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## Irrigating Food Access Equality: The Pathway to Eliminating Food Deserts in Southern Texas

By **Christian Jimenez**, *CHCI-PepsiCo Nutritional Health Public Policy Fellow*

### Executive Summary

Within the Rio Grande Valley region of Texas, 52% of census tracts are deemed food deserts, defined by the United States Department of Agriculture when more than 33 percent of individuals live more than one-mile distance from a grocery store (USDA, 2019). Fortunately, attention to communities lacking access to grocery and farmers markets has been increasing, however, a lack of interagency cooperation between government, non-profit organizations, and communities remains a barrier to achieving a comprehensive solution (Harding, 2009). A first step towards eliminating food deserts is making stakeholders such as small businesses, government agencies, food banks, and community leaders aware of the lack of collective power and unity causing the inability to implement change in larger scales in regional areas (Harding, 2009). To enhance and promote current initiatives such as community gardens, farmer markets, and creation of grocery stores in food-scarce areas, two policy proposals have been

determined:

Policy 1: Local governments should provide guidance and incentivize stakeholders to form Food Policy Councils to provide a platform to cultivate partnerships among all food system participants and create clear priorities on support programs and services addressing food desert consequences.

Policy 2: The U.S Department of Agriculture should incentivize the private sector to invest in food desert communities by establishing tax credits to reduce the financial burden of constructing new grocery stores.

### Measuring Food Deserts

The United States Department of Agriculture defines a food desert when a census tract meets the following two criteria (USDA, 2019):

- 1) A low-income community poverty rate of 20 percent, or a median family income at or below 80 percent of the statewide median family income.
- 2) A low-access community

census tract with more than 33 percent living more than one mile from a supermarket or large grocery store or rural census tracts (geographical regions containing 1,000 to 8,000 people) that are more than 10 miles from a supermarket or large grocery store.

Currently 6,500 food deserts have been identified in the United States; with 75 percent in urban areas and the remaining 25 percent are rural (National Homeless Coalition, 2017). Proximity to a grocery store is especially problematic for rural communities because policy often serve more populated areas (Feeding America, 2014).

### The Problem: Texas Food Deserts

In the Southern region of Texas, the Rio-Grande Valley, too many residents live in food deserts, where residents have limited access to fresh fruit, vegetables, and other healthful whole foods due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers' markets, and healthy food providers. This leads to a dependence on outlets with

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limited nutritious options causing an increase in obesity rates within communities living in food deserts (Salinas, 2014).

### **Policy 1: Local Government Encouragement to Form Food Policy Councils**

A food desert is an intersection of issues in population hunger, malnutrition, agriculture, food accessibility, and infrastructure. These issues are currently addressed separately by various organizations. To coordinate these efforts, local government could create a Food Policy Council (FPC) by executive order (The Public Law Center). Subsequently, this equips grassroots efforts and non-profit organizations to drive and maintain a Food Policy Council system (The Public Law Center). Food Policy Councils aim to ensure that initiatives from different sector participants function symbiotically towards community-based needs (Harper, et.al 2009). For example, a farmer’s market workgroup could bring forth an issue to the council about their inability to supply healthy fresh products to their communities. In response, a FPC can facilitate a partnership within the FPC network of businesses to fund the startup of a food hub organization. Food hub organizations help local producers expand their product distribution to more places throughout a community such as local and regional grocery chains, schools, and co-operative food markets (The Public Law Center).

Additionally, by benefiting from the use of FPC platform, different food system participants could provide status updates on their respective project which would allow for the FPC to be responsive, plan, and provide updated direction to participants. Cities and counties in the Rio Grande Valley are not alone in creating a food policy council. The cities of Laredo and San Antonio in Texas both have FPCs and could provide a model for policy when forming a food council. The Rio Grande Valley leadership’s resolution should include the clear mission for the council to achieve long-term goals such as promoting public health, healthy eating, and access to healthy food options in the community (The Food Policy Council of San Antonio). Main provisions within the resolution should outline the membership eligibility and accountability for participants. Lastly, an effective food council includes a diverse selection of members to provide the council a variety of perspectives in order to best navigate the food system and local policy for long-term sustainability (The Public Law Center).

Challenges this policy would face would be its reliance on holding the food system participants accountable for proper communication, assembly, and responding to other participants’ needs. Additionally, Food Policy Councils are challenged by working with a diverse membership while navigating political climates and balancing focus to specific

programs (Harper, et.al 2009)

### **Policy 2: Federal Government Incentivizing Community Investment**

*Healthy Food Access for All Americans Act*

The Healthy Food Access for All Americans Act (H.R. 1717) is a bill introduced in the United States House of Representatives (116th Congress) which would allow tax credits and grants for initiatives that provide access to healthy food in food deserts (United States Congress). For instance, the proposal would allow tax credits for operating a new grocery store or renovating an existing grocery store in a food desert. The bill would also authorize grants for a portion of the construction costs of building a permanent food bank in a food desert. Additionally, temporary access merchants, mobile markets, farmers markets, and food banks will be allocated 10 percent of any annual operational costs by government grants (United States Congress).

This bill was introduced on March 3, 2019 and as of February 17, 2020 awaits review by the House Subcommittee on Nutrition, Oversight, and Operations.

While tax incentives aim to attract more business (in this case, grocery stores) by reducing costs of operations, investors may show concern on the long-term sustainability of the tax incentives. They may also view investment in a low-population, rural district as risky. Lastly, evidence has indicated

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that U.S low-income households in food deserts do not necessarily shop at their closest chain store due to product offerings and price points (Breyer, 2013). This poses a challenge to the efficacy of increasing number of grocery markets in food desert regions.

## Conclusion

Food Policy Councils are important centers of local food system knowledge, information, data, and opinions from different sources (Harper, et.al 2009). The primary aim of this centralized leadership model is to inspire initiatives and help coordinate organizations and institutions to projects. Bringing together different stakeholders helps ensure that food desert initiatives are representative of diverse needs. Additionally, the continued effort to establish new grocery markets is an imperative catalyst to solving the ongoing issue of food deserts by incentivizing and attracting the emergence of grocery markets (Jimenez, 2013). Furthermore, it is time for the United States Congress to act and irrigate areas with insufficient grocery markets with both incentives and proper resources for new markets to establish and prosper. Considering the amount of monetary resources the nation has, policymakers should prioritize financing the further development of successful enterprises that are able to thrive financially and socio-ecologically all while creating a more harmonizing community by synergizing increased community

support, creative partnerships, and government investment. By establishing an interagency leadership model that would increase collaboration, delegation and objectives – there is an opportunity to create upward mobility for all organizations involved while bringing food access equality to underserved populations living in food deserts across Southern Texas.

## Endnotes

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