

Closing New Mexico's Food Gap

Presented by the Farm to Table and the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council

It is a little known fact that many of New Mexico's rural and urban communities do not have adequate access to affordable and healthy food outlets. In the absence of this essential link, many New Mexicans living on tight budgets are forced to travel great distances to shop at stores that provide a wider selection of nutritious and reasonably priced food.

Closing New Mexico's Food Gap is a project of Farm to Table and the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council that began in September of 2005. The primary purpose of the project has been to find options that will increase access to affordable and nutritious foods in rural and underserved urban areas of New Mexico. Through the analysis of local, regional, and nation food access studies, and from data gathered from seven community focus groups around New Mexico, the project identified food outlet and grocery store development as key ingredients in securing a healthy diet for all. This report outlines the challenges New Mexicans face and illustrates options that can integrate affordable and nutritious foods into the permanent infrastructure of food outlet and grocery store development.



Key Findings of the Food Gap

- Because of New Mexico's persistently high poverty rate (currently 26 counties have a poverty rate of 16% or higher), the state's residents often lack an income sufficient to purchase a nutritious diet for their families.
- Because of long distances to affordable food stores and inadequate public transportation, New Mexicans face additional hardships shopping for food for their families.
- Diets that are high in fat and processed foods, and low in fresh fruits and vegetables contribute to high rates of obesity, diabetes, and other nutrition-related diseases.
- New Mexico suffers from a disparity of full service grocery stores across the state. There are approximately 250 full service grocery stores. This equates to approximately 1 grocery store per every 486 sq. miles.
- Smaller independent grocery stores, such as those typically found in rural and underserved urban areas, often suffer from a lack of refrigeration for fresh fruits and vegetables as well as access to affordable wholesale distributors.

Case Study: New Ideas to Think About

New ideas in food retail and grocery store development are put into action everyday. In these boxes, throughout the report, are examples of new solutions working in New Mexico and around the nation.

Why Study the Food Gap: Health, Hunger, and Poverty in New Mexico

A lack of access to affordable and available food retail outlets and grocery stores has strong implications for the well being of New Mexicans. In a study conducted by the American Journal of Public Health, individuals living in neighborhoods and/or communities with a least one supermarket were more likely to meet dietary guidelines for fresh fruit and vegetable consumption than those living in neighborhoods or communities without a grocery store. A lack of access to nutritious foods can have extremely adverse affects on an individual's health and is costly to the state in terms of health care. The New Mexico Department of Health estimates that annually diabetes costs to the state is \$1.1 billion including diabetes related amputations. The Department of Health also states, "One case of diabetes out of every seven could be prevented through exercise and diet." This would result in an annual savings of over \$128 million dollars for the state. In addition, a diet lacking in fresh fruits and vegetables increases the risk of heart disease, cancer, and obesity.



Food Insecurity: Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways.

In November the U.S. Department of Agriculture ranked New Mexico as the "hungriest" state in its 2005 report on household food insecurity. According to the report, 16.8% of the state or approximately 319,200 residents are food insecure. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as, "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways." This means having to use emergency food assistance, eating less than necessary to get by, or buying extremely inexpensive foods that will not maintain a healthy diet. New Mexicans need affordable, accessible food outlets and grocery stores stocked with nutritious foods to keep both themselves and their families healthy.

Accessing food in New Mexico is a challenge due to the state's extreme rural areas, lack of sufficient urban and rural public transportation, and high poverty rates. To illustrate the idea of how much income a New Mexican would have to make in order to provide the basic necessities for a family of four, New Mexico Voices for Children created a "Bare Bones Budget" identifying the basic necessities and their cost. The Bare Bones Budget study measured the current economic costs of defined geographic communities within New Mexico. The results of the study revealed that New Mexico's low-income families need an income that is between 136%-247% of the Federal Poverty Level to adequately provide for their families, which for a New Mexican family of four is between \$27,200-49,400 annually.

