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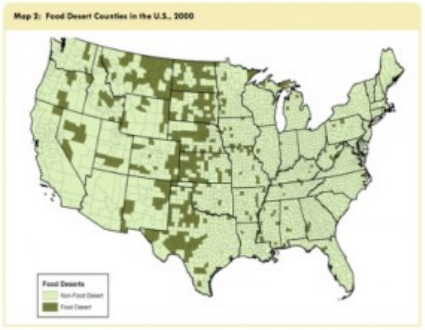
NEW WEST SERIES

Multimedia Feature: How Families Manage in the Rural Food Deserts of the West

Small towns, including many in Montana and Wyoming, get left behind by food distributors. With few options to grow their own food, many end up out of luck or relying on creative means to fill their fridges and pantries.

By AJ Mazzolini, Guest Writer, 2-03-11

Pattie Fialcowitz straps two of her three small children into the family's Subaru. She makes sure the 2-year-old and 4-year-old are ready for the trek. They'll be in the car for about an hour, headed 45 miles south to Missoula for the biweekly grocery trip, so she wants to ensure they're comfortable — for everyone's sake.



This map from Rural Realities, a study by the Rural Sociological Society, shows dark areas of the country defined as food deserts, places with a lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables and, often, grocery stores.

The white Outback's tires crunch on a thin layer of fresh snow covering the gravel road. Mountains in the not-too-distant horizon are distinctly whitened. A few acres of fields surround Fialcowitz's house, where she grows crops year-round and raises cattle.

The land on Fialky Farm is fertile, but it sits, statistically, in the middle of a desert—a food desert. For the Fialcowitz family, the only fresh produce available in the town — or for miles in any direction — comes straight from the four acres of land they own. Because in Dixon, Montana, a town of about 230 people that sits in the southwest corner of the Flathead Indian Reservation in Western Montana, there is nowhere to buy healthy food. No restaurant. No grocery store. Not even a gas station convenience store.

"There's a lot of people that don't eat well here," Fialcowitz says. "There's a lot of poor people, too."

Video: Fialky Farm helps food desert residents find healthy eating

The Rural Food Desert

For many families living in sparse regions, the Fialcowitzes' plight is a familiar

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one. In the United States, especially the rural West, the number of areas without ready access to healthy and affordable grocery stores has been gradually increasing over the past few decades.

A study released by the Research Initiation Program at Mississippi State University shows one of the highest concentrations of food-desert counties in the United States extends east from the Rocky Mountains toward the Great Plains. Food deserts are prevalent in nearly all non-metropolitan counties in Montana, eastern Wyoming and Colorado, as well as parts of northeastern New Mexico, according to the study. Populations there, from the Canadian to the Mexican border, have a shortage of healthy food.

Defining these food deserts can be tricky and they can exist in both urban and rural areas with similar issues of accessibility. Some experts label deserts differently depending on relative size of available supermarkets or distance separating customers from the food source. Either way, several critical factors have caused the development of the deserts, said Al Cross, director of the Institute for Rural Journalism at the University of Kentucky.

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Part of this food accessibility problem has been caused by the emergence of massive, big-box stores that move into nearby locations, Cross said. As more and more people make the choice to visit large chain stores, places where they can get not only groceries but other household supplies, it puts strain on local grocers.

"That cuts the market for business in small towns, especially for supermarkets," said Cross, who served on the editorial board of a rural sociology project on food deserts. "They operate on very small margins to begin with, maybe a 2 or 3 percent (profit). They can't raise prices to compete because even more people will leave."

A second leading cause of small-town markets closing — and effectively adding to the prevalence of food deserts — involves dwindling populations in rural areas. Populations already low are threatened by the disappearance of independently owned farms and the general migration of people toward suburbs. With fewer potential customers, there's less money to help keep local grocery stores open, Cross said.

Miles from Nowhere

Especially in rural areas, food deserts exist beyond the reaches of the massive food distribution system in this country. Chuck Verbeck, an administrator for Sysco Corporation, the largest food distributor in North America, said it all comes down to the costs of delivering a relatively small amount of food to stores with undersized customer pools, many of which are far off of main highways.

"When it comes to rural areas and our decisions there… it's like any business," said Verbeck, the company's vice president of program sales for the Billings, Mont., distribution facility. "It's all driven by profitability and access."

Verbeck pointed to the lack of operating grocery stores that his trucks service in tiny towns in Montana and Wyoming. He said the majority of deliveries are to bars and casinos that serve food. And while the company — which does $38 billion in food services a year nationally — has no exact rule on where to deliver, if a Sysco salesperson can't make a profit in a place, you definitely won't see a truck in that town.

By the Numbers

Although there is no formal definition of a food desert, areas classified as such often share common characteristics including high numbers of convenience stores, higher poverty rates, and more residents living in sparsely populated areas outside of cities. Rural Realities, a study done by the Rural Sociological Society, classifies food deserts by the number of people in each county lacking convenient access to a supermarket. Here's the breakdown of food deserts in the Rocky Mountain West.

- 98 percent of food desert counties are located outside of urban areas.
- 13 percent of counties in the U.S. are considered food deserts (418 out of 3,141).
- 54 percent of counties in Montana are food deserts (30 out of 56).
- 30 percent of counties in Wyoming are food deserts (7 out of 23).
- 31 percent of counties on Colorado are food deserts (20 out of 64).
- 21 percent of counties in New Mexico are food deserts (7 out of 33).

Even places where distributors could make money sometimes get left behind, especially due to inclement weather. Conditions can cause deliveries to

become increasingly difficult.

"We've got a $200,000 piece of equipment and our drivers' safety to take into consideration," Verbeck said. "When the snow flies, sometimes we don't. And that's Mother Nature dictating where we go."

That scenario tends to occur each year in Cooke City, Mont., where trucks coming from Billings, located just 125 miles northeast, have to circle around Yellowstone National Park on more reliable roads to even get near the town, he said. The new route adds hours and more than 100 miles of travel to the itinerary. If they can't make it all the way into Cooke City, a seasonal tourist town with a permanent population of little more than 100, Sysco tries to coordinate a drop point where pickup trucks can pack the product back up icy, winding roads.

When fresh fruits, vegetables and lean meats are left out of a person's diet, serious problems develop. Without the nutrients that come from a balanced approach to eating, malnutrition will be right around the corner, Cross said. Even worse, cheap and seemingly easy substitutes for products found in the produce section of grocery stores can lead to all sorts of health problems if consumed regularly over a long period of time.

Processed food on the shelves of gas-station convenience stores is the most readily available food in many rural areas, but is often packed with saturated fats, high levels of sodium and cholesterol.

"That's a lot of empty calories that encourage obesity and diabetes," Cross said.

Those effects are usually unavoidable for folks who, unlike the Fialcowitz family, have no viable transportation and therefore no other options. Because of this, the portion of the populous with low or no income is hit even harder by the lack of healthy food.

But some people are fighting back. Kentz Willis, a nutrition and food safety expert from the University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension in Sheridan, said that, while residents of scantily populated regions may have a hard time bringing supermarkets back to town, many are starting to cultivate their own food, often planting small gardens during the growing season.

"There's a real movement in the region of people starting community gardens. There's nothing healthier than grabbing something straight out of the ground —maybe washing it first — and then digging in," Willis said.

Unfortunately, he added, with the climate of most of the Rocky Mountain area, the opportunity to farm can be limited. The growing season in Wyoming isn't nearly as long as a season in a place like California, he said, so people need to take advantage of it while they can.

In Missoula, Pattie Fialcowitz parks her car next to a local organic food store. She'll sell some of her crops there — shallots in the winter, a wider variety of cultivated products during the summer months — before swinging by Costco to pick up bulk supplies like toilet paper and cheese. The snow has started up again, falling thick, whipped around by harsh winds.

Winters, she says, poses challenges for people in rural areas. During the summer, however, those who grow crops often sell their surplus to others in their communities. When farmer's markets are in season, neighbors' efforts are one of the best solutions to solving the healthy food scarcity issue, adding fresh produce to the diets that need it most.

"The farmer's markets are popping up all over the place," she says. "But people have to be looking for it. And many people aren't." And with the regular and long disappearance of warm weather, even that option also disappears, leaving long drives and hard, personal choices for people in Dixon and places like it.

ABOUT THIS SERIES: This week, New West is proud to run stories reported and written by University of Montana School of Journalism students who, with the help of American Public Media's Public Insight Network, looked into the local food movement and agricultural shifts shaping the West. Journalism student Heidi Groover served as lead editor for this series. The project originated as part of the Green Thread initiative at UM.

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