

June 26, 2008

The Honorable Herb Kohl, Chairman
The Honorable Robert Bennett, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Agriculture, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies
Senate Appropriations Committee
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chairman Kohl and Ranking Member Bennett:

The undersigned organizations urge your support of \$500,000 for a comprehensive nationwide assessment of low-income urban, rural, and tribal communities with limited access to affordable, healthy, and fresh foods, areas also known as “food deserts”.

Initial studies document food deserts in Chicago, Southeast Minnesota, rural Iowa, rural Mississippi, and Detroit, where 92% of Food Stamp EBT benefits are redeemed at liquor stores, convenience stores, gas stations, and pharmacies selling food products. The studies indicate that food deserts occur in communities nationwide, however no effort has yet been made to provide a benchmark analysis of their incidence and their characteristics nationally.

This Food Desert Study (Section 7527 of H.R. 2419) will provide baseline data needed to improve the effectiveness of major nutrition programs, the relationship of low-income consumer access to retail grocery stores to obesity and diabetes trends, and an identification of economic opportunities associated with improving retail access to healthy, affordable food. The one year study will be led by USDA in coordination and consultation with the Institute of Medicine, Department of Health and Human Services, and the Small Business Administration. The Department of Agriculture has unique research capabilities in this area, with access to both food retailer and food assistance program data. With the Department’s leadership final study recommendations can be incorporated into nutrition program administration, as well the upcoming 2009 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization.

Because of the late completion of the Food, Farm, and Conservation Act of 2008 following the normal FY 09 appropriations request cycle, we were unable to include this vital study in our appropriations requests. Additionally, the USDA indicated this study would be funded through existing funds in the House and Senate versions of the Farm Bill; the discretionary funding authorization was required only in the final conference report. Given the late emergence of the funding need for this Food Desert Study, we support your efforts to ensure this vital study has the necessary funding to ensure its timely completion.

An appropriation of \$500,000 for this Food Desert Study for fiscal year 2009 will allow its recommendations to be incorporated in the 2009 Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization and further the recognition of food access issues in underserved urban, rural, and tribal communities.

Sincerely,

National/Regional

American Heart Association

American Public Health Association

American Farmland Trust

Community Food Security Coalition

Congressional Hunger Center

Farm to Table

Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund

Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy

Intertribal Agriculture Council

Land Stewardship Project

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association

National Urban League

Northeast Midwest Institute

Northeast States Association for Agricultural Stewardship (NSAAS)

PolicyLink

Prevention Institute

Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

Sustainable Agriculture Coalition

Trust for America's Health

United Fresh Produce Association

World Hunger Year

State/Local

Agriculture & Land-Based Training Association (ALBA) (Salinas, CA)

Boston Collaborative for Food and Fitness (MA)

Black Farmers and Agriculturalists Association ~ California Chapter

CASA del Llano (TX)

City Seed (New Haven, CT)

Community Food Connections (AZ)

Connecticut Food Policy Council

The Food Trust (PA)

Just Harvest: A Center for Action Against Hunger (Pittsburgh, PA)

Michael Fields Agriculture Institute (WI)

The Minnesota Project

New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council

Sustainable Agriculture (Louisville, KY)

Sustainable Living Systems (MT)

Utahns Against Hunger