

Transcript of podcast – USDA Economic Research Service economist Michele Ver Ploeg discussing the ERS Food Desert Locator data product (May 2, 2011)

Ver Ploeg: Food deserts are areas, especially low-income areas, where it's hard to get to a source of healthy and affordable food. People usually think that means there's not a supermarket or large grocery store in those areas, and people are worried about it because they think that public health outcomes like obesity rates, diabetes rates, may be linked to the lack of access to healthy and affordable food. So, in 2009, the USDA and ERS wrote a report on measuring food access across the United States.

Interviewer: Now, I understand we have a new mapping product that helps you locate food deserts across the United States?

Ver Ploeg: That's right, because there's some policy interest in trying to do something to reduce the effects of food deserts, three Federal agencies, the Treasury Department, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S Department of Agriculture, have come together to implement funding streams that will allow communities to tap into the funds to develop retail sites for the low-income neighborhoods that are food deserts.

As part of that, the Economic Research Service helped that group define and locate food deserts throughout the U.S. Once we came up with that definition we came up with a mapping tool that allows communities and users to find and map the food deserts in their neighborhoods.

It shows a national level map, because it's a national level map it shows a very diverse population of the U.S. Food deserts are bigger in areas across the west, but they're smaller in urban areas. So, this tool allows you to zoom into areas. We can also view statistics on the people in those food deserts, for instance the number of people that are low-access, the number of low-income people that are low access, characteristics like children and the number of elderly in the area and the number of households without vehicles.

You can also print the maps if you want to look at them. You can download the data if you want to use it and do some analysis on your own. You can change the settings so you can look at satellite images so you can see if there are large buildings or lakes or parks or something underneath the map.

It's really a tool for communities and individual users to find out where the food deserts are in their neighborhoods.