the CO Wine Industry Development Board are hosting a joint event on Feb 28th on a business development workshop focusing on how a better understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion can drive your brand and benefit your bottom line.

Community Food Access Program

The Community Food Access Program (CFA) has opened our second round to accept grant applications for small food retailers and small family farms. Grants are open until March 11. Key information about the application, including eligibility requirements, can be found on our website. In addition, we are completing the process of awarding \$1.8M to awardees in our first round of applications. We have also finalized our Tax Credit Rules, allowing the same entities to receive a 50% tax credit to purchase equipment that advances local food access, similar to the CFA grant.

Resilient Food System Infrastructure Grant Program

The Resilient Food System Infrastructure Grant (RFSI) opened the application process on February 7th. Under the RFSI grant, CDA will issue large (>\$100K) grants to advance the middle of the supply chain for non-meat production. Details here: [RFSI grant program](#). Interested applicants will have two windows to apply. Phase 1 is an opportunity to receive feedback on a proposal's eligibility. This is not a required application. It is a simplified version of the full application so applicants have an understanding of the goals and requirements of the program. Those who submit a Phase 1 application are eligible to receive funding for grant writing assistance when submitting the full (Phase 2) application. Phase 1 deadline is March 7th. Phase 2 applications are required and will open March 15th. Every applicant is required to submit a USDA application form. These are due no later than the end of day May 1, 2024. Award recommendations to the USDA AMS will be made on May 23, 2024

The Specialty Crop Block Grant program

The Specialty Crop Block Grant program (SCBG) accepted concept proposals through Feb 16th, 2024 for this upcoming year's grant cycle. We received a total of 44 proposals. Review of proposals is underway and reviewers will select the best concept proposals to complete a full proposal to the USDA. CDA anticipates awarding approximately \$700,000 in SCBG funds.

Ag Workforce Development Program (AWDP)

The Ag Workforce Development Program is finalizing the list of awarded businesses for apprenticeship/internship funding for 2024. CDA received requests from 57 businesses to fund 89 interns in 2024. This has become a highly competitive grant over the last few years and we hope to receive additional funding to grow the # of internships we can fund. The announcement about this year's awarded businesses will be made in March.

Colorado Department of Education (CDE)

HSMA

Based on Aug through October claim data we are seeing 40% increase in breakfast, 30% increase in lunch participation. Largest increases are in the paid category-90% at breakfast and over 50% lunch. CDE is analyzing funding and the change in the CEP student percentage from 40-25%. We will know more in February. There will be an optional mid-year CEP election.

Phase two is Local Food Program and Wages and Stipends

CDE is working on the opt-in process for the programs, resources and trainings.

Local Food Program also includes a technical assistance grant to a statewide non-profit. We are in the process of writing the Request for Proposals for this TA Grant which will begin in July.

CDE hosted a farmer and school district connection event in Montrose in November and we are planning the next event for the spring in SE Colorado. These events are happening around the state and are intended to assist producers and food service personnel to make connections to purchase food. The next connection event is being hosted by The Good Food Collective and will take place in SW Colorado Feb 9th in Mancos.

Summer EBT

We have opted in for this summer and the data collection is mandatory

CDE hired a project manager and we are working to implement with CDHS to implement the program (they may have more info in their update)

State plan needs to be submitted by February 15th

Similar to pandemic benefit eligible students can receive \$120 for the whole summer.

Local Food For School Cooperative Grant \$2,649,917

This grant was in the form of sub awards to NSLP schools to purchase raw or minimally processed local products. We are happy to report that the grant has been fully utilized before the sunset date of

February 29,2024. We are working on final disbursements to districts and will have a report summary to share in early spring.

Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS)

SNAP

Energy EBT (also known as “Heat & Eat”) additional benefit to qualified SNAP households will launch in early fall 2024. This will be between \$20.01 and \$25 paid through a single (annual) cash payment on EBT cards.

eHIP (electronic- Healthy Food Incentive) similar to Double Up Food Bucks, dollar-for dollar match incentive that promotes the purchase and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables up to \$60 per household per month at participating pilot retailers and farmers markets still tentatively scheduled for launch around April/May 2024.

