Stepping into the Food Desert

Report and Recommendations on Addressing Food Desert Issues in Northern New Mexico

Prepared for Rocky Mountain Youth Corps

by
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Background

The Project

Ernest Atencio, dba Land & Culture Consulting, was contracted by Rocky Mountain Youth Corps (RMYC) to research programs currently operating in the agricultural or food security sectors, explore potential partnerships, and make recommendations regarding RMYC programming to address local "food desert" issues. Any RMYC programming must both address local community need and provide service-learning experience and job-based training for corpsmembers.

This report is the product of a number of interviews, conversations, and brainstorming sessions with people who are very knowledgeable about local food systems and engaging youth in agriculture. I conducted additional research into the history of local food production, food deserts, and food security issues and researched numerous organizations and funding resources online. This report boils most of that work down into the most salient, reasonable, and realistic recommendations for RMYC to engage in an effective way in addressing the food desert. Much of the useful substance of the this report is found in the Annotated List of Agriculture and Youth Programs (Appendix A), which is a comprehensive directory of regional agricultural and food security programs, as well as youth programs from across the country that could provide additional models for youth engagement in agriculture.

Food Desert

The USDA's definition of a food desert is "low-income areas where a significant number or share of residents is far from a supermarket, where 'far' is more than 1 mile in urban areas and more than 10 miles in rural areas" (USDA 2013a). Rather than a region with a lack of water, this defines regions and neighborhoods that lack access to a variety of healthy and nutritious foods, a lack of knowledge about healthy diet choices, and, in rural areas like northern New Mexico, it is characterized by a lack of transportation infrastructure. We are not talking about access to pricey natural or organic food stores or farmers markets, but access to basic and affordable full-service grocery stores that can be found in neighborhoods of any socioeconomic class. In the absence of full-service grocery stores, residents usually still have access to the less nutritional and unhealthy choices of fast food restaurants or convenience stores. Currently, about 11.5 million people nationwide, or 4.1 percent of our population, live in food deserts as defined above.

This lack of access is directly linked to common health problems found in many low-income communities and populations of color. "The link between inequitable access to healthy, affordable food and chronic diseases is evident in every region of the country. Low income and being African-American, Latino, or American Indian increases the likelihood of poor access to good food and the prevalence of chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes." Says Dr. Eduardo Sanchez, vice president and chief medical officer of Blue Cross Blue Shield Texas. "Access to healthy, affordable food is a major public health problem and should be considered as important as affordable healthcare" (Winrock International 2009).

That is the challenge we face, and it is particularly stark in our region. A USDA map of north-central New Mexico (Figure 1) shows most of Taos, Rio Arriba, San Miguel, San Juan, and McKinley Counties, along with several Indian communities, as food deserts. New Mexico's overall rate of "food insecurity" (living in fear of not having enough) is 15.2 percent, just a bit

