

POLICY BRIEF

Food pricing and consumer choice: Recommendations for improving affordability for fresh produce in Missouri



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Summary

This policy and practice brief summarizes input from over 95 participants in the Fruit and Vegetable (Veggie) Policy Convening hosted by A Red Circle and University of Missouri Extension over two and a half days in February 2024. The purpose of the Convening was to discuss policy solutions that could keep fresh produce affordable while ensuring fair compensation for farmers. The goal

for the community is to increase access and funding for fruits and vegetables, support community programs, and enhance education efforts that increase fruit and vegetable intake. Breakout room discussions included speakers from academic institutions, community-run nonprofits, and national organizations. Through the Fruit and Veggie Policy Convening, community members and stakeholders provided policy requests to improve food pricing

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and accessibility options that affect different parts of the food supply chain. Additional policy examples were also informed by searching published journal articles and reports.

Keywords

community programs, food pricing, food policy, food access, food insecurity, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE), local food systems, subsidies

Introduction

The Fruit and Veggie Policy Convening was held to address food pricing and policy challenges while also supporting the launch of a community grocery store. The development of this Convening began a year in advance, initiated by A Red Circle and in partnership with the American Heart Association and Missouri University Extension. The goal was to explore policy solutions that could keep fresh produce affordable while ensuring fair compensation for farmers. Over two and a half days, discussions focused on nutrition, farming, and policy. Funding from the Missouri Foundation for Health's Opportunity Fund covered meals, logistics, and stipends to make it possible for farmers to attend.

The Process and Invitations

The planning team identified key stakeholders, including farmers (especially farmers with farms of 50 acres or less), food advocates, policymakers, and community members engaged in food access efforts. The goal was to bring together individuals who could provide practical insights on ensuring fair prices as well as influence policy discussions and community education. Invitations were extended to people with experience in nutrition, farming, and policy, ensuring a well-rounded conversation. Experts from advocacy groups, local universities, and the Federal Reserve Bank served as guest speakers to provide economic and legislative perspectives.

Before the Convening, planning meetings were held virtually to organize logistics, select topics, and structure the event. Missouri University Extension facilitated the Convening and assisted with

scheduling, data collection, and discussion frameworks. The Convening was held at St. Louis University, chosen for its accessibility to attendees from different parts of the city and county of St. Louis. Participants also drove in from the cities of Columbia and Springfield.

Challenges and Advice for Future Convenings

One major challenge during the discussions was maintaining focus on the core goal—affordable fresh food in grocery stores—while balancing the broad interests of attendees. Discussions often expanded into school meals, hospital meals, and institutional food policies. Establishing clear objectives helped to redirect participants and maintain focus on the primary topics of discussion.

Another significant challenge was ensuring farmer participation. Attending the Convening was an opportunity cost for local farmers and meant time away from their farms, so stipends of \$400 (all currency is in US\$) were provided to compensate for farmers' time. This approach was effective and would be a helpful consideration in future budgets for groups planning similar events.

Regarding funding conversations, we also hosted technical economic discussions, such as those led by the Federal Reserve Bank representative. These discussions were valuable but complex. We recorded these sessions and found that providing recorded material was helpful in giving accessibility to those needing to revisit the information later.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Clear Objectives:** Define and reiterate the core purpose to keep discussions on track.
- **Diverse Participation:** Invite a mix of community members, farmers, policymakers, and economic experts for a well-rounded discussion.
- **Farmer Compensation:** Offer stipends to ensure participation from those who would otherwise lose income by attending.
- **Strategic Location:** Choose an accessible venue to encourage attendance from all regions.
- **Technical Session Accessibility:** Record complex policy and economic discussions for later reference.

- **Partners:** Collaborate with university groups who can lend additional time and resources.

With these strategies, future convenings can more effectively help shape policy and provide actionable solutions for food affordability and accessibility.

Results: The Breakout Discussions

Access to nutrition is crucial for sustained health, often more so than access to healthcare alone. Between 700,000 and 860,000 Missourians are estimated not to have enough nutritious food to meet their daily needs (Missouri Foundation for Health, n.d.). Food insecurity in Missouri accounts for an estimated \$1 billion in avoidable healthcare costs (Operation Food Search, 2021). This disproportionately impacts people in rural communities, older adults, people with disabilities, and people with low incomes due to barriers like availability, accessibility, affordability, and difficulties with government assistance programs.