Summer EBT the now permanent food assistance program that was authorized by Congress in the consolidated appropriations act and then funded at the State level during Gov. Polis’ extraordinary session (Nov. 2023) will tentatively launch by end of summer 2024 for a one-time \$120 benefit per eligible school-aged child.

Regular SNAP participation is at an all-time high in Colorado and is continuing to increase. This can be attributed to a number of reasons including, but not limited to, the economic impact of the pandemic, cost of housing, increase in utility rates, and inflation reflected in the all-food consumer price index, and relatively stagnant wages in Colorado, coupled with targeted and effective efforts to increase access of SNAP benefits to more households that qualify. **In the last five years, Colorado has realized an overall 36% increase in households served.**

Averages

YEAR	HOUSEHOLDS	INDIVIDUALS
CY2019	225,292	452,937
CY2020	233,666	459,298
CY2021	263,078	513,698
CY2022	271,775	538,171

CY2023	301,803	569,246
(January 2024)*	306,726	575,670

*Estimated

While SNAP is highly federally prescribed, the USDA Food & Nutrition Service (FNS) makes certain waivers and options available to states to support the administration of the program and issuance of benefits based on states’ varying structures. During the Public Health Emergency, FNS made additional options available to states to simultaneously ensure timely and effective service delivery to clients, and support human services workers as they also navigated lock down, illnesses, and children/other dependents being home amid school and facilities closures. Out of 38 optional policies, waiver, and process options, Colorado fully implemented 26 and partially implemented another four. Among the eight options not utilized, six of those were not feasible due to the complexities of Colorado’s County Administration model and two options were determined not in the best interest of Colorado’s SNAP program.

The federal government monitors states’ efficiency and effectiveness of their administration of SNAP as a key variable to maintaining program integrity. Ensuring accurate and timely benefits are delivered to eligible participants with optimal customer service is a top priority for CDHS, as well as our commitment to make certain eligible households have access to the nutrition assistance they need. How well CDHS meets this goal is measured through a variety of performance indicators. Colorado is currently in very good standing in our Program Access Index (the degree to which eligible individuals have access to SNAP), Payment Error Rates (how accurately SNAP eligibility and benefit amounts are calculated), and Case and Procedural Error Rates (accuracy of worker actions in cases in which applicants were denied, terminated, or suspended and did not receive benefits). However, Colorado is currently struggling with and needs to improve Application Processing Timeliness (i.e. how timely initial SNAP applications are processed). Specifically, federal law entitles all eligible households to SNAP benefits within 30 days of application, or within 7 days, if they are eligible for expedited service. The federal target is 95% of all applications be processed timely; currently, Colorado is at 78%.

While having sufficient numbers of trained staff to process applications is a key component of the system, technology and automation are remarkable tools to aid processing of client applications and provide customer support. In 2019 and 2021, the Department was awarded two grants to build two innovative, first-of-its-kind proof of concept automations: iCR (Intelligent Character Recognition) and IVR (Interactive Voice Response). Subsequently, the Department leveraged American Rescue Plan Act funding to expand these tools.

iCR for Periodic Report Forms (PRFs): currently used in 28 Colorado counties

iCR for Renewals: currently used in 6 Colorado counties + “turned on” for Med renewals

- Intelligent Character Recognition (iCR) and Robotic Process Automation (RPA) work together to form the core solution for Intelligent Document Processing; it extracts data from handwritten forms, performs data entry into CBMS, and automates downstream tasks to the extent allowed by federal and state policies.
- It is currently used to scan and read structured handwritten documents, such as PRFs and redetermination packets.
- An artificial intelligence learning module allows it to constantly improve.
- Streamlines and automates updates, especially for repetitive tasks such as PRFs.
- Automates data entry from paper forms, allowing workers to focus on processing.
- Completes validation and flags nonsensical data entry from clients, for example reporting income from a child of 5 years old.
- Reduces client churn by marking RRRs as received once they are scanned, so even if a county has a backlog to work, as long as the packet is scanned the client will not be discontinued if the county can't work it before the due date.
- Allows for a worker to conduct final verification and maintain control in determining eligibility.
- Decrease processing times of applications and redeterminations. Increases accuracy/ reduces errors as the tool is more precise than manual entry.
- Reduces the workload and backlog for counties through the automation of not just forms, but verification documents as well.

