



Sustaining Rural Communities

The state of grocery stores in rural Oregon

"The two things I've noticed, in order for there to be a town, is a grocery store and a school. If you're missing one or both of those things, you're not going to have a town - people will leave."

-Thaddeus Cowan Thompson, Chester's Thriftway, John Day

A vital function of any town is providing opportunities for residents to purchase food. Across the United States, rural communities are losing their grocery stores, putting into question the future of the towns themselves. Rural grocery stores provide for the economic, nutritional, and civic needs of citizens that are required to sustain communities. As the grocery store goes, so goes the town.

Since 2009, Oregon Food Bank, through the help of Resource Assistance for Rural Environments (RARE) AmeriCorps members, has surveyed over 80 independent grocery store owners throughout Oregon to determine the state of our rural grocery stores. Owners were asked about the services they provide, challenges they face, and how they might be better supported. Their ideas, struggles, successes and stories are shared in the report *Sustaining Rural Communities: A Report on Grocery Stores in Rural Oregon*.

Why support rural grocery stores?

Rural economic development

- **Rural grocery stores = rural jobs.** Of the stores interviewed, each have on average 5 full-time and 5 part-time employees.
- Chester's Thriftway in John Day is used as a recruiting tool for a nearby hospital.

Access to food

- For many rural residents, the town grocery store is their only access to food.
- **Rural poverty rate** is 18.3% and 17.5% of Oregonians are **food insecure**. The rural grocery stores who participated in this survey were on average 41 miles away from the nearest discount grocery store.
- Residents of Jordan Valley are 60 miles away from the nearest discount grocery store. If it weren't for the local grocery store, many residents wouldn't have access to food.

Social Hub of Rural Communities

- Whether it be gathering for a cup of coffee, seeing a neighbor as you walk down the aisles, or just using the store as a gathering place, rural grocery stores provide a cultural identity to small towns.
- Like the local school, **without the local grocery store, many rural towns won't survive.**



Rural Grocery Store Challenges

Common challenges identified by rural grocery store owners include:

- Meeting minimum purchasing requirements
- Product delivery
- Stocking fresh produce
- High operations costs
- Slim profit margins
- Availability of satisfactory labor

Several stores mentioned community-based solutions to some of these challenges such as informally sharing **suggestions and advice**; **co-purchasing** to meet minimum orders; sharing **marketing strategies**; and purchasing from **local growers**. Though for most stores, these solutions are insufficient.

Rural Grocery Stores in Oregon



"I have to go once a week to buy fresh produce in town, also the stuff we cannot get from those vendors we go to town to Winco, Costco, etc..."

- Harbick's Country Store, Blue River

"Without SNAP/WIC we wouldn't be able to make it"

- Mill City Market

"The most significant is shortage of working capital. If we had working capital we could do wonders. We know what to do and what's needed and what to provide."

- Cascade General Store, Oakridge

"I could buy whiskey, cigarettes, and gamble within walking distance of my house, but I cannot buy foodstuffs."

- Mike E., rural Josephine County resident



OPPORTUNITIES

Healthy Rural Stores

Lack of healthy food options at rural grocery stores is a public health concern. A coordinated effort from food system organizations, public health, and small business organizations can provide funding and resources for a healthy rural stores program.

Increase SNAP/WIC Acceptance

37% of residents in rural Oregon counties (with populations less than 65,000) use SNAP benefits. Understanding the benefits of these programs and technical support will help stores and customers.

Infrastructure Funding

Lack of refrigeration space is identified as a major barrier to stocking more fresh produce. Outdated and inefficient equipment increases already high operations costs. Rural stores need better access to low-interest loans and economic development grants.

Statewide Alliance of Stores

A coordinated formal alliance of independently owned grocery store owners will ensure that all stores have access to sharing of best practices, advice and general support.

Shop at your Local Grocery Store

The easiest way to support rural grocery stores is to shop at them!

"[I] feel as if [we] are providing an important service to the community with [our] store since there are some who need food in the town—there are widows who don't drive. The burdens of [our] job are a necessary part of having a grocery store in the area."

- Ranch Hand, Jordan Valley