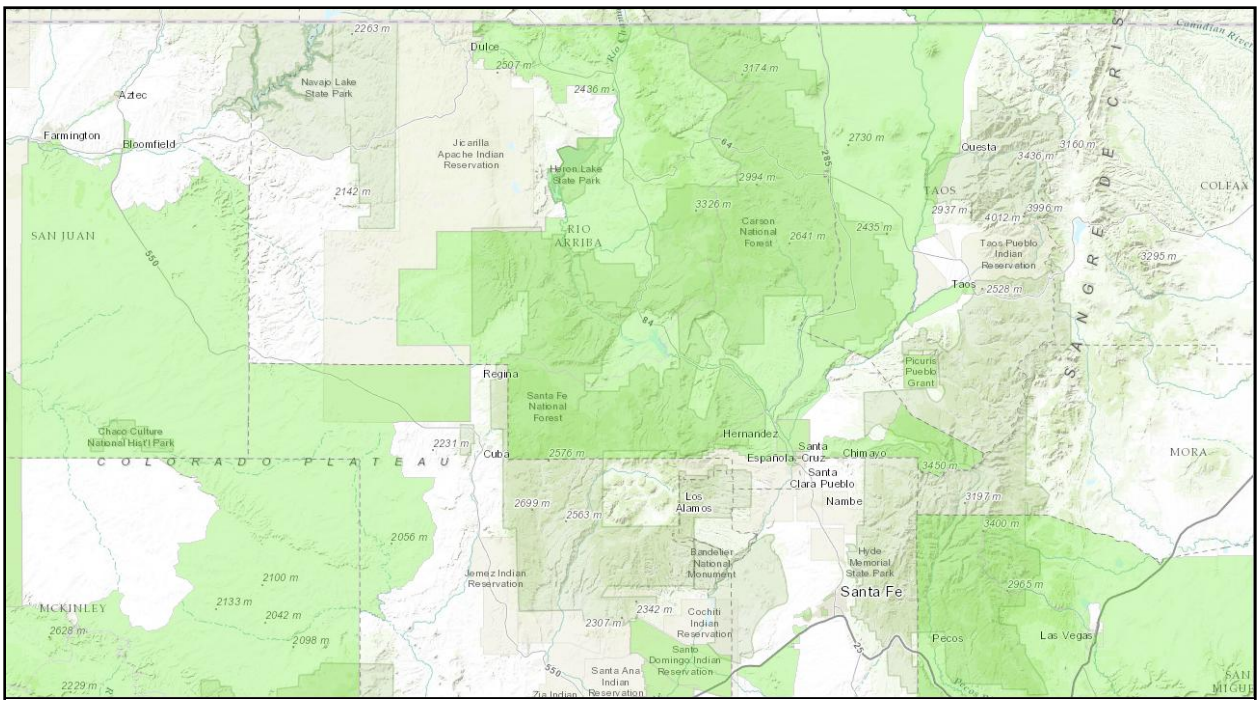

Figure 1. Green shading indicates food deserts as defined by USDA (from USDA Economic Research Service website).

higher that the national average of 14.7 percent; however, the rate jumps to 23.3 percent for Hispanic households and 28 percent for New Mexico children living in food-insecure households (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013; Coleman-Jensen, et. al. 2013).

Related health problems tell a clear story of the impacts of that food insecurity and lack of access to healthy foods. About 26 percent of New Mexican adults are obese and one in three children in New Mexico is overweight. Diagnosed diabetes affects about 7.1 percent of the adult Anglo population, but hits Native American and Hispanic populations harder, with rates of 16.1 percent and 11.8 percent, respectively. Over a ten-year period diabetes increased among school children by 40 percent (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2013; CDC 2013a; CDC 2013b). This is an expensive problem, and public health costs related to obesity and diet-related diseases are skyrocketing. Treating obesity and diabetes in New Mexico costs over $300 million each year, with the public paying $130 million of that through Medicare and Medicaid (Finkelstein et. al., 2004).

There is no end to the statistics that illuminate the problems of poor nutrition and associated public health concerns. The point is that this issue is clear and present—probably one of the greatest civil rights challenges of the coming decades—and needs to be addressed.

Local Food and Agricultural History

Northern New Mexico and the Taos Valley in particular once grew enough food to feed its population and at times was even considered the "breadbasket" of the region, with *acequia*-irrigated fields and orchards in villages and valleys producing a variety of produce, vast tracts of dry-land wheat over the mesas, and several local mills to process the wheat. Fray Francisco Dominguez wrote in 1776 that "everything yields such an abundant harvest that when there is

scarcity in most of the kingdom, everyone goes to Taos and leaves there well supplied, not just once, but many times" (Atencio 2007). Recent assessments have indicated that the Taos Valley still has the land and water resources to feed itself and indeed there are a number of local initiatives trying hard to resurrect community-based agriculture.

That agricultural tradition is deeply ingrained into local Indian and Indo-Hispano culture. Even as few people practice agriculture these days, it is part of a land-based identity and heritage. In an informal survey of Taos High School students conducted in 2006 by Taos Land Trust and Taos County Economic Development Corporation (TCEDC), most said that they valued the agricultural lifestyle and expect to farm their parents' land some day. So even though they are not actively engaged in agriculture today, they still aspire to it. Many believe that maintaining this strong connection to the land and tradition is essential to creating real food security.

With this history of a rooted land-based culture, abundance, and capacity, it is ironic that today we are in the middle of a food desert. There are some questions about whether our food desert designation takes into account small farm operations, kitchen gardens, and other production that operates beneath the economic radar screen, but nonetheless we have a problem. There is strong interest and momentum in restoring local food systems and opportunities for RMYC to engage in a way that makes a difference.