Key Recommendations of the Food Gap Project

There are many ways to improve food outlets and grocery store options. The following goals focus on the most immediate concerns and offer ways that policymakers, community organizations, local businesses, and residents can close New Mexico's food gap.

2007 Recommendations

- Research and support strategies that develop new or enhance existing food retail businesses. These strategies could include: financing options, equipment and renovation packages, nutritious food promotion incentives, predevelopment costs, constructions costs, workforce development, and security enhancement.
- Research strategies to increase food distribution to rural and underserved urban areas of New Mexico.
- Establish a Task Force to serve as an advisory body in partnership with New Mexico's Health, Human Services, Agriculture, Economic Development, Agency and Long-Term Services and Transportation Departments. This Task Force could include grassroots organizations, community groups, and relevant industries to develop an action plan for food retail and grocery store development across the state.
- Coordinate outreach to rural communities and underserved urban neighborhoods that could benefit from food retail and grocery store development. Establish relationships and actively engage community members in the process identifying the best ways to address food access problems.
- Identify which rural communities and/or underserved urban neighborhoods would be ideal to coordinate pilot projects. Pilot projects can include: renovating an existing food outlet or grocery store, creating a mobile food market, or developing a community buyer's club.
- Develop a statewide action plan and funding strategy that would provide incentives and support to individual entrepreneurs, business owners, and communities to enhance or develop food outlets focused on affordable and nutritious foods as a component.
- Develop education materials and a legislative initiative about the action plan and provide presentations to communities and policymakers.
- Prepare for introduction of a legislative bill requesting funding to implement the action plan.

2008 Recommendations

- Introduce legislation requesting funds to implement the action plan.
- Provide continuous base funding for a statewide grocery store and food outlet financing initiative. Upon the success of several pilot projects, advocate for the state to provide money for food outlet and grocery store development and enhancement. Make these funds recurring and part of the state's base budget. Encourage businesses, developers, and investors to match the state's funds.

Grocery Stores Are Sustainable Economic Development

Grocery stores, like many other services such as banks, pharmacies, restaurants, and hospitals are essential to a prosperous and livable community. Grocery stores spur economic development and community vitality by creating and sustaining high paying jobs, capturing dollars currently being spent outside of the community, and increasing sales tax revenue for municipalities. In addition, large grocery stores have the potential to serve as “anchors” for community shopping centers, attracting more retail stores and a diverse array of goods and services.



High poverty communities and neighborhoods that have experienced years of job loss, population decline, and physical and economic erosion can

benefit from the development of full service grocery stores. Currently, New Mexico has 26 counties with 16% of the residents living below the federal poverty line. New Mexico has 19 non-metro counties that are classified as “high poverty,” or having poverty rates over 20%. Moreover, the state has 12 counties that are classified as having persistent poverty and 10 of these are rural. Statewide, approximately 17.4% of New Mexicans live in poverty, this is 5% above the national average of 12%. Not having access to a full service grocery store exacerbates the problems associated with rural and underserved communities in poverty such as, inaccessible healthcare and community services, rising rates of food insecurity and hunger, and limited access to public or private transportation.

Case Study: Tammen Temeeh Kahni “Our Grocery Store”

Some 100 miles off the nearest interstate on the Nevada-Idaho border lies the Duck Valley Reservation home to over 1200 members of the Shoshone-Paiute tribe. With an unemployment rate of 24.7% and over 95% of tribal dollars being spent outside of the community, the Shoshone-Paiute tribe decided to take the economic development of their community into their own hands by building their own grocery store.

In 2001 the tribe applied for a \$165,000 USDA Rural Business Enterprise Grant to create a business plan to renovate an existing tribally owned building. The tribe was awarded the grant and agreed to turn their building into a deluxe shopping center complete with a 10,000 sq. ft. grocery store. After a few years a second Rural Business Enterprise Grant was awarded in the amount of \$91,595. With this grant the tribe was able to purchase refrigeration equipment and make further renovations. The store was named “Tammen Tameeh Kahni” which translates to “Our Grocery Store.” The store held it’s grand opening in March of 2005 and will soon host a variety of retail businesses with all profits going to the tribe.