This paper considers factors such as the drivers of food systems, the administration and availability of funding, sustainability, and socio-cultural contexts in a modified food supply chain. Food pricing is affected at each step of the supply chain, and the Convening was mostly centered around producers, retailers, and consumers. Recommendations arose on improving affordability at each of these three steps. It is important to note that implementing targeted subsidies, price controls, and discount programs for fresh fruit and vegetables have been successful policies in other states and can offer a feasible solution to strengthen food security for Missouri communities.

Producers

The Convening held breakout room discussions that highlighted the drivers of food pricing and how the current food production system disproportionately affects low-income communities. High production costs, corporate market control, and policy barriers favor large-scale farming, making fresh food less affordable. Policy suggestions that arose from the breakout room discussions included better support and funding for small-scale local

farmers to implement sustainable agricultural practices and provide produce to a wider variety of retailers.

Solutions

Speakers at the Convening discussed how food that is locally produced is more cost-effective. Connecting local producers (e.g., farmers with 10-50 acres) directly with consumers and retailers can increase farmer profits, lower consumer prices, and enhance access to fresh produce. Moreover, programs like urban farms teach sustainable farming techniques, benefiting the local environment. For example, the Urban Farm Project and A Red Circle discussed the use of organic practices and minimizing chemical inputs and explained water conservation techniques employed on the farm, such as rainwater harvesting and drip irrigation.

Small-scale farms face market access barriers, limited infrastructure, and dominance by large-scale operations. To reduce these barriers, farmers require more comprehensive solutions that improve both market access and food pricing (according to Debi Kelly, a speaker at the Convening), such as:

- tax incentives for farmers growing specialty crops (e.g., organic produce, heritage grains);
- collective purchasing and distribution of food that involves local farmers, grocery stores, and community organizations; and
- investment in cooperative grocery stores, which are more likely to purchase produce from local farms.

Expanding Missouri's Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure Program with accessible grants could greatly benefit small farms. Missouri lawmakers already subsidize fruit and veggie farmers through budgetary processes. Currently, \$50,000 grants are limited and reimbursement-based, creating barriers. The state received \$7 million in funding for these grants, but only \$2 million were allocated in the state budget (Rossi, 2024); 30 farmers were selected to receive a grant to sell their produce to local restaurants and stores, where there is high demand for local produce. However, only 16 of these

projects received funding and only partially. The funding limitations are a state budget issue. These efforts could be expanded. Allowing upfront payments and covering salaries could ease the burden. Participants at the Convening recommended \$250,000 grants to support 10–50 acre farms (to, for example, expand capacity to contract for help or hire staff; buy tools; plan for future needs; or improve buildings), in turn bolstering independent grocery stores and access to local produce.

Redistribution of grant funding from the Missouri Department of Agriculture is necessary to effectively support food security and can help ensure that high-quality farmland is preserved and not lost to development. Farmers of small family farms must be included in policy conversations. The federal farm bill supports large, commodity farms, so more state-level subsidies for small, sustainable farms are essential to ensure food security and environmental sustainability. Bolstering support for 10–50 acre farms can help create a resilient, equitable food system that benefits both producers and consumers.

SUPPORTING SMALL-SCALE PRODUCERS

Short-term actions:

- Initiate discussions with farmers, grocery stores, and community organizations to collectively purchase and distribute food

Long-term actions:

- Increase disbursement of the Resilient Food Systems Infrastructure grant
- Offer tax incentives for specialty crops
- Offer subsidies to promote environmentally friendly, sustainable farming practices
- Invest in co-op grocery stores

Retailers

A session on the drivers of food pricing highlighted how retailer purchasing power affects food costs and supports local farmers who are reliant on both retailer and consumer sales. Another session, titled “The Value of the Card,” highlighted how retailers could incentivize consumers to buy more fruits and vegetables. One solution focused on eas-

ing small retailers’ participation in government programs that make healthy food more affordable. Specifically, one participant suggested “reducing barriers of small growers accepting Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.”

SNAP can provide a significant economic benefit. Every \$1 in new SNAP benefits issued in Missouri can increase gross domestic product by \$1.54 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service [USDA FNS], 2022). In Missouri, retailers who accept SNAP can also participate in Double Up Food Bucks (DUFEB) and the Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP), which provide coupons, discounts, and other benefits for buying fresh fruits, veggies, and grains (Missouri Department of Agriculture, n.d.-a). Participating retailers reported greater produce sales than nonparticipating stores (USDA FNS, 2023).