RMYC Historical Agricultural Programming, Capacity, and Resources

In interviews with RMYC senior staff, we sketched out the history of the organization's past forays into agriculture, discussed what worked and what didn't, identified available capacity and resources, and brainstormed potential food desert projects. Again, RMYC's mission is to provide meaningful community service and to employ and train youth, so any programming has to meet both these goals. In addition, it is important to remember that food deserts are not just about agricultural production, but also about awareness, access, and distribution.

Over several years, RMYC has been involved in a number of agricultural initiatives, from helping build school gardens and grow domes to providing various labor for a nonprofit's garden and greenhouse to educational programs involving home kitchen gardens and a nearby Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm. These projects have provided minimal benefits for corpsmembers or the broader community due to a variety of reasons, including lack of oversight and continuity from the host entities. In general, agricultural projects to-date have not been guided by an overarching vision and goals.

RMYC has significant resources to offer for agricultural programming to benefit the community, including 30 acres of arable land, labor, tools and equipment, funding, reputation, and programmatic management expertise. That is a lot to offer and an excellent starting point. Staff imagined a number of ways that RMYC could put those resources to work, including:

- build greenhouses and raised-bed gardens at local schools as pilot projects
- dedicate a portion of local farms as a low-income CSAs subsidized with corpsmember labor
- recruit an education and outreach crew dedicated to nutrition education and use of SNAP benefits for healthy choices

- dedicate a summer crew to provide continuity at school greenhouses and gardens, which are otherwise left untended for the summer
- develop a mobile food pantry or mobile farmers market to distribute healthy foods to rural hinterlands
- use part of the 30-acre property as a farm and/or CSA, integrating youth education, production for local schools and hospital, "p-patch" access for landless low-income residents, and tithing a percentage of production to charitable food programs

Kitchen Sink Brainstorming

Ideas about RMYC addressing food desert issues ranged from major capital investment in facilities that would contribute to local food storage and delivery to equipping corpsmembers with bikes and bike trailers to deliver food to low-income residents like the milkmen of old; from creating food policy to gain easier access to public schools to simply getting corpsmembers to dig in the dirt and farm and grow beans and corn to feed people; from contributing facilities for a more comprehensive food hub to contributing labor to existing cooperative agricultural ventures; from entrepreneurial models to purely charitable food models. This section is not a comprehensive report on all of those interviews and conversations, but will just highlight a few ideas and guiding principles that are most relevant to RMYC.

Food systems in the modern age are more than soil, water, seeds, and sun, but now involve complex policy and social and market dimensions. As part of its agricultural programming it is important for RMYC to participate in formal food council activities and food policy initiatives, but one of my primary recommendations is that you don't allow those activities to drive or constrain your program. Starting with overarching vision and goals, there are any number of entry points that could be successful and RMYC simply needs to start somewhere, anywhere, to learn more about this world, then the needs and niches and strategic directions—as well as RMYC's strengths and weaknesses in this sector—will become obvious. It is clear from the vanguard of progressive agricultural activities that innovation and successful programs drive policy, not the other way around. So just start with anything that works.

There have been some questions about the public service restrictions around utilizing AmeriCorps service members on private farms. The answer is not completely clearcut, however, some programs do use AmeriCorps-funded positions to work with privately owned farms and/or enhance private production. In the case of Food Corps, they place AmeriCorps service members in nonprofit organizations, government agencies (such as agricultural extension offices), and schools or school districts, not with for-profit entities, like most farms. Curt Ellis, Food Corps executive director, says, "The fuzzier regulation is about AmeriCorps members not being able to perform service that benefits for-profit enterprises directly, so we're just careful to not have our corps members closing contracts with farmers or processors. They can make introductions between potential buyers and sellers, but they can't do the negotiations or actually commit to a purchase . . . that's up to the school or the local partner that works with schools." They may occasionally help with a little farm work or harvest as part of the relationship building, but not in any significant way. Despite the fuzziness, Food Corps very clearly emphasizes and focuses on the work's contributions to the charitable food system—even though it may be helping a local farmer increase production and sales, more importantly it helps feed those in need. On the 20th anniversary of AmeriCorps just last month, Food Corps was highlighted as the second among

"20 reasons why AmeriCorps rocks at getting things done" (Food Corps 2013). So obviously it is working for them. In the case of the American Friends Service Committee, AmeriCorps members are trained in farming for a full year on a private farm, then given a one-acre parcel on private land to farm on their own for the second year, all of it considered training to develop young people as the next generation of farmers in their communities. Another colleague working under USDA funding made the case that economic development in a chronically impoverished region like northern New Mexico *is* a service that benefits the public and helps feed people. So the answer appears to include being very careful about the formal business relationships AmeriCorps members engage in and highlighting the public and/or educational benefit as the primary purpose and intent, while other potential private benefits are incidental and secondary.

