

USDA Food Desert Locator Tool – Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Food Desert Locator Tool and where can I find it?

The Food Desert Locator, developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) is an internet-based mapping tool that pinpoints the location of "food deserts"(low-income communities that lack ready access to healthy food) around the country. It provides data on population characteristics of census tracts where residents have limited access to affordable and nutritious foods.

This tool is designed to assist efforts to expand the availability of nutritious food in food deserts and will help policy makers, community planners, researchers, and other professionals identify communities where public-private intervention can help make fresh, healthy, and affordable food more readily available to residents who live there.

The Food Desert Locator is on the Web at www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert. The site contains an online media kit that provides downloadable images and logos and details about how food deserts were defined and estimated.

What is the definition of a food desert?

The 2008 Farm Bill defined a "food desert" as an area in the United States with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly such an area composed of predominantly lower-income neighborhoods and communities.

While there are many ways to define a food desert, a working group comprised of members from the departments of Treasury, Health and Human Services, and USDA, which is partnering to expand the availability of nutritious food, have more specifically defined a food desert as a low-income census tract where either a substantial number or share of residents has low access to a supermarket or large grocery store.

This definition is derived from a 1-year study to assess the extent of the problem of limited access in the US. For more information see <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/AP/AP036/>.

How do I use this tool?

Users of the Web-based product can view a map of the United States that highlights and identifies census tracts that qualify as food deserts. Users can scan the map and zoom into an area or use the search feature to find a specific location. Users can create maps showing food desert census tracts. They can also view and download statistics on population characteristics of a selected tract—e.g., the percentage and number of people that are low income and have low access to large grocery stores, or the number of "low-access" households without a car by clicking on a specific census tract. The information is also provided in a downloadable Excel spreadsheet.

[Type text]

Are there other tools available to me?

The Food Desert Locator comes on the heels of an earlier Web mapping tool documenting indicators of food access, which was also developed by ERS: the recently updated Food Environment Atlas. That product, unveiled by the First Lady at the launch of her Let's Move! initiative last year, presents a broad set of statistics on food choices, health and well-being, and community characteristics. It includes indicators of food access, but does not define or identify food deserts. The Atlas presents data at the county level, while the new Food Desert Locator data are at the census tract level, covering smaller subdivisions whose general population characteristics are often relatively homogeneous.

The Food Desert Atlas is on the Web at www.ers.usda.gov/data/fooddesert. The site contains an [online media kit](#) that provides downloadable images and logos.

How is the Federal Government using this tool to increase access to healthy foods?

As part of the First Lady's Let's Move initiative to combat childhood obesity, USDA, Treasury and HHS will aim to expand the availability of nutritious food through the establishment of healthy food retail outlets, including developing and equipping grocery stores, small retailers, corner stores and farmers markets to help revitalize neighborhoods that currently lack these options.

What types of projects will get funded?

Priority consideration will be given to organizations located in communities identified as food deserts and whose projects seek to eliminate food deserts in these designated areas. Projects that demonstrate the need for improved healthy food access in communities that are not officially designated as food deserts are also eligible for funding. For more information about the federal loan and grant programs at work supporting these efforts, go to: www.usda.gov/fooddeserts

What kind of data was used to identify food deserts?

The Food Desert Locator uses 2000 Census population data and a 2006 directory of supermarkets and large grocery stores (food stores with at least \$2 million in sales that contain all major food departments). The directory was developed from a list of stores authorized to accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, augmented by data from Trade Dimensions TDLinx (a Nielsen company) These data will be updated with more recent population data and store location data in 2012.