Interactive Voice Response for SNAP cases

IVR is a system that can comprehend a caller's input and guide them through a set of flows to answer their question(s).

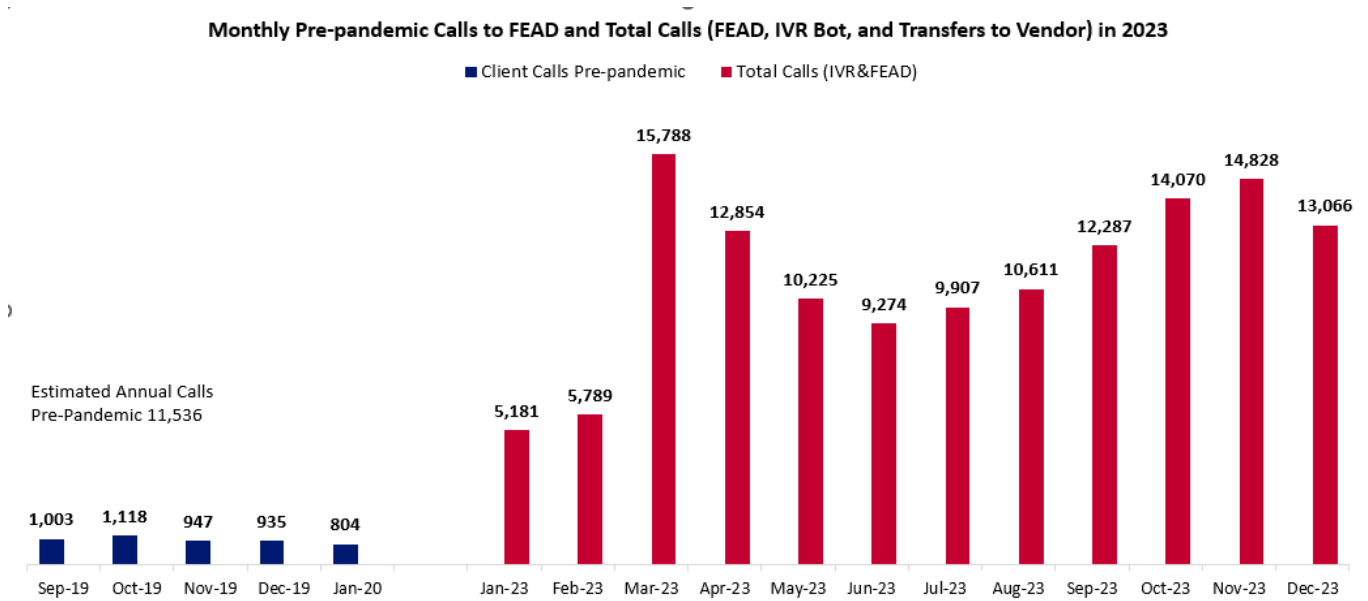
After verifying their identity for security purposes, a caller can use the keypad to provide responses to questions or speak to the IVR directly in English or Spanish and it can interpret their *intent* and validate what they say.

The IVR can be called at any time or can call clients and help them be proactive with maintaining their benefits. It can handle 1,000 calls simultaneously; leveraging a low-cost IVR in front of a traditional call center allows for helping more clients simultaneously at any one time.

The IVR is available 24/7 and can help clients with the top inquiries that the call center and workers receive related to benefit information, telephonically signing a form or packet, applying for SNAP, and ending their SNAP benefits, all without the need for county/human intervention.