A few specific guiding principles emerged from the interviews and research:

1. Farming and food system management require full-time, dedicated, knowledgeable staff to manage and oversee operations.
2. Farming is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, but requires knowledgeable adaptive response to localized conditions and, in this case, RMYC crews.
3. Farming is a long-term proposition and could involve three to four years to build adequate capacity.
4. Production to supply schools or other institutions requires a reliable and predictable quality and quantity of produce, which might require aggregation and cooperation with other producers.
5. In the reality of current markets and need, initial production might focus on one or two specialty niche crops, rather than attempting a full spectrum of crops, again, in cooperation with other producers.
6. Any program to create better access or distribution of healthy foods can and should also be a vehicle for nutrition education creating a variety of field and educational programs.
7. In this context, particularly involving public funding, focus first on the charitable food system need before entrepreneurial enterprises and economic development.
8. However, in economically depressed northern New Mexico, locally appropriate economic development also helps feed low-income residents.
9. Partners are essential and personal relationships with key people in existing programs and institutions matter as much here as in any other endeavor.

Recommendations

The recommendations below are the product of background from RMYC and interviews and conversations with many of the contact people listed in Appendix A, as well as further research into those organizations and other successful youth and agriculture programs. They are also the product of some of my own brainstorming from years of working with the agricultural and food system sector and from a big-picture, systems perspective that looks at the interconnectivity of programs and people, need and niches to be filled, and the most effective way to engage without stepping into someone else's turf or reinventing any wheels.

In addition to the guiding principles above and specific project recommendations below, I very strongly recommend the following general approaches:

1. *Start into agricultural and food desert programming with clear, overarching vision and goals.*

This does not need to be complicated or the product of lengthy focus groups and study. The problem is obvious and the vision and end goals are clear. This could be as simple as "feed more people better food" or "provide healthy food and nutrition education to low-income residents," etc. Food Corps, for instance, which is one of the most successful national models of farm-to-school AmeriCorps programming, uses a simple three-ingredient recipe: 1) **knowledge** (teach kids about what healthy food is and where it comes from), 2) **engagement** (build and tend school gardens), and 3) **access** (bring high-quality local food into public school cafeterias by developing farm-to-school supply chains). A similar simple recipe can be developed to fit this community.

2. *Start anywhere, even with the simplest program design, just to enter the agricultural sector and learn the ropes.*
   Innovation and successful programs drive policy, not the other way around, so don't wait until every policy and partner and tactic are in perfect alignment. Don't take on anything too ambitious to start, but start somewhere within reach that will yield real and tangible outcomes and follow the logical path of least resistance. Every farmer I spoke to, for instance, emphasized that farming is hard work, more complex, and takes longer to establish than most people imagine, so keep it simple and start with three to five acres maximum. A simple "p-patch" model providing space for low-income residents to grow produce (under supervision) could be as effective as a more complex CSA model. Distributing food where needed with bike trailers could be more effective and efficient than capital investment in a refrigerated delivery truck. There are any number of entry points for an organization with RMYC's capacity.
3. *Cooperate as possible with existing programs and do not try to reinvent any wheels.*
   This may be obvious, but there are many components of a successful community food system already in place and RMYC does not need to duplicate those efforts. And, of course, many hands make light work and this problem needs all the help it can get, so RMYC will need to reach out to those programs and entities to explore collaborations and ways of filling needs and niches in the system. For instance, TCEDC already provides most of the facilities necessary for a food hub function, but they do not have a flash freezer for frozen foods. MoGro has developed a very successful model of food distribution to Pueblo communities south of Santa Fe, and RMYC might explore a way to adapt that existing program and extend it north. For solidarity and capacity and knowledge sharing, join existing cooperatives already in place, such as the Agri-Cultura Network, CODECE, and Farm to Table. Etc.