Solutions

Facilitating the growth of local food economies requires the creation of financial incentives for retail grocery stores that addresses regulatory compliance, marketing, and consumer demand. In addition to greater financial support, the Convening also proposed the following strategies to strengthen local food systems:

- **Stronger Supply Chains:** Building successful farmer-retailer relationships ensures a reliable local food supply.
- **Innovative Pricing Models:** Flexible pricing or price averaging can reduce the impact of price fluctuations.
- **Technical Assistance:** Helping retailers navigate regulations simplifies compliance and reduces their burden.
- **Bulk Buying Programs:** Independent stores can pool orders, lowering costs and providing farmers with a stable customer base.
- **Expand SNAP retailer participation** through the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI).

Bulk buying programs and cooperative efforts can benefit both farmers and retailers. Initiatives like the Rural Grocery Initiative, part of Kansas

State Research and Extension, offers technical support and grants to independently owned rural grocers, enhancing local food access (Kansas State University, 2024). State marketing campaigns such as Pick Tennessee Products, Fresh From Florida, and Certified South Carolina (Robbins, 2023) also connect consumers with local producers, providing models for the “Missouri Grown” program.

Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI), a grant available to grocery retailers, could help expand the availability of locations that sell fresh fruits and vegetables. Retailers can also apply for funding to use on electronic benefit transfer (EBT) equipment if they demonstrate that having EBT equipment helps sell healthy, fresh, and affordable foods to underserved communities and markets (USDA FNS, 2024b). Additional funding for the SNAP Healthy Incentive program is also available for eligible government agencies and nonprofit organizations through the federal Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP).

SUPPORTING RETAILERS

Short-term actions:

- Innovative pricing models to mitigate the impact of price volatility
- Offer technical assistance on regulatory compliance to reduce burden

Long-term actions:

- Offer subsidies and incentives for equipment to serve as an EBT vendor
- Support bulk buying and food hub programs
- Support EBT at farmers markets

Consumers

SNAP accessibility, utilization, and stigmatization were key topics at the Convening. Awareness and adoption of federal food programs like SNAP and WIC are minimal among farmers market vendor and staff, and retailers. SNAP, which serves 11% of Missouri households, aims to reduce poverty and food insecurity while also boosting the economy (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2025).

Many Missourians face a “benefits cliff,” where

increased income disqualifies them from aid and yet is not sufficient for fresh food. In 2023, Missouri passed legislation that created a transitional benefits program for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and SNAP (Revisor of Missouri, 2023). This program, however, is currently unfunded, leaving many without crucial support (Bates, 2024a). The Missouri legislature must allocate funding each year to ensure that people do not experience this benefits cliff.

Solutions

Participants advocated for shifting SNAP from a safety net to an empowerment tool, suggesting the removal of lifetime bans for nonviolent drug offenders and integrating SNAP eligibility screening into primary care, aligning with the “Food as Medicine” program (American Heart Association, n.d.). Strategies that increase SNAP participation also include expanding outreach about the program, increasing the availability of the program’s managing office, and simplifying the application and recertification process (Nicoll, 2015; Pinard et al., 2017).

Policies that enable programs to offer discounts or vouchers for fresh produce can also provide additional immediate relief to low-income families. Prioritizing targeted subsidies, price controls, and discount programs can ensure that all Missouri residents have access to nutritious food and maintain a healthy diet. Notably, of these recommended policies, some do not require legislation:

- Broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE) allows states to raise SNAP income limits from 130% to 200% of the federal poverty line, simplifies administration, and reduces frequent churn— when a household leaves and then reapplies and re-enters SNAP within four months (USDA FNS, 2024a). BBCE alleviates restrictive administrative rules for eligible low-income households because social services agencies can apply independently *without a legislative mandate*. BBCE simplifies eligibility, links SNAP to TANF, and increases deductions for expenses like rent and childcare. While 41

states have adopted BBCE, Missouri and eight others have not (Rios & Huelsman, 2024). Empower Missouri is collaborating with the Missouri Department of Social Services to implement BBCE without requiring new state funds (Bates, 2024b).

