

# A Town Called Malnourished

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Most people think of food deserts as places like inner-city Detroit or east Los Angeles, but they exist throughout rural America, even in communities where produce and fruit are grown. In urban areas, the U.S. Department of Agriculture considers a food desert an area with no ready access to a store with fresh and nutritious food options within one mile. In rural America, a desert is defined as 10 miles or more from the nearest supermarket.

It's estimated there are more than 23 million people, more than half of them low-income, living in food deserts. Lack of access to healthy foods and consequent poor diet leads to higher levels of obesity and chronic conditions like diabetes and heart disease.

Health advocates say a more apt description of these carrot- and cantaloupe-deprived environs might be "food swamp." Swamps are generally saturated in fast-food chains offering high-fat and high-sugar value meals, and/or gas station convenience stores that seemingly pump out Red Bulls and roller food on a conveyor belt.

Yet, there's a glimmer of sunshine on all that swampland. From the Appalachian hills to the flatlands of American Indian reservations out west, grassroots organizers and public health advocates are digging in (sometimes literally) to transform rural food deserts.

Cooperative extension agents (agricultural experts funded through USDA programs), faith-based groups, and dedicated locavores work like physicians staging health "interventions" by way of farmers' markets, community gardens, food canning classes, and farm-to-school projects, infusing rural pockets with fresh and tasty fruits and vegetables.

Dawn Newman, American Indian and tribal-partnership liaison with the University of Minnesota extension service, oversees the master gardening program on the heavily forested Fond du Lac reservation in Wisconsin. About 4,000 members of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa are scattered across the rural landscape. In addition to supporting the tribe's tradition of gathering mushrooms, wild rice, and maple syrup tapping, she secures USDA grants for gardening projects. Last year they created a farm-to-school and community garden program that included a community supported agriculture component, which provided free shares of produce for anyone who signed up. Not exactly a resounding success, says Newman, who was puzzled that many members did not even bother to pick up the food. Was it because it was free? Did they not know how to cook it?

"Historically, I would say that after the trauma they experienced as a community, living on reservations in poverty conditions and being dependent on government commodities, people became more accustomed to eating shelf-stable foods—things from cans they just open up and heat," says Newman. "It's what many people are used to. Changing that mindset to choose the healthier foods is a challenge. It's not something that you can do overnight."

Like Newman, others working in rural food swamps say just having access to healthy foods is one thing; actually getting people to choose that healthy food takes time.

(495 words)