Specific Projects

The project proposals below are a few that emerged from interviews and brainstorming that would be within reach for RMYC. They are very general and simplified and intended mostly as seeds for future program planning. RMYC will have to create the detailed program design, business plans, and outcomes in relationship with partner organizations and pursuant to specific funding sources once a project or projects are selected for development. These projects are not listed in any particular order and it is possible and advisable that once agricultural programming takes off RMYC would engage in multiple projects at the same time. Funding for these projects would likely be a mix and match of the potential funders listed in Appendix B, along with existing AmeriCorps program funding where appropriate.

Project	***Potential Partners***	***Strategies***	***Outcomes***
RMYC Farms	• American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) • Agricultural Implementation Research and Education (AIRE) • Taos Municipal Schools	In consultation with AFSC and AIRE, and under ongoing guidance of AIRE, develop three to five acres of RMYC property as a farm and hands-on learning center, possibly focusing on one or two specialty crops to fill specific market need. Could include a portion of acreage as low-income "p-patch" or CSA, dedicated percentage of production for tithing to low-income programs, at-cost sales to schools, field trips for school kids integrating nutrition education, community workshops, etc.	• Contribute to charitable food system • Train local residents in farming • Train the next generation of farmers • Train corpsmembers in farm operations, marketing, distribution • Educate children and the public about healthy food choices • Endless potentials
Fresh Foods for Taos Communities	• TCEDC • Taos Municipal Schools	Secure funding to invest in two pieces of major equipment: a flash freezer and a large Polar King cold storage unit (half cooler/half freezer). Flash freezer and related equipment to add value to selected seasonal produce from community and/or RMYC farms and distribute frozen veggies to schools, hospital, and low-income programs during winter months. Polar King unit to store frozen produce in one side and fresh produce in the other for distribution to institutions. Corpsmembers grow, harvest, prepare foods for freezing and	• Meet significant community need for nutritious fresh and frozen foods year round • Contribute to local institutions and charitable food system • Train corpsmembers in farm operations, culinary preparation, marketing, distribution

		storage, develop and maintain markets, relationships, and distribution.	
Community Development through Agricultural Mentorship	• Cooperative Development Center (CODECE)	Using CODECE's model, identify three to five local farmers to engage in a cooperative farming and marketing venture, mentoring corpsmembers with these farmers in agricultural production while helping build capacity and economic development, and tithing a percentage of production to institutions that serve low-income residents. A second year of access to land for corpsmembers to continue practicing farming techniques, a small portion of production for personal use and continued tithing for low-income use.	• Increase production of healthy foods for local consumption and commercial market • Contribute to charitable food system • Train the next generation of farmers • Contribute to community and economic development
School Gardens for Healthy Kids	• Taos Municipal Schools	Develop school gardens and/or greenhouses for hands-on education and food production for school lunches, including RMYC summer crew to manage during summer break. Under supervision of Mary Ann McCann, integrate nutrition education curriculum developed and delivered by corpsmembers.	• Produce healthy foods for school children • Teach children about gardening • Educate children about healthy food choices
Mobile Food Pantry and Farmers Market	• TCEDC • MoGro	A mini version of the successful MoGro program, purchase and equip a truck for weekly delivery	• Contribute to charitable food system • Train corpsmembers in

		of healthy, low-cost, SNAP-eligible and/or free foods to communities and neighborhoods in need. Corpsmembers source and secure a combination of produce tithed or purchased from local farms, donations, and wholesale purchase. Integrate nutrition education programs and materials.	business management, marketing, distribution • Educate public about healthy food choices
Orchard Rescue for Taos Schools	• TCEDC • Tooley's Trees • Taos Municipal Schools	Identify and revive untended orchards around Taos, with technical assistance from Tooley's Trees, providing owner a small percentage of crop (if desired) while majority becomes cider and juice and fresh apple slices prepared and stored at TCEDC for Taos school children.	• Train corpsmembers in tree care, orchard management, and culinary preparation • Contribute to school children nutrition • Revive a declining agricultural sector in Taos

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
Annotated List of Agriculture and Youth Programs

Appendix B
Food Desert Potential Funders