- The Food as Medicine initiative promotes nutrition to prevent chronic diseases and is supported by the federal government, health organizations, and universities. Programs include medically tailored meals, groceries, and produce prescriptions (American Heart Association, n.d.).
- The Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) offers annual benefits of \$50 to low-income seniors and \$30 in benefits annually to WIC individuals that can be exchanged for fresh produce at participating markets. Expanding this program, especially to southeast Missouri, could help alleviate food insecurity (Missouri Department of Agriculture, n.d.-b).
- Double Up Food Bucks (DUFB) matches SNAP dollars spent on produce. In 2023 in Missouri, \$1 million was redeemed from fresh produce purchases. DUFB customers reported that having access to fresh produce positively impacted their health. The program boosted access to fresh produce for consumers, and retailers even increased their produce sales (Double Up Food Bucks Heartland, 2023). The DUFB grant was implemented in Missouri by the DUFB Heartland Collective. The collective did not secure federal funding in 2024, but was provided private funding for 2025 which will allow DUFB to be offered in Missouri (Alferman, 2024). The state could allocate funds through their legislative budgets and provide matching funds to supplement private donations, ensuring the program's sustainability and expansion.
- The Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) supports projects and provides grants that improve access to healthy food. Missouri's Rural Food Access Partnership,

with the financial support of a three-year \$1 million grant, was launched in 2024 and aims to expand healthy food to retailers in underserved areas (Empower Missouri, n.d.).

For consumers, requested policy changes include increasing their eligibility for food assistance programs and expanding the number of retailers that accept the benefits.

SUPPORTING CONSUMERS

Short-term actions:

- MO DHS could exercise the option to implement BBCE, which doesn't require legislative action
- Fund community food programs that provide healthy foods, and education to the community

Long-term actions:

- Expand Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) especially to southeast Missouri and other rural areas
- Support EBT at farmers markets

Community-based Considerations

Community initiatives also play a crucial role in addressing food accessibility issues. In St. Louis, events like the Good Food Summit focus on the economics of food distribution and the vital role of anchor institutions (e.g., grocery stores). These summits emphasize making fresh produce affordable while ensuring fair wages and investments for local farmers. These initiatives originally began with nutrition and cooking classes and later expanded to include growing food as well as a farmers' market to increase access to fresh produce (Jessica Donze Black, speaker).

Integrating agricultural practices with health and nutrition goals while supporting local food economies should be done through a holistic approach. Convening participants suggested implementing these multifaceted solutions that include both individual-level education and upstream systemic changes to improve nutrition security:

- Fund and implement sustainable community engagement projects.
- Consider diverse cultural preferences. Taste, price, and convenience influence food choices.
- Invest in food entrepreneurs and create infrastructure. Shared kitchens and manufacturing spaces bolster local food production and distribution.
- Build more community gardens. Educating and engaging residents through school and neighborhood gardens strengthens the workforce and local food systems. One example is the Carver Urban Farming Project (St. Louis American, 2024).
- Promote farm-to-school programs. Introducing the benefits of freshness and taste of locally grown produce early in childhood influences long-term dietary habits. Farm-to-school programs effectively introduce fresh produce to children despite barriers such as food service management policies and misconceptions about food safety.
- Community food prep education is key. Individuals who learn to cook and handle fresh ingredients in community-based programs and school-based interventions tend to purchase and consume more fresh fruits and vegetables (Ilić et al., 2022; Jeans et al., 2023; Metcalfe et al., 2021).
- More equitable funding practices. Historically, agricultural development funding often excluded minority farmers. Increasing efforts to fund organizations working with underserved farmers and ranchers, such as the 2501 program and the Socially Disadvantaged Groups Grant, which provides funding and technical assistance to socially disadvantaged groups in rural areas (USDA, n.d.).

Conclusions

Improving food access in Missouri requires supporting local producers, addressing retailer challenges, and improving customer access. Legislative tax incentives, subsidies, and technical assistance are key (see Table 1). Building robust local food systems support rural and urban farmers and improves local supply chains, advancing economic growth across Missouri.

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Table 1. Summary of Policy Recommendations for Missouri Legislators to Affect Different Categories of the Food Supply Chain

Support for local food systems could provide:

CATEGORY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Small-Scale Producers	Expand funding through grant access and subsidies to make it more affordable to grow fruits and vegetables sustainably in the community, and minimize chemical inputs and use water conservation techniques.
Retailers	Increase incentives for grocers and farmers markets vendors to participate in food programs and accept Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) while lowering the administrative burden.
Consumers	Create a wider eligibility net for individuals to participate in affordable, nutritious food programs through broad-based categorical eligibility (BBCE), while expanding SNAP income eligibility limits, removing lifetime bans for nonviolent drug offenders, and increasing cost incentives to buy fruits and vegetables through Double Up Food Bucks.

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