



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on October 29, 2010

The Vast Wasteland of Michelle Obama's "Food Desert" Program

As part of her "Let's Move!" campaign against childhood obesity, First Lady Michelle Obama proposes to "invest \$400 million a year to provide innovative financing to develop healthy food retailers to underserved areas and help places such as convenience stores and bodegas carry healthier food options." That \$400 million, of course, will come out of the pockets of U.S. taxpayers.



Obama's proposal to eliminate so-called "food deserts" is predicated, [writes Terrence P. Jeffrey of CNSNews.com](#), on the notion that "American children are growing fat because their parents cannot get to a supermarket — to buy fruits and vegetables — without undergoing the hardship of boarding a bus or riding a taxi. As a consequence, food-desert-dwelling children are forced to eat fast food and junk procured at chain restaurants and convenience stores." Obama claims that 23.5 million Americans, among them 6.5 million children, live in these food deserts — low-income areas that are more than a mile from the nearest supermarket.

Her plan, then, is to spend hundreds of millions of other people's dollars each year to put supermarkets in food deserts on the theory that, given the opportunity, people will choose to purchase healthful foods.

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However, as this author [pointed out](#) in an article for *The New American*, "There is little evidence that [existing state healthy-food financing] initiatives have any significant effects on produce consumption and obesity rates." David C. Holzman, [writing for Environmental Health Perspectives](#), explained that although several studies have shown a correlation between easy access to healthful foods and both better eating habits and decreased obesity, "the actual health toll from living in a food desert environment has not been tabulated in a peer-reviewed study. Moreover, the only 2 studies that examined diets before and after grocery stores were installed in food deserts — rather than comparing neighborhoods with grocery stores to similar neighborhoods without — are not encouraging." Those studies, Holzman said, found that the opening of supermarkets in previously underserved areas had little to no impact on the eating habits of people in the neighborhood.



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Even supposing that these programs really did work, a cost-benefit analysis of Obama's proposal clearly shows that it is not worthwhile. According to Jeffrey, a 2009 [study](#) on food deserts mandated by Congress — at a cost to taxpayers of \$500,000 — “demonstrates that Mrs. Obama's depiction of American ‘food deserts’ is fatuous at best. Lower-income Americans live closer to supermarkets than higher-income Americans.” This makes sense when one considers that higher-income Americans are more likely to live in suburban areas that require them to drive to the grocery store, while low-income persons tend to live in or near cities, which explains why the study found that “a greater share of low-income individuals (61.8 percent) have high or medium access to supermarkets than those with higher income (56.1 percent).”

Furthermore, of the 23.5 million people who live in low-income areas that qualify as food deserts, says Jeffrey, “more than half of these people are not low-income, and almost [all] in these areas — 93.3 percent — drive their cars to the supermarket.” He adds: “Only 0.1 percent — one-tenth of one percent — of Americans living in low-income areas more than 1 mile from a supermarket took public transit to the store, the report said.” Thus, Obama's program would annually cost taxpayers \$17,021 for each person supposedly helped by the program — and, as noted earlier, it probably won't make any difference in that person's eating habits anyway.

To answer Jeffrey's question, “But does [Obama's program] deserve a single penny?": Of course not! It's unconstitutional, the costs vastly outweigh the benefits, and it is unlikely to succeed in its stated goals. Unfortunately, none of these things has ever stopped Congress from instituting a program before and then spending even more on it when its failure has become manifest. Americans should encourage their congressmen to call for a price check when Obama brings this white elephant to the Capitol Hill checkout line — and then to reject it forthwith.



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