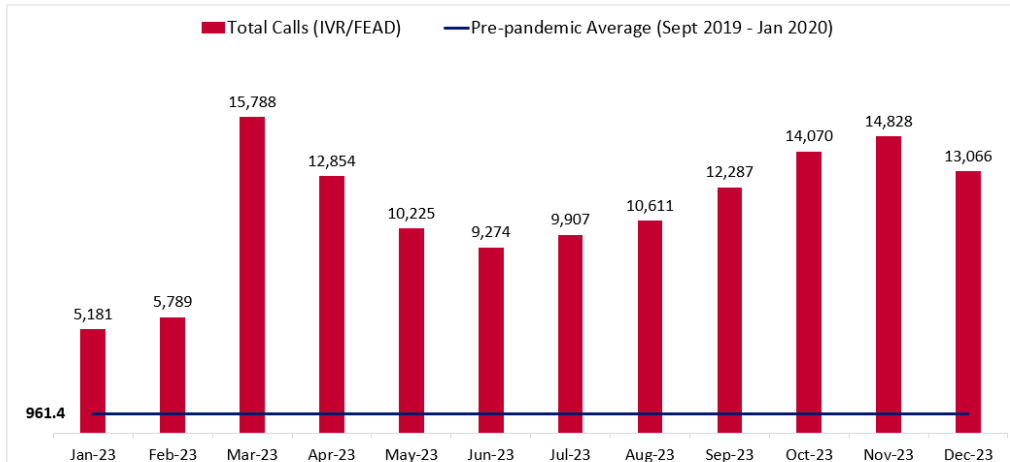
Can be used to nudge clients and provide courtesy reminders or help guide clients on the phone like how a worker or agent would. If a client doesn't pick up, it can also leave a voicemail. CBMS now calls individuals who fail to sign certain documents and obtain a recorded telephonic signature. Previous process required the counties to physically send the paperwork back to the household and wait for signature or call the county for telephonic signature. This eliminates the steps for the counties and allows for the document to be processed within a few days instead of waiting for the mail back and forth.

This is a high-level view of our calls that came into SNAP/EBT in 2023, along with our callers that utilized the IVR bot. On the left we have a glimpse of our pre-pandemic numbers that were 11,536 calls for the entire year. Total calls in 2023 was 133,880. Call volume from 2019 compared to 2023 demonstrates a 544% increase. Less than 1,4000 calls received on our SNAP lines were intended for other programs (Medicaid, cash).



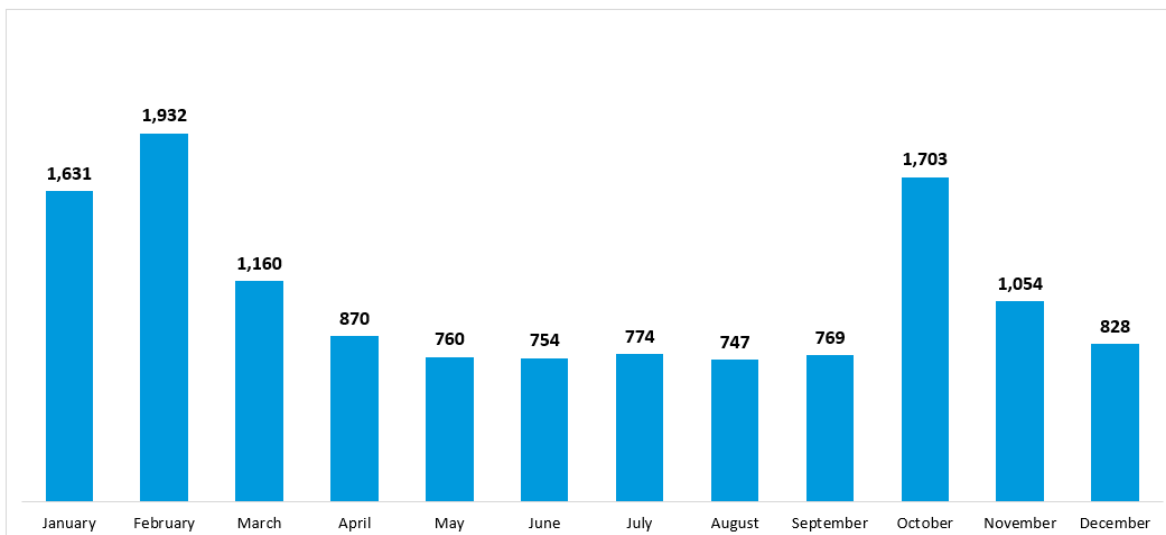
The graph below is our baseline, pre-pandemic calls compared to our 2023 monthly totals.

