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# Country LIVING

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## *Food deserts* in rural Ohio

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# Food Deserts

BY LISA HOOKER

And an innovative program aimed at solving the problem

## in rural Ohio

IN A LAND OF PLENTY, there is hunger and poor nutrition where the food is grown.

Access to fresh, healthy produce and meat is a growing problem in rural areas. The obstacles involve economics, education and transportation. And the conundrum has a name: **Food Desert.**

With food prices spiraling upward, putting meals on the family table isn't easy. Rising energy prices, the cost of agricultural inputs, high demand and tight supplies mean checkout lane receipt shock at grocery stores. The problem is compounded by unemployment and a faltering national economic recovery.

It's tough all over, but rural Ohioans face more challenges. It begins with even finding fresh foods that can contribute to a healthy diet. For many, it is a daily struggle that they lose more often than win.

The Ohio State University's Center for Farmland Policy Innovation (CFPI) researched rural food accessibility in 2010. It estimates 5.2 million people, or about 45 percent of Ohioans, are rural residents.

"Most of us don't give a second thought to grocery shopping. We get in our car and go. That's not the reality in rural Ohio. If you can get there in

your car or by walking, can you afford the food? If you can afford it, is there something there that's healthy? Often the answer is no," says CFFPI Director Jill Clark.

### It's an issue of access

CFPI found that 24 percent of rural households must drive more than 10 minutes to any retail food store. For some, it's quicker and easier to patronize a fast-food restaurant. About 25 percent of rural Ohioans live within a 10-minute drive of a fast-food chain, but not a large grocer.

Supermarket competition spurs lower food prices, but it's unusual in very rural communities. Only 30 percent of the state's rural households have ready access to more than one food store larger than 40,000 square feet. Stores of this size typically offer

### Chesterhill Produce Auction

FROM APPLE CIDER TO BISON MEAT and canned fruit preserves, the fast-paced Chesterhill Produce Auction in Morgan County is a unique place to purchase fresh, local foods.

Horse-drawn buggies haul in the produce. Bidders inspect overflowing pallets that are both bountiful and colorful.

"The sellers are from southeastern Ohio. They appreciate this local market and the fact that so many neighbors, restaurants, grocery stores and roadside stand operators come to buy," Rural Action's Tom Redfern says.

Chesterhill Produce Auction is open on Mondays and Thursdays from May through October. For more information, contact Redfern at 740-767-4938.



Cee-Dee Handy Mart in the rural community of Chauncey is one of the first Country Fresh Stops cooperating stores in the region.



an array of fresh meat and produce.

"Groceries have models, and they don't miss market opportunities. Unfortunately, rural communities don't fit the models anymore," Clark says.

As a result, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) says rural residents rely on small grocers or convenience stores that simply can't offer the same affordability or healthy variety as supermarkets.

Also, the rural food situation in the 21st century is a far cry from the 1940s and 1950s when residents in the country had gardens, hen houses for eggs, a couple of pigs for bacon and ham and perhaps a milk cow or two.

Dependence on precooked, packaged, and additive-infused "ready meals" is an issue in both urban and rural settings. Despite what appears on the ingredient labels, nothing replaces fresh meats, vegetables and fruits if these foods are available and affordable.

### A new idea — Country Fresh Stops

The Food Desert situation in Athens, Meigs and Morgan counties is improving through Rural Action's "Country Fresh Stops" program. It offers fresh produce through partnerships with local retailers. The goal is to improve community health, create business for local growers and increase sales for the retailers.

The first site debuted in July at Cee-Dee Handy Mart in the Athens County community of Chauncey. More Country Fresh Stops are planned.

"Store owners make a one-year commitment to selling fresh fruits and vegetables. The produce is integrated into the store with our branded point-of-purchase materials. We're also developing recipe cards to help customers know how to use the produce," says Tom Redfern, Rural Action's sustainable agriculture coordinator.

Seasonal fruits and vegetables are delivered through Chesterhill Produce Auction and other local growers.

Rural Action and its program partners assist the owners with display and refrigeration equipment, training, promotional items, advertising and nutrition education.

## 2010 food hardship facts

1. Ohio tied for 20th in the nation in food hardship.
2. Nearly 16.6 percent of Ohio households without children and 26.3 percent of households with children didn't have enough money to buy food at some point in 2010.
3. Nationally in 2010, the food hardship rate for households without children was 14.9 percent, while it was 23.4 percent for families with children.

*Source: Food Research and Action Center, an anti-hunger advocacy group*



Misty Carsey, an employee of Cee-Dee Handy Mart, displays fresh green beans from the store's Country Fresh Stops selection.

Redfern and Country Fresh Stops cooperators hope to see the program's footprint expand — and rural residents come to enjoy and depend on fresh produce in their diets. ☻

Contact Clark at 614-247-6479, Redfern at 740-767-4938 or visit [www.ohiofoodshed.org](http://www.ohiofoodshed.org) for more information about Country Fresh Stops locations and Ohio's produce auctions.