Grocery Store Development Challenges

Nationwide, the absence of grocery stores is becoming better understood as a missing link in many low-income communities and neighborhoods. For example, the Center for Food and Justice at Occidental College conducted a study that found that middle and upper income communities located in Los Angeles County have twice as many full service supermarkets per capita as low-income communities. Additionally, in a study of rural supermarkets in non-metro counties located in the Mississippi Delta researchers found that zip codes with a high percentage of low-income families had less full service grocery stores than other zip codes.



Small Stores



Large Stores

Typically, larger chain stores nestle themselves in higher income communities and can also sometimes be associated with population density. A recent study conducted by California Food Policy Advocates concluded that the median income of a community is just as important, if not more so, in determining if an area is suitable for a new store location.

Examples of this can be seen in urban and rural communities in New Mexico. Albuquerque's downtown and South Valley neighborhoods are both underserved

by high quality, full sized grocery stores. These neighborhoods have the greatest percentage of residents who live below the federal poverty level, speak English as a second language, and have children that qualify for free or reduced price school lunch. Mora County, though 80 miles away and drastically different from Albuquerque, suffers a similar dilemma. It is a rural county with an average of only 2.7 people per square mile, 25.4% poverty rate, and a 28.9% child poverty rate. Within the county there is only one full service grocery store.

Because of the disparity of full service grocery stores throughout the state, many New Mexicans typically shop in places identified as hubs for their geographic regions. For example, residents of towns such as Carrizozo, Chapparral, or Dona Ana will make the drive to Las Cruces to do their bulk shopping. Shiprock residents will drive 25 miles to Farmington, Mora residents will travel 30 miles to Las Vegas, and Quemado residents travel 75 miles to Grants. New Mexico's urban hubs do not always carry everything that shoppers need. As part of our focus groups we conducted a comprehensive food accessibility survey, which asked, "how far have you gone to shop?" Participants in the southern part of the state identified stores in Tucson, Arizona and El Paso, Texas while participants in the northern part of the state identified stores in Durango, Colorado and Chinle, Arizona.

In addition to a shortage of grocery stores, rural communities and underserved urban neighborhoods face the barrier of higher food prices. As part of our research, Farm to Table conducted a market basket assessment of 40 grocery stores across the state. The market basket consisted of 38 items, derived from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Thrifty Food Plan (TFP). The price survey revealed that market baskets from smaller stores cost on average of 32% more than the market basket from a larger chain store. Rural stores more than 20 miles away from another store on average cost 30% more than urban stores. However, certain stores located within urban areas had higher prices depending on their location. For example, Las Cruces stores located near University Park had dairy products priced 30% lower than stores located on the northern and eastern side of the city.

Development Success Stories in New Mexico

New Mexico communities have recognized the need for adequate access to healthy food. In Dixon, a group of community members rallied together to bring a coop grocery store to their town center. Over a two year process Dixon secured a \$35,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture Community Food Projects Grant, prepared a business plan, secured a building, and bought used grocery store equipment. The Dixon Coop successfully opened its doors in August of 2004 and has since secured additional federal grants to aid in further renovations. The Dixon Coop will celebrate its third year in business this year, all because community members creatively turned a problem into a solution.

In Dulce, community members were tired of making the two-hour round trip to Farmington or Pagosa Springs, Colorado to do their major food shopping. Diana Pierce, a local convenience store owner, knew the selection in her store was limited but couldn't afford the expensive refrigeration equipment. Working with the Jicarilla Tribe, Pierce was able to gain financial support to build a brand new store. The new store is a state-of-the-art 38,000 square foot supermarket. The store includes a produce department, a top of the line meat case, food vendors, a community meeting space, seven walk-in coolers, and freezers. The Jicarilla Apache Supermarket officially opened its doors in August of 2002, and since then Diana Pierce has tripled the sales of her former convenience store. Through food-related economic development, the Jicarilla Apache are increasing the self-reliance of their community and the health of their people.

