



Shaping the Future of Food in the Mississippi Delta

GLOBAL IMPACT ARTICLE SERIES

Driving through West Tallahatchie County, Mississippi, it can be a long while before you see another person. What you do see, at least in the summer, is a bucolic green: plenty of trees and wide, flat expanses of fields – commercially-owned soybeans, corn, cotton, and rice. When you do come across a town, the nature of the region’s challenges becomes more apparent.

“When you get inside the towns there are a lot of boarded up buildings,” says Lee Taylor-Penn, a graduate student at the University of Michigan (U-M) School of Public Health and Ford School of Public Policy. “You can see there are some faded murals on some of the boarded-up buildings where people have tried to beautify the area. But inside of these little towns they mostly look abandoned.” There is evidence of a struggle with the population and economic decline, and this rural area is profoundly food insecure. (USDA defines food insecurity as a limited or uncertain access to adequate food, typically due to a lack of money or other resources.)

Taylor-Penn is one of a five-member U-M Dow Fellows team of graduate students that spent the last year working to promote sustainable food systems in West Tallahatchie. The team used participatory-based community research to create a data-rich report on consumer behavior, food availability and, plausible future scenarios to help guide the community as it works to establish a more sustainable local food system. The team worked closely with the Emmett Till Interpretive Center.

FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is linked to numerous health issues beyond the potential for repeated bouts of hunger. Not knowing where your next meal is coming from, or having to make choices between, for instance, food or electricity, can be extremely stressful. This situation can promote psychological and emotional issues and physical illness. Anxiety and depression, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and developmental delays and behavioral problems are all associated with children who experience food insecurity.

Access to grocery stores, a critical component food security, has consistently been linked to better health outcomes. Full-service grocery stores stock fresh fruits and vegetables daily and have competitive prices. However, in West Tallahatchie and other food insecure areas, the primary source of food is from convenience stores that sell a lot of processed, unhealthy foods. Research data supports the link between a community’s location in a food desert and negative health impacts. These same areas—usually low-income, communities of color, and rural areas—often have the most trouble attracting full-service grocery stores.

STUDENT TEAM MEMBERS

Lee Taylor-Penn, School of Public Health and Ford School Public Policy; Anna Bengtson, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning (TCAUP) and School of Natural Resources and Environment; Grace van Velden, