

Region 4 - Rural Food Access White Paper (January 2023)

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Most Americans enjoy a fresh, stable food supply – with abundant access to food – thanks in large part to North Dakota’s agricultural producers. In fact, 60% of Americans live within walking distance – less than a mile – from a large supermarket or grocery that sells fresh foods.

However, there is a strange twist. The people who live on farms and in rural communities do not have easy access to the fresh foods and staples they help supply.

In Pembina, Walsh, Nelson, and Grand Forks counties (Region 4), rural communities have experienced a steady decline of jobs among grocery stores, restaurants, and other types of eating places. **These small towns have lost 25% of grocery store jobs and 45% of restaurant and other food service jobs since 2012.**



Much of the issue isn’t because the region has been losing people – but rather – **how the big wholesale suppliers to grocery stores penalize rural areas due to low volume. The Robinson-Patman Act, established in 1936, prohibited sellers from discriminating against price or promotional deals and protected small grocery businesses from fast growing supermarket chains.** However, enforcement of the RPA has declined since the 1980s. There have been attempts to resurrect enforcement of RPA since 2022 and uncertainty during the second Trump administration.

Over the past 30 years, grocery suppliers have rewarded very large supermarkets and supercenters for buying and selling foods at very large volumes – so much so that there are just 20 grocery retail companies that dominate the market in the United States. They doubled their sales between 1990 and 2020 – while small and independent grocery stores across rural America struggled and closed – like those in many North Dakota small towns.

So many grocery stores have closed since 1990 that much of North Dakota is defined as a rural food desert. The official USDA term for food desert is an area with Low Access to Healthy Foods.

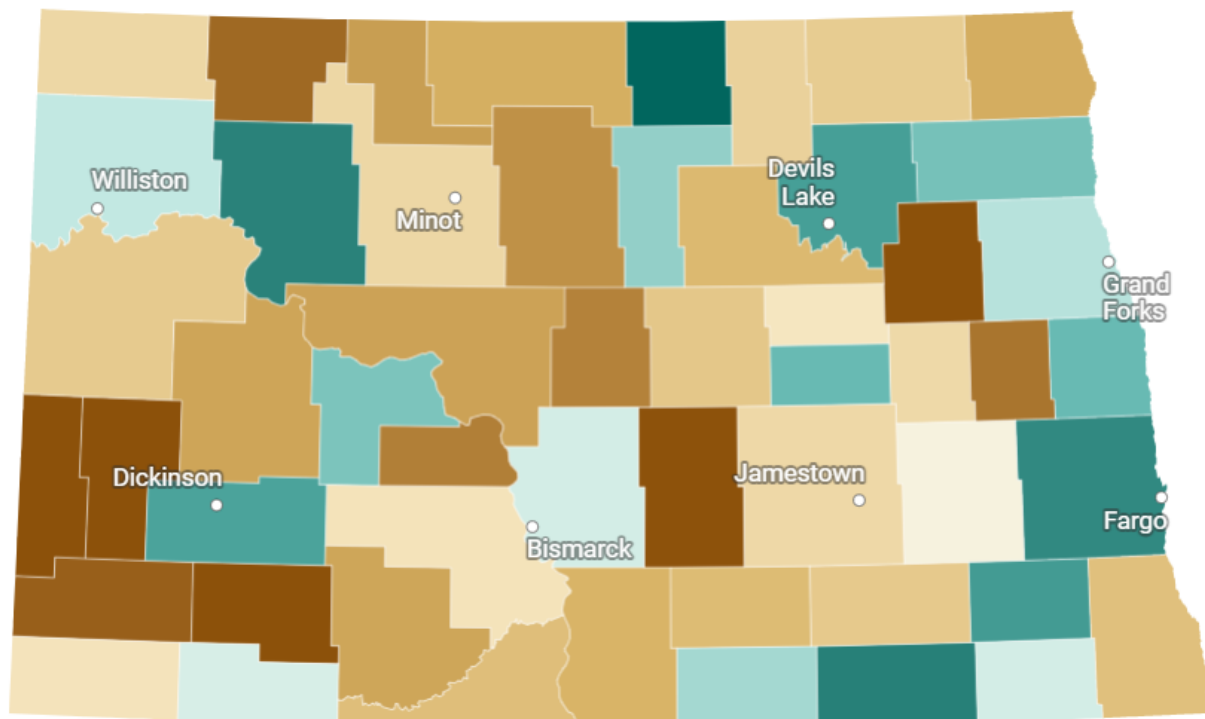
In rural areas, places with Low Access to Healthy Foods mean that more than a third of residents must drive 1 to 10 miles, or more, to access a large supermarket or grocery store that sells fresh produce and fresh meats.

Food deserts: 34 ND counties with low access to grocery stores

On average, 45% of rural residents in 34 ND counties live 10 to 20 miles, or more, from a grocery store, about 5x more than rural areas nationally. Two counties do not have a grocery store. The USDA defines these tracts as Low Access Areas, or food deserts. Rural grocery stores are essential for well-being, local businesses, tourism, workforce attraction, and competitiveness.

Percentage of residents with low access to a grocery store.

9.0% 30.0% 100.0%



Map: Red River Regional Council • Source: [USDA ERS Food Access Research Atlas \(2015, 2019\)](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)



Link to interactive map: https://www.datawrapper.de/_/9fGoN/

More than 45% of rural residents in North Dakota live in a food desert

According to the USDA, convenience stores and dollar stores that stock milk and a few fresh items do not count as grocery stores.

- While 92% of rural residents in the United States have easy access to grocery stores
- Only 8 percent of rural residents in the entire nation have to drive 10 to 20 miles or more to access a supermarket or grocery. Only 8% of rural residents live in a food desert.

That's not the case in North Dakota.

Here, nearly every county has an area that would be considered a food desert. **On average, more than 45% of rural residents in North Dakota have Low Access to Healthy Foods.**

Nearly every county in the state has an area that meets the definition of a food desert. (map).

- In 19 counties, nearly half of residents live 10 to 20 miles, or more, from a supermarket.
- In 11 counties, nearly all residents live 10 to 20 miles or more from a supermarket.
- And, across the entire nation, there are only 23 counties that do not have a grocery store – and **TWO of those are in North Dakota.**

Impacts

Rural grocery stores that sell fresh foods are essential for health and well-being, and they are critical for sustaining a vital local economy, attracting workforce, and growing tourism.

Local grocery stores keep money and jobs in the community.

Local foods are a growth industry. The USDA says locally produced foods sold in local groceries and farmers markets accounted for 3 percent of all agricultural sales in the US in 2017 and its share is growing.

5 things happened during the pandemic:

- More people bought more groceries locally.
- People from larger cities drove out to small towns to buy groceries.

- With more business, smaller grocers were able to buy more from suppliers.
- There were big supply chain problems that showed the value of locally produced foods and meat for schools and grocery stores.
- Small grocery stores had to get creative to help customers

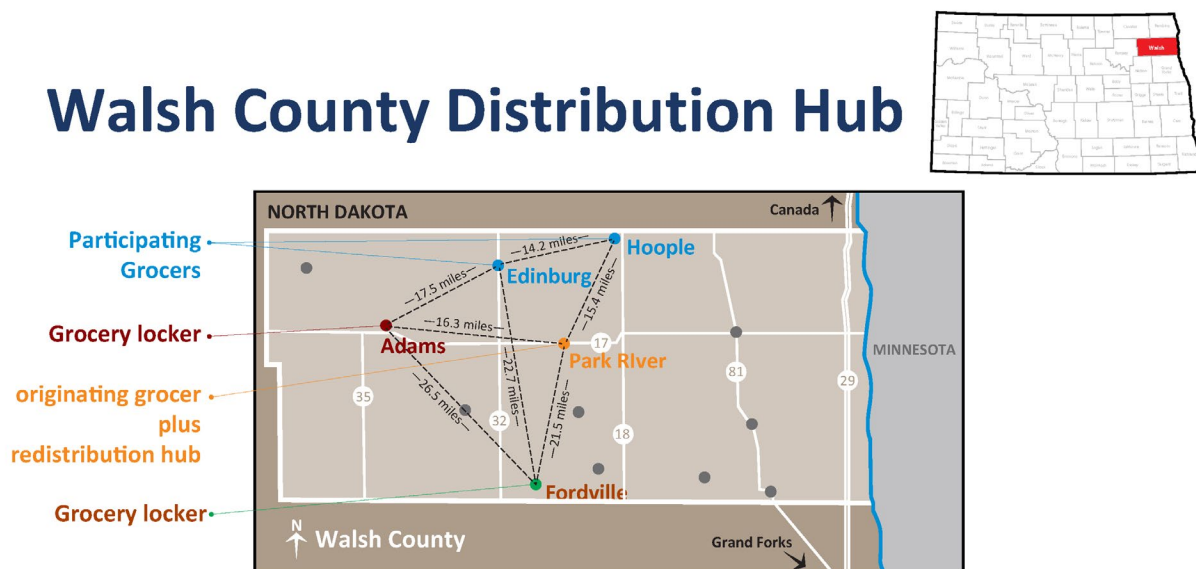
We have seen that here in North Dakota, and SB2273 harnesses North Dakota ingenuity to power local solutions to the challenges that small grocery stores face.

A cooperative approach to addressing food deserts in North Dakota

One of these is the Rural Access Distribution Cooperative that started in 2021 in Walsh County.

This cooperative, allowing [three rural grocery stores to order groceries in bulk collectively and distribute items between the three stores](#) and to other grocery pickup locations in the region.

Walsh County Distribution Hub



The grocery cooperative in Walsh County developed among communities that are 15 to 27 miles apart to overcome the mileage barriers residents experience by living in a food desert.



The cooperative model, between Jim's Supervalu in Park River, Hoople Grocery in Hoople and the Market on Main in Edinburg, has resulted in lower grocery prices and lower delivery costs for the stores, which carries through to customer prices. In the future, a grocery locker in Fordville will extend the program to Adams, a community without a grocery store.

To lower food prices and use online ordering to reach rural customers who live further than 10 miles from a grocery store (the federal definition of a food desert), food business owners in Park River, Adams, Hoople, Edinburg, and Fordville have created the first rural food access and distribution cooperative. The Rural Access Distribution Cooperative includes three grocery stores, one bar and restaurant, and a community development organization. The cooperative will allow the small-town grocery stores to share the costs of an online shopping platform, purchase products cooperatively to increase volume and reduce wholesale prices and deliver grocery orders to climate-controlled grocery lockers in outlying communities. The cooperative's goals are to allow more local residents to shop for food at local or nearby grocery stores, which increases rural residents' access to food, preserves 117 jobs, and bolsters the sustainability of three of Walsh County's four grocery stores.