On the Navajo Nation residents found it typical to drive at least three hours round trip just to access a grocery store. Dineh Cooperatives Inc. (DCI), a Navajo community development corporation, seeing this as a problem set their sights on building the Navajo Nation's first shopping center. The Tseyi Shopping Center faced many obstacles throughout its various phases of development. Despite pitches to Albertson's and Safeway many of the major chain stores turned DCI away. "We had put together a dog-and-pony- show to present to representatives of leading chains in the area but these officials just sat there and nodded politely," said John Colvin, President and CEO of DCI. Bashas, one the last supermarkets on their list, seemed to be their last hope. Much to their surprise Chairman Eddie Bashas agreed to work with them to build a store.

DCI and Bashas opened their first store on the Navajo Nation in 1981. The 28,000 square foot store carried a variety of traditional foods including: large sacks of "blue bird" brand flour (traditionally used for fry bread), cuts of mutton, large cans of lard, potatoes, dairy alternatives, animal chow, and an assortment of fresh and canned vegetables.

The store boosted employment on the Nation. Tribal law requires that businesses employ local residents whenever possible. Bashas facilitate training and team building among the Nation's residents by sending new store employees to Phoenix, Arizona to receive training provided by current Phoenix based Bashas managers.

Today there are seven Bashas locations located on the Navajo Nation in communities such as Tuba City and Window Rock, Arizona and Crownpoint, New Mexico. A portion of each stores profits continues to be given back to the Nation through DCI. Bashas has brought nutritious food access, profit sharing, and sustainable economic development, to the Navajo Nation. Bashas is currently looking to expand further into the southwest and to continue its work with tribal communities.

Alternative Food Outlet Options

Convenience Stores

Communities and neighborhoods without grocery stores are often reliant upon small convenience stores. These stores, while more accessible than full service grocery stores, typically do not carry fresh fruits, vegetables or meat. In addition, these stores carry large amounts of pre-packaged, processed foods with low-nutritional value at inflated prices. In an article published by the [Washington Post](#), it was recently discussed that choosing an orange over a package of Twinkies means saving 1000 calories and 60 grams of fat. “A store that has no oranges eliminates that choice.” Improving the availability of product in these stores and enhancing the viability of pricing, freshness, quality, quantity, and customer service in rural and underserved urban areas is a strategy that improves the already existing resources within the community.

Convenience stores currently face unique challenges that prevent them from selling fresh nutritious foods. These challenges include; matching the low price, quality, and selection of larger stores, an increased risk of profit loss while changing product selections, and meeting customer expectations and acceptance. Instituting mechanisms of support for convenience stores such as subsidizing refrigeration equipment or offering low-interest loans or tax credits for converting product lines can aid convenience stores in making the switch to healthier foods.

Cooperatives

Food Co-ops are grocery stores that are member owned and member governed. Most food co-ops are owned by their employees or owned by their customers. Cooperative have been typically more successful in higher or mixed income communities. Co-ops face many of the same challenges as convenience stores in regards to purchasing foods at low-prices. Co-ops also face the challenge of recruiting and retaining members—without the support of many members co-ops would not be able to survive. Food co-ops can be a solution for rural communities and underserved urban areas but only with adequate support and business guidance.

Mobile Markets

Mobile markets are trucks that are stocked full of produce and healthy snacks. Mobile markets are community-based initiatives that increase food for communities without grocery stores. The People’s Grocery, an Oakland, California based non-profit runs a mobile market. Every Tuesday and Saturday, youth interns drive the brightly colored truck throughout neighborhoods in West Oakland, selling fresh organic produce obtained from farmers’ markets. In addition, the People’s Grocery holds mobile education courses focused on nutrition and health.

Buying Clubs

A buying club is a group of people that come together to purchase foods at wholesale prices. Members of the buying club traditionally share the responsibilities of ordering the food and then delivering it to other buying club members. SHARE Colorado is an example of a regional buying club. SHARE purchases large quantities of items normally purchased in a grocery store, such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and frozen meats, and then re-sells the items in bundles priced \$15-25. The bundles are picked up at host site locations in Colorado, Utah, Arizona, South Dakota, Wyoming, and New Mexico. Administration costs for the program are kept low through an assortment of donations and from the consistent help of many volunteers. Buying clubs are most successful when they are well organized, have a steady flow of volunteers, and reliable forms of distribution.

Transportation and Food Access

Transportation is a primary barrier to affordable and nutritious food for low-income, elderly, and disabled persons. New Mexico is the fifth largest state with a population of just over 1.8 million of which a third live in rural areas. New Mexico has an average population density of 15 persons per square mile. This helps to illustrate the challenges some New Mexican's have in getting to sufficient food outlet centers. Effective transportation systems are essential. In the United States, 92.7 percent of households own a private vehicle. Over 10 percent of driving age New Mexicans, close to 100,000 individuals, do not own a private



vehicle. In focus groups conducted by Farm to Table, transportation was a priority issue. A woman from McKinley county spoke of community member's experiences, "They don't have a car, but they get a ride from family members, or they call a friend or pay someone."

The Center for Food and Justice at Occidental College has conducted research on transportation and food access their work highlights the necessity of building the bridge food retailers and consumers. Residents of low-income areas, across the nation, have limited access to a food markets and often have to travel away from their communities and/or neighborhoods to shop for food. Many of New Mexico's urban areas have public transportation systems, which are designed to meet commuter needs rather than shopping patterns. A woman in Rio Arriba county stated, "It's a big issue for our elderly...They have to call and wait for an hour and they get tired."

Participants in this project's focus groups stated that they traveled as far as 70 miles each way to access a grocery store. A coalition of Latino community groups with a similar problem in Austin, Texas decided to lobby their local government to establish a "grocery bus" route. The route was primarily targeted at low-income areas of Austin. The bus makes a twice a day loop to several of Austin's major supermarkets. Transportation policies attuned to New Mexico's food security are essential in closing the gap between family farmers, food retailers, and consumers.

Case Study: Innovative Ideas in Distribution

Distribution in and around the state of New Mexico has long been a problem for many local farmers and ranchers. La Montanita Coop, a long term supporter of local producers, saw the troubles local farm families were having getting their product to market and decided that it was time for them to take an active role in creating a more effective distribution system in New Mexico. The Coop's "The Food Shed Project" picks up product in refrigerated trucks from over 30 local farm families and delivers it to all Coop locations and other retail businesses in Northern New Mexico. The project is anticipated to expand as the Coop recently purchased a refrigerated warehouse to store even more product and to ensure freshness prior to distribution.

State Legislation to Improve Access

Many communities across the country have struggled for years to bring a grocery store to their town or neighborhood. Securing the funding, convincing investors, and finding a large enough parcel of land are challenges that are not accomplished easily. However, with the help of public-private partnerships building a grocery store or renovating an existing one can be a reality. Below are examples from Pennsylvania and California of how state legislation can be used to aid grocery store development.

In 2003, Pennsylvania created a statewide economic development initiative to improve the access to healthy and affordable food. The Governor of Pennsylvania, Ed Rendell, and the Pennsylvania State Legislature allocated more than \$20 million dollars for a pool of sustainable funds. These funds, matched by nearly \$60 million from a private economic development corporation, created an \$80 million financing pool for grocery store development in rural and underserved urban neighborhoods. Supplied in the form of low interest loans and grants these funds can be utilized for land acquisition, equipment rental or purchase, specialized projects, and construction.

Since the program's launch in early 2004 it has enjoyed great success. To date the Fresh Food Financing Initiative has assisted 22 locally owned grocery stores with expansion or substantial renovation in both rural and urban communities. Over 2,500 new jobs have been created and over 1,133,595 sq. feet of retail space has been created or restored.

