



Food Deserts Policy Development 2014

Issue:

Food deserts are a rapidly expanding problem. While they generally occur in urban, low-income areas, they still have the potential to effect many rural areas. In the absence of financial resources or transportation needed to reach a grocery store, consumers turn to local convenience stores that rarely stock fresh, healthy foods. In turn, experts suggest food deserts lead to an epidemic of malnourished and obese Tennesseans.

Questions:

What role should the state and county Farm Bureaus offices play in reducing the effect of food deserts?

Are food deserts becoming a prominent issue in your county?

Background:

The United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service has estimated that nearly 23.5 million American currently live in a food desert. Of those, more than half are living in low income areas, and at least 2.3 million people are living in rural areas that are more than ten miles from a supermarket and lack access to transportation.

Food deserts are not just a national issue. A 2010 Gallop poll ranked Tennessee second in the nation for states lacking access to healthy foods in low income areas. That same poll ranked Memphis as first for hunger in the country, with 26% of the Memphis population being unable to afford to purchase food for their family in the last twelve months. While large, metropolitan areas are at higher risk for having food deserts, at least 13% of the census tracts in Tennessee are considered a food desert.

At the federal level, First Lady Obama's "Let's Move" campaign has a goal of eradicating food deserts by 2017. As part of that goal, the federal government has allocated \$400 million to be used as tax breaks for supermarkets that open in food deserts. Efforts to mitigate the growth of Tennessee food deserts have seen limited success. In 2012, the Tennessee Grocery Area Task Force was formed with membership that included grocery store owners, food advocates, and public health officials. Though the task force was short-lived, they issued a series of recommendations including lowering regulatory barriers to building supermarkets and creating incentive programs to build or expand food markets. However, only their recommendation to create a new distribution schedule for food stamps was implemented. The change prevents grocery stores from being overwhelmed with the recipients on the first of every month.

State lawmakers have begun the process to form legislation. Earlier this year law makers attempted to push through a bill proposed by Rep. Harold Love, of Nashville. The program would have allocated a portion of the tax imposed on retail sales of sugary drinks to finance and develop projects to sell fresh foods to low-income areas. The bill failed.

Also this year, Senator Mark Norris, of Collierville, created a bipartisan Legislative Nutrition Caucus to increase legislative efforts to address poor nutrition, especially in children. Goals for the caucus include eliminating food deserts, encouraging urban gardening, and promoting healthier lifestyles.

Farm Bureau Policy:

Horticulture Crops (Partial)

We commend the Legislature and the Tennessee Department of Agriculture for the development of improved market facilities and services. The farmers' market system benefits consumers allowing the purchase of fresh Tennessee products directly from Tennessee farmers.