

An Apple a Day, the New Mexico Way

Eat your vegetables! That's what we're told by our parents growing up. And for many of us, tasting fresh fruits and vegetables as a young person helps develop life-long healthful eating habits. Unfortunately, many of our communities do not have access to fresh produce, so do not have the same opportunities to enjoy delicious New Mexico-grown products. This is unfair and unjust.

The Mid-Region Council of Governments is interested in promoting fresh, local fruits and vegetables for two reasons. First, increases in sales of local fruits and vegetables help keep our local New Mexico farmers farming. That in turn keeps our lands in agricultural production, our valleys green and our open spaces intact. Second, promoting fruits and vegetables promotes eating habits that are nutritious, a top goal for this state whose diabetes and obesity rates are among the highest.

While it seems like a no-brainer that a crispy New Mexico-grown Golden Delicious apple will taste good and be good for us, we know that many rural New Mexicans don't have equal access to the fresh produce others enjoy. In 12 rural counties in New Mexico, at least half of the residents must travel more than 10 miles to get to a good retail food store; some residents' journey as far as 60 miles, and without a car or reliable public transportation, some actually hitchhike to reach the closest grocery store.

Not only is food shopping like this inconvenient, it's downright costly. Research has found that the more distance between a person's home and a food store, the fewer servings of fresh fruits and vegetables they are likely to consume. On top of that, shoppers may pay as much as 65% more for their food than shoppers living in the state's metropolitan areas.

Getting New Mexico produce in the schools seems like a simple solution. In fact, with Senator Dede Feldman's help last year, several schools in Bernalillo County were given extra funding to purchase fresh fruit snacks weekly. The problem, however, is that our local school food service staffs, who prepare our children's lunches, are only given \$1.00 per meal to buy the food they serve. As a result, schools must serve foods like canned peaches and frozen french fries.

Two bills now before the state legislature that could change this. One of them - the "New Mexico-grown Produce for School Lunches" would add just 25-cents more to the cost of that meal. Even that small amount of additional money could put fresh fruits and vegetables on the plates of every New Mexico school kid. The other bill - "The Manny Herrera Access to Healthy Foods Act" would invest in new and existing food outlets in order to give every New Mexican a fair chance for a healthy diet. Not only would both proposals help children and families eat more healthy food, much of that food would be purchased from New Mexican farmers. The results: healthier people, lower health care costs, new jobs and agricultural sustainability.