Motivated by the success in Pennsylvania, a number of public health and food advocacy groups in California successfully lobbied for a similar initiative. The bill, titled the Healthy Food Access Act (SB 1329) sponsored by Senator Elaine Alquist, sought to bring together state and private dollars to create a funding pool that would provide one-time assistance to create and develop economically sustainable models to increase healthy food consumption in rural and underserved urban communities such as business plan development, feasibility studies, refrigeration units, and outside technical assistance.

The Healthy Food Access Act successfully passed two policy committees in the California Senate, the Senate Appropriations Committee, the Senate Floor, and two Assembly Committees. Unfortunately the bill was voted down this fall in Assembly Appropriations Committee. Despite the setback, the bill garnered media attention educating both policymakers and the public about the lack of access to healthy food in low-income communities.

Case Study: Be a Good Neighbor and Build a Healthy Community!

In 2002, a non-profit Literacy for Environmental Justice (LEJ) conducted a community food security assessment of food retail outlets within the Bayview Hunters Point neighborhood in San Francisco. Key findings within the study concluded that less than 5% of the convenience stores within the neighborhood sold fresh produce and that many residents were forced to ride for over an hour on a bus to access a grocery store.

To seek a solution to this problem, LEJ developed an innovative program entitled the "Good Neighbor Program." The program provides local convenience store merchants with economic incentives to provide nutritious food options such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Examples of incentives include, free in-store energy retro fits, local advertising, business training, cooperative buying, in-store promos, and participation in the good neighbor branding campaign.

Conclusion

State government is an essential ingredient to the success of communities in New Mexico. New Mexicans face difficulties in accessing food because of its rural areas, high poverty rates, and lack of sufficient urban and rural public transportation systems. Grocery store and food outlet development is a practical solution for communities to increase access to nutritious food, acquire living wage jobs, and obtain foods that are traditional to our region. In addition, grocery store and food outlet development encourages economic growth, attracts foot traffic to town centers, creates locations for public transportation drop offs and pick ups, and has the potential to serve as an anchor to attract other retail businesses.

Through the cooperation and leadership of officials in both the public and private sectors, the number of grocery stores and food outlets can be increased. An action plan created by representatives from the public and private sectors serving on a task force can be the blueprint for a food secure New Mexico. This action plan will provide ways in which rural and underserved communities can renovate or expand existing grocery stores or food outlets, identify which communities could benefit from the development of new stores, provide innovative alternatives, and transportation and distribution options.

If New Mexico's food gap continues to be ignored, hunger and food insecurity will grow. Grocery stores and food outlets will operate and manage themselves in economically rational and predictable ways. They will continue to place themselves in communities with high median incomes and high population densities. The state of New Mexico depends on the actions of our policymakers to create new development opportunities and to ensure that across the state rural and low-income communities are not forgotten.

Hartford Food Systems, located in Hartford, Connecticut, is a non-profit organization that focuses on hunger and food security. They recently released a report in which they concluded that, "Supermarket chain executives never promised to promote the general well being of our residents. That is the job of our elected representatives and public servants." As evidenced in Pennsylvania public and private partnerships can work. Through innovation, new opportunities, and realizing the limits and the capacity of our existing grocery retail sector, policymakers and communities can fully close the food gap and provide grocery store access for every New Mexican.

Project Advisory Team

This project has been aided and guided by a project advisory team. The project advisory team included Pam Roy, Le Adams and Tawnya Laveta of Farm to Table; Rozie Kennedy, New Mexico Task Force to End Hunger; Clark de Schweinitz, New Mexico Legal Aid; Denise Miller, New Mexico Farmers' Marketing Association; and Mark Winne, Mark Winne and Associates.



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About us

Farm to Table is a 501c(3) non-profit organization located in Santa Fe, New Mexico that focuses on linking local food and fiber production to local needs by improving communities' access to nutritious, affordable, locally grown, and culturally significant foods. For more information about Farm to Table and the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council, or the *Closing New Mexico's Food Gap* project please contact:

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