Monthly Calls Received (FEAD, IVR Bot, and Transfers to Vendor) in 2023 Compared with Pre-Pandemic Average



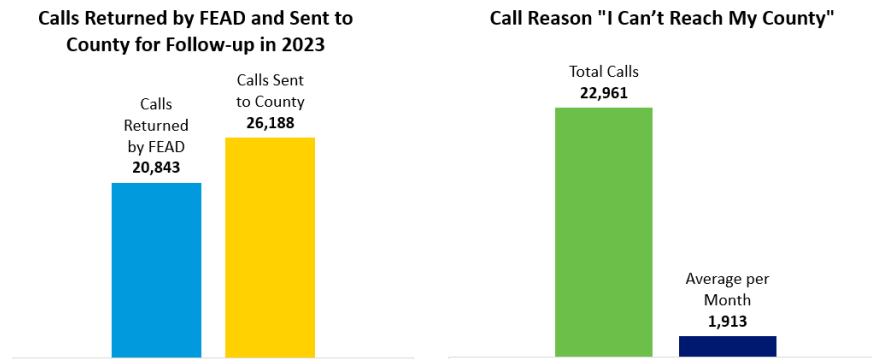
This graph highlights our repeat caller volume. There were a total of 19,145 repeat calls, overall. The 12,982 represented in this graph of those who called >1x in the same month. Examples of repeat calls: Caller has separate issue which results in multiple calls within the same month. FEAD or county worker attempted to call back but was unable to reach the caller.

Monthly Number of Repeat Callers with More Than 1 Call to FEAD in the Same Month, 2023



This graph reflects the volume of the most common reason for a client to reach out to us- they can't reach their county (22,961 calls into FEAD this year). It also reflects how we sort through all of our calls,

regardless of reason for the call. For 20,843 of those, our staff returned the call. 26,188 of our calls were forwarded onto the client’s county of residence as no action could be taken by the State.



Total Counts of Calls by Theme for 2023

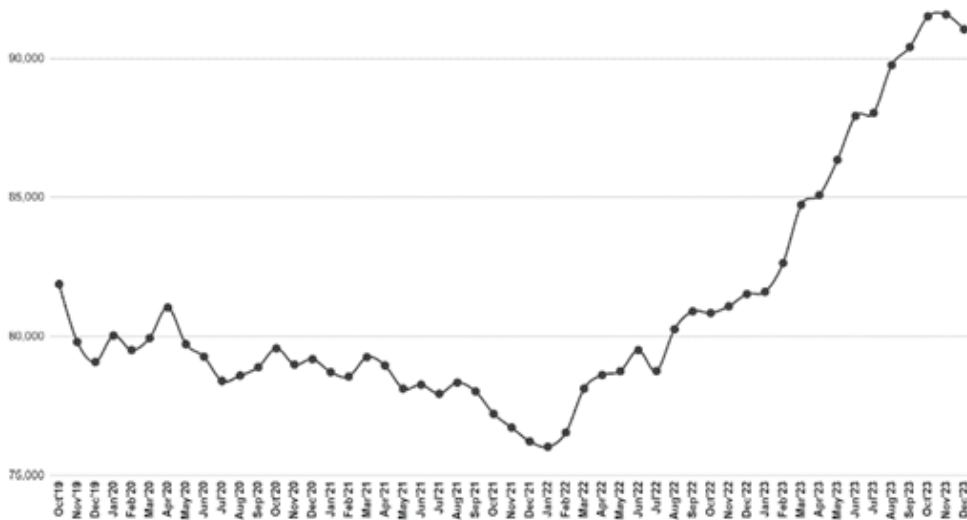
(No new updates on LFPA or R&R at this time.)

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE)

Colorado Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (COWIC):

Caseload Updates – WIC caseload has grown steadily and relatively rapidly since January '22 after years of slow decline. Caseload and retention has stabilized a little in the past few months. It was 91,049 in December (down slightly from 91,579 in November). It's too early to say whether our caseload is plateauing and we will continue to keep a close eye on the trend.

Total WIC Caseload - Count



Post Appointment Transportation for New Arrivals (Migrants) - Some of the local agencies have reported challenges specific to new arrivals (migrants) and transportation post WIC appointment - i.e., some people get transportation to the WIC appointment, but don't have transportation from the WIC appointment. **We're currently encouraging the local agencies to direct these folks to 211's** hotline for transportation assistance such as bus passes, one-way Lyft services (available in Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas, Jefferson, Fort Collins, and Weld), and assistance with longer-term transportation needs.

Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP):

Outreach - Increasing participation in CACFP is a priority. Since the end of the waivers, participation has returned to pre-pandemic numbers. We continue to develop sponsor partnerships to help child care centers with support on CACFP recordkeeping requirements.

FY 2023 Preliminary Meal Data (fiscal year end procedures are still in progress)

Meals Served

	Child Care	FCCH	After school	Adult Care	Total
FY 2020	9,277,735	2,790,549	1,853,158	497,620	14,419,062

FY 2021	9,286,620	2,780,005	7,625,898	601,785	20,294,308
FY 2022	10,707,789	2,760,172	9,292,425	560,134	23,320,520
FY 2023	10,705,092	2,726,238	1,757,519	598,433	15,787,282

Note-FY 2023 is preliminary as fiscal is working on year end close out.

As shown above, the **overall drop is a result of the drop in after school meals** - particularly those associated with models that took advantage of the PHE era waivers (congregate and meal pattern) which have since sunset. The month over month data below helps to illustrate the big picture over this time period.



Quality Nutrition Workgroup - currently finalizing a “Quality Nutrition Toolkit” which compiles resources and helpful tools so that those supporting child care providers can encourage participation in the programs that enhance access to quality nutrition for children. The toolkit webpage will be hosted on the Colorado Department of Early Childhood website. The CACFP will add a link to the toolkit, however, most of the CACFP resources are currently on the website.

Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) Qualified Exempt (QE) - CDPHE, CDEC, Family child care home sponsoring organizations continue outreach strategies to licensed home providers and qualified exempt CCCAP home providers (ECCLA, nutrition and early childhood

advocates to help raise CACFP awareness). To date: 22 QE home providers have enrolled through a home sponsor, after 2 have discontinued.

Healthy Eating Active Living

CDPHE awarded Food Bank of the Rockies a contract that started January 1, 2024, to update their procurement system to align with Healthy Eating Research's Nutrition Guidelines for the Charitable Food system. Future work includes supporting their healthcare food box program.

2024 Legislative Session Bills (Food and Nutrition Security) of Interest to CDPHE

- SB24-043 Authorizing Direct-to-Consumer Sales of Raw Milk

Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT)

NSF Engines grant

Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT) assisted with the development of the grant application submitted by the Colorado—Wyoming Climate Resilience Engine (CO-WY Engine) ahead of its groundbreaking selection by the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) as an NSF Engines grant recipient. This prestigious award positions the CO-WY Engine to receive up to \$160 million over the next 10 years to transform Colorado and the region into a national leader in developing climate-resilient and sustainable technologies.

“In ten years, the CO-WY Engine expects to generate significant economic impact for the region, including 22,000 new climate technology related jobs, \$1.5 billion in regional GDP impact, more than \$1 billion in private capital formation, the training of more than 2,000 individuals, and the distribution of \$80 million in commercialization grants to startups in the climate technology sector,” said Mike Freeman, Innosphere Ventures CEO and incoming CEO of the CO-WY Engine.

Proposition 123

Gov. Jared Polis, the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT), and Colorado Housing and Finance Authority (CHFA) announced the first 16 recipients of the voter approved Proposition 123 Land Banking funds. This funding is intended to support Colorado communities as they acquire and preserve land for affordable housing, from Rangely to Denver and Salida to Huerfano County.

The recent awards will create an estimated 1,380 housing units across the state, including housing for at-risk young adults and people transitioning out of homelessness.

Microchip

The Global Business Development Division of the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT) announced that Microchip, a Colorado Springs-based leader in the production of semiconductor devices received a historic preliminary memorandum of terms (PMT) resulting in \$90 million to modernize and expand a Microchip fabrication facility in Colorado Springs as part of \$162 million in overall direct funding to support the company's semiconductor supply chain.

Microchip, which employs nearly 1,000 Colorado workers, is the second semiconductor company to be identified for federal funding through the CHIPS and Science Act and the first in Colorado. This is the largest federal investment in CHIPS manufacturing announced by the Department of Commerce to date.

In Colorado Springs, Microchip will expand several product lines to three to seven times their current capacity. Microchip expects the expansion to create 400 net new jobs at an average annual wage of \$75,000, which is 118% of the average annual wage in El Paso County.