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Almost one third.

That’s how many residents are affected by food deserts in North Carolina. A food desert, originally defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a low-income area where a significant number of residents are far from a supermarket (i.e., 1+ miles in urban areas and 10+ miles in rural areas). North Carolina has over 170 food deserts across 57 counties.

Research suggests there is a connection between the lack of access to healthy foods and the rate of obesity and costly chronic diseases. In fact, excess weight has been estimated to cost North Carolina $17.6 billion each year in medical costs and lost employee productivity.

Featured Tool

Check out the USDA’s Food Access Research to see Food Deserts in your area.

Featured Challenge

Click here to share your ideas for making the healthy choice the easy choice by improving healthy food access in low-income communities across the state.

Featured Resource

Join the MOOC-MENT! Click here to learn about IEI’s free six-week “boot camp”. Massive Open Online Course (MOOC-Ed),
Click here to see the CDC Modified Retail Food Environmental Index to find food deserts across our state.

On the other hand, residents living in neighborhoods with at least one supermarket have been found to consume up to 32% more fruits and vegetables than those living without one. Some believe a population-wide shift of consuming just one extra portion of fruits and vegetables could actually save the U.S. $2.7 trillion in medical costs.

But the issue is just as much about economic development and jobs. Data suggests that each new food retailer can create between 48 to 120 new jobs and increase home values and tax revenues. In addition, there is growing evidence that buy-local food programs campaigns could support North Carolina rural farmers and increase sales. According to Nancy Creamer, Director of the Center for Environmental Farming Systems at North Carolina State University, “We spend $45 billion on food in this state. Just keeping 10 percent of that in-state would be $4.5 billion annually.”

So what is being done in North Carolina?

In January 2013, two grocery stores in Southeast Raleigh closed, prompting Representative Yvonne Holley (D-Wake) to learn more about food deserts and the policy solutions to address them. Later that year she introduced House Bill 957, originally designed to provide tax incentives to small businesses to encourage the delivery and availability of nutrient-rich foods in food desert zones. The bill later became a study commission, drawing bipartisan support with Republican Majority leader Rep. Edgar Starnes (R-Caldwell) and Rep. Chris Whitmire, (R-Henderson/Polk/Transylvania) as committee co-
According to Holley, legislators will be looking at "new and creative ways to get people access to nutrient-rich foods." The House Committee on Food Desert Zones will have a total of four meetings leading up to the 2014 short legislative session. Materials and presentations from the meetings can be accessed here.

Since the launch of the Emerging Issues Commons, several North Carolinians have expressed the desire to improve access to healthy foods. Click here to share your ideas for improving healthy food access in low-income communities across the state.

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