

Date of Hearing: April 10, 2024

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE

Esmeralda Soria, Chair

AB 2090 (Irwin) – As Amended April 3, 2024

SUBJECT: Office of Farm to Fork: food deserts: transportation

SUMMARY: This bill would require the California Department of Food and Agriculture’s (CDFA) Office of Farm to Fork (OF2F) to work with transportation agencies to increase the amount of agricultural products available to underserved communities and schools in the state, and to prioritize the department’s efforts in food deserts, as defined, throughout the state, as specified. Specifically, *this bill*:

- 1) Would require the California Department of Food and Agriculture’s (CDFA) Office of Farm to Fork (OF2F) to work with transportation agencies to increase the amount of agricultural products available to underserved communities and schools in the state, and to prioritize the department’s efforts in food deserts, as defined, throughout the state, as specified.
- 2) Adds transportation agencies to the list of federal, state, local and private organizations that OF2F works with to promote food access to increase the amount of agricultural products available to underserved communities and schools.
 - a) Requires OF2F to add the following consideration factors including, but not limited to, distance, income, transportation, food variety, pricing, population density, and demographics, when determining current barriers to food access.
 - b) Requires OF2F to prioritize efforts in food deserts throughout the state, especially cities and counties that are most impacted by food insecurity.
 - c) Adds the following to identify distribution barriers that affect limited food access work to overcome those barriers:
 - i.) Facilitating partnerships between transportation agencies to address inadequate public transportation lines in urban and rural communities, with the aim of connecting all communities to adequate and nutritional food access, as specified, by doing both the following:
 - a) Exploring the feasibility of public transportation, food delivery systems, e-scooters, e-bicycles, protected sidewalks, and protected bicycle lanes to food networks in local communities.
 - b) Collaborating with local governments to identify barriers to food access and assisting in the development of community-driven policy solutions.

- 3) Assess access to school breakfast and lunch programs during scheduled academic calendar breaks and school closures, when coordinating with school districts.
- 4) Defines the following:
 - a) “Food desert” means an area with limited access to affordable and nutritious food, particularly an area composed of predominantly lower income neighborhoods and communities.
 - b) “Food insecurity” means the occasional or constant lack of access to the food one needs to live a healthy life and the uncertainty of being able to acquire enough food to meet the needs of an individual or household due to insufficient money or other resources.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Creates OF2F within CDFA, and requires OF2F, to the extent that resources are available, to work with various entities to increase the amount of agricultural products available to underserved communities and schools in the state. (Food and Agriculture code (FAC) 49001)
- 2) Requires OF2F, among other things, to identify distribution barriers that affect limited food access and work to overcome those barriers through various actions and to coordinate with school districts and representatives to, among other things, increase the nutritional profile of foods provided in schools. (FAC 49001)

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown.

COMMENTS: OF2F is tasked with helping all Californians access healthy and nutritious California-grown food. OF2F connects school districts and community members directly with California's farmers and ranchers, and provides information and other resources. AB 2413 (Pérez), Chapter 583, Statutes of 2014, created OF2F to coordinate with state and federal agencies, along with private and public organizations, to help streamline farm to fork(F2F) efforts. CDFA is uniquely situated to administer OF2F due to CDFA's knowledge of the agricultural industry, and CDFA's ability to bring farmers together with a variety of public and private organizations to increase the supply of healthy food. OF2F administers the following food access programs: The Healthy Refrigeration Grant Program, the California Nutrition Incentive Program, the California Farm to School Incubator Grant Program, the Farm to Community Food Hubs Program (on hold due to budget) and the Urban Agriculture Grant Program.

USDA’s Economic Research Service previously identified approximately 6,500 food desert tracts in the United States based on 2000 Census and 2006 data on locations of supermarkets, supercenters, and large grocery stores. Food deserts are defined as areas where people have limited access to a variety of healthy and affordable food. As policymakers consider interventions to increase food access, it is important to understand the characteristics associated with these areas. Factors typically associated with food deserts include income, vehicle availability, and access to public transportation. This report examined the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of these census tracts and which of these characteristics distinguish food desert tracts from other low-income census tracts.

CDFA's 2012 report *Improving Food Access in California*, stated access to healthy food means having a variety of affordable, good quality, healthy food within one's community. For the purposes of this report, healthy food will primarily refer to fresh fruits and vegetables, with frozen, dried, and canned vegetables as viable alternatives. Sufficient food access requires all of the following components:

Proximity: The distance residents have to travel to reach outlets that sell healthy foods can impact the amount of healthy food they purchase. Travel costs (including both the time spent traveling and the cost of driving a private vehicle or taking public transportation) can increase the real cost of healthy food and keep people from purchasing it.

Variety: Access to a variety of healthy food choices is another important part of food access. Variety ensures sufficient choice – beyond a single option or two – and supports a healthy diet.

Quality: Accessible, healthy food should also be of good quality.

Affordability: Accessible food needs to be affordable. This includes both an affordable sticker price as well as the ability to use nutrition program benefits (e.g. CalFresh or WIC) in addition to cash.

According to the author, transportation plays a critical role in how Californians access– or are unable to access– healthy and nutritious foods. The United States Department of Agriculture defines food deserts as areas, both rural and urban, where people have limited access to a variety of healthy and affordable food. Nearly one million Californians, 45% of whom are low-income, live without access to nearby supermarkets or large grocery stores in communities known as food deserts.

Supporters' state OF2F operative statute language does not mention the word transportation despite it being a critical element in solving food deserts as recognized by state and federal agencies. Income, mobility, and proximity are all factors that are determinative to food access. Furthermore, each local jurisdiction is unique so a top-down solution may not be the best solution when evaluating transportation barriers. A solution must be done in tandem with local governments and transportation agencies to combat food deserts where they exist.

The bill seeks to streamline the existing funding sources within OF2F to identify, prioritize, and target food deserts as areas of need for technical support and resources, particularly for the integration of bringing people to food on existing or modified transit lines.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

A Voice for Choice Advocacy
Almond Alliance
California Grocers Association

Opposition

None on file.

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