



COUNTY NEWS EXTRA

C O U N T Y N E W S E X T R A

ARE YOU LIVING IN A DESERT? — by Karen Ehrens | Nutrition Consultant

Poor diets are linked to our nation's growing health problems of diabetes, heart disease, obesity and other chronic diseases. People have started taking a look at how access to healthy foods, or lack of access, affects health.

"Food deserts" are a fairly new concept to describe places where there is not much food available to eat. Marie Gallagher, a researcher specializing in food availability describes food deserts as "large geographic areas with no or distant mainstream grocery stores."

People with better access to a supermarket or large grocery store are more likely to eat healthier foods and to have a reduced risk of obesity. Ironically, North Dakota grows food to feed the world, yet has a large number of counties classified as food deserts. This affects our health and our quality of life.

Where are the deserts?

The first look at food deserts in rural areas was published in 2007 using 2000 Census data. This review showed that in 43 of 53 North Dakota counties, half of the population lives more than 10 miles from a large food store (defined as "large supermarkets and supercenters"). In 37 counties, **all** residents live more than 10 miles from large food store. The counties not classified as "food deserts" tend to fall along the state's major arterials, Interstates 29 and 94 and US Highway 83. It will be interesting to see if this figure has changed following the current Census.

There is a new tool available to help look at access to food in other ways. The USDA Food Environment Atlas came online in

March 2010. This interactive tool can map for each state and county in the US indicators such as access to grocery stores and restaurants, how much money is spent in restaurants, food assistance and food security. According to information from the food atlas:

- In seven North Dakota counties, between 20 and 28 percent of the population have no car and live more than one mile to a grocery store.
- In 10 counties, 40 - 80 percent of people with low incomes live more than one mile from a grocery store and in 14 counties, 25 - 40 percent of people with low incomes live more than one mile from a grocery store.
- In three counties (Billings, Slope, Oliver) there are no stores authorized to accept WIC benefits.
- In three counties (Billings, Slope, Sheridan) there are no stores authorized to accept SNAP benefits (formerly known as food stamps).
- In North Dakota, we have also identified gaps in the charitable feeding network. The "Creating a Hunger Free North Dakota 2008 Study," the first-ever study of the statewide charitable feeding network, found that:
 - Fifty-two of 53 counties have a charitable feeding program.
 - Forty-three percent of food pantries/soup kitchens serve a radius of 40 miles or more.
 - In 29 out of 53 counties, food

pantries/soup kitchens provide less than 50 percent of the statewide average amount of food to, or serve less than, 50 percent of the low income population needing assistance.

Solutions

We have only begun to take a surface look at the issue of access to food in our state. NDSU researchers are wrapping up a study of the nutrition environments in Fargo, Jamestown and Bismarck. There has been a North Dakota Healthy Eating and Physical Activity State Plan developed, and one of the goals of the plan is to "improve access to healthy foods and places for physical activity." A workgroup of statewide partners has formed around the issue of food access, but there is limited personnel time and no funding to move forward the work. A more complete and thorough look at the issues of food access needs to be undertaken.

The Creating a Hunger Free North Dakota coalition developed out of the study mentioned above. The group, guided by a strategic plan, is actively working how to fill gaps and address challenges in connecting hungry people with food.

The ND Department of Agriculture is leading the ND Hunger Free Gardens initiative that will help connect those who grow vegetables and fruits to those who experience food insecurity. The goal is to grow and distribute a minimum of 500,000 pounds of fresh food to North Dakota's 244 food pantries. Any individual, group, grower or organization can participate.

Other potential solutions include:

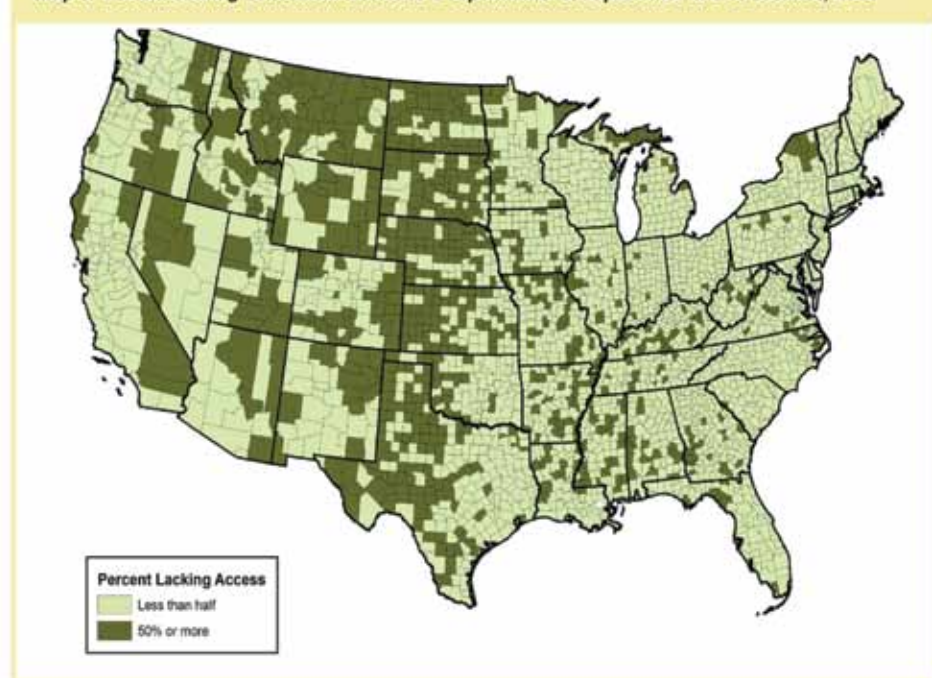
- Continue community planning and economic development efforts to

retain stores and build new ones.

- Shop locally. Support your local grocery and farmers market.
- Improve food offerings at existing stores to include more fruits and vegetables, whole grain foods, and low fat options.
- Bring people to stores. How can we help those who can no longer safely drive or do not have their own transportation get to stores?
- Target federal food and nutrition programs to areas designated as food deserts.
- Look to improve food distribution networks in the state. There are a couple of groups looking to do this, including the new venture, AggregateND at www.aggregateND.com, a finalist in the Innovate ND program.

To learn more or find out what you can do about the food deserts in our state, please contact Karen Ehrens, LRD, at karen@ehrensconsulting.com, 701-223-2616.

Map 1: Percent Lacking Convenient Access to a Supermarket or Supercenter in U.S. Counties, 2000



Map 2: Food Desert Counties in the U.S., 2000

