



See also County handouts on Greenhouses, Loafing Sheds, Pole Barns, Building Permit Requirements, and Heating an Accessory Building.

Building Codes for Farmers, Ranchers and the Agricultural Community

Farming, ranching, and agricultural operations are an important part of Larimer County's heritage and critical to our continued economic and natural vitality. Like all buildings, agricultural buildings are subject to building and land use code rules, whose application depends on exactly how the buildings are used.

Building permits were first required in Larimer County when the first building code took effect on January 1, 1972. However, building permits were not clearly required for "private use" agricultural buildings until the 1988 Uniform Building Code took effect on October 30, 1989. Since then, barns, sheds, silos, and other ag buildings over 120 sq. ft.* in floor area have required building permits and inspection approvals prior to use.

Building code rules are less stringent when the general public will not access a structure. Barns for animals, hay and other storage, and greenhouses used solely for growing crops, are subject to lesser structural, architectural and energy code requirements. Farmstands where only employees go inside and the public stays outside do not need to meet all building code requirements for commercial buildings. Once the public is invited in, these buildings are more like groceries, and must meet exiting, fire safety, accessibility, and public health codes like any other store.

Agricultural buildings may be built for or converted to other uses, such as:

- Wedding/Events Centers
- Food preparation and cooking classes
- Equine Therapy Operations
- Public Riding Arenas
- Farmers Markets
- Barndominiums (barn dwelling units) or short-term rentals
- Repair garages, commercial storage and similar businesses

When the use changes, a building permit is required, and the building must comply with land use and building codes for the new use. Health, fire, and floodplain codes may also apply depending on use, size and location.

Some ag buildings exempted from building permits (<200 sq. ft. in area or built from shade cloth/maximum 6-mil thick poly-roofing with no public access) may need miscellaneous permits for electrical, gas or heating.

***The maximum permit-exempt building size increased to 200 sq. ft. with the 2021 building codes.**

Building Code Rules for Agricultural Buildings

Which Building Codes Apply?

The International Residential Code (IRC) applies to detached one- and two-family dwellings, some townhouses, and their accessory structures not more than three stories high. All other buildings fall under the scope of the International Building, Plumbing, Mechanical, and other non-residential codes. All electrical work, including wiring for well pumps and other uses with no associated building, must follow the requirements of the 2023 National Electrical Code.

When is an Engineer Required?

The IRC contains prescriptive rules for conventional construction in areas where Ultimate Design Wind Speeds are less than 140 mph and ground snow loads are 70 pounds per sq. ft. or less. Construction outside these parameters (including most of Larimer County beyond the Front Range) requires plans designed and stamped by a licensed Colorado Professional Engineer (PE). Pole barns and loafing sheds fall outside IRC prescriptive rules, so we developed handouts you can use without hiring an engineer, if you stay within the handout's limits. With no prescriptive codes, silos and greenhouses require engineering.

Building Code Rules for Agricultural Buildings

Most agricultural buildings are classified under the International Building Code (IBC) as Group U (utility) buildings, including barns, silos, sheds, and greenhouses. Larimer County has adopted IBC Appendix C, which allows construction of larger Group U buildings. A one-story Group U building can be unlimited in area if it is surrounded on all sides by yards or public ways at least 60' wide. A two-story Group U building can be unlimited if it has 60' yards *and* a fire sprinkler system. IBC Section 3112 contains special construction rules for greenhouses. All buildings that are heated or cooled must meet energy code rules.

The Land Use Code and the Building Code

While the County's Land Use Code views some agricultural uses as non-commercial (Value-Added Agriculture, Accessory Rural Occupations, etc.), the IBC classifies all buildings into appropriate occupancy groups based on the hazards and risks associated with the intended use. The Building Division may classify agricultural buildings as Assembly, Business, Factory/Industrial, Storage or other occupancies depending on their intended use. The intended use will also determine if these buildings can be structurally designed and constructed as Risk Category I (Low Hazard) or Risk Category II (Ordinary Hazard) buildings.

Prefabricated buildings (mobile farmers' markets, farmstead accessory dwellings) are also subject to state Division of Housing requirements and/or federal codes for HUD/manufactured homes.

Confused? Start by calling our Planner-on-Call (970) 498-7679 or Building Staff-on-Call (970) 498-7660.