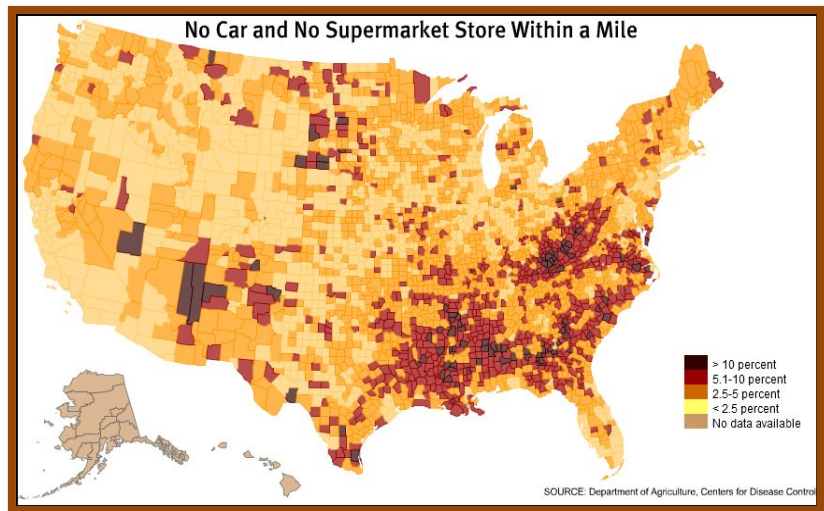


Addressing Food Concerns: A Southern Priority

Statement of Need: Approximately 16 percent of households in the South are food insecure, the highest of all four regions of the United States (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, & Singh, 2012). A lack of access to healthy, affordable food particularly affects rural, low-income communities for a variety of reasons. Much of what we see in the Southern region is due to low income, no transportation, and an all-around lack of resources to obtain nutritious food. As the map shows, access to supermarkets, where healthy, nutritious foods are often obtained, is limited in the Southern Region.



Potential Impact:

Working across programmatic boundaries, Cooperative

Extension Service is poised to bring together invaluable expertise to promote local consumerism of locally produced, healthy foods, potentially decreasing the burden of food deserts in the region. Specifically, working together, Extension Service has the opportunity to help communities, farmers, and consumers collectively:

- Lower food costs to consumers by reducing transportation expenses to the farmer
- Decreased time between harvest and consumer, which can increase the amount of produce available for sale, resulting in increased income potential for producers.
- Increase availability of fresh fruits and vegetables in unserved/underserved areas, potentially impacting a number of important health indicators such as obesity.

Opportunities: The synergies of multi-state, multi-disciplined approaches have their own potential rewards as various perspectives and expertise aligns along a common goal. Additionally, a number of funding agencies are becoming more invested in helping to address this concern. The recent Farm Bill has prompted new investments both through USDA NIFA and USDA Rural Development, to name just two. As new funding opportunities open, this planning team can help set the stage for prompt, precise responses that are targeted and well-coordinated to effectively address this collective concern.

Initial Scan of Activities and Opportunities: Several activities are already underway in the region and can be used as a base on which to build. While this is by no means considered a thorough scan, some of these are listed below:

- The Community, Local and Regional Food Systems eXtension Community of Practice recently launched with 12 of the South's 13 states represented for a total of 97 Southern members, comprising approximately 29% of the 327 person team.
- LSU AgCenter co-sponsored the Farm to Table International Symposium on August 2-4, 2014.
- A Land-Grant University in the South recently submitted a proposal to offer training and technical assistance for the Community Foods Projects Competitive Grants Program.
- Program & Staff Development and Communications specialists from the South are already working across state lines to think through ways to ensure that impacts and accountability are carefully tracked and communicated for local foods initiatives.
- SRDC's sister Regional Rural Development Center in the Northeast has a well-established regional food collaboration among its Land-Grant partners and other stakeholders. That Center's director, Dr. Stephan Goetz, has offered to share lessons learned as the South begins to gear up. <http://agsci.psu.edu/research/food-security>.
- SRDC's long-established RIDGE program holds promise in linking researchers into the Extension realm through this common interest. <http://srdc.msstate.edu/ridge/>
- SRDC was included in a recent discussion among federal and state level partners on identifying common measures of rural vitality for the South. A good bit of interest was expressed around using the attention focused on local foods as a potential area in which to begin a multi-disciplinary effort.

Proposed Action: The Southern Rural Development Center proposes to bring together a small team of Extension expertise from a cross-section of the Extension System to begin thinking about how to tackle this tremendous challenge through our collective regional strengths. The proposed planning group would include representatives from among the Extension leadership (directors and administrators) as well as from Ag and Natural Resources, Community & Resource Development, and Family & Consumer Science bringing expertise along the farm-to-table continuum. Additionally, Program & Staff Development and Communications specialists are already working across state lines to think through ways to ensure that impacts and accountability are carefully tracked and communicated for local foods initiatives. Their early successes will bring strength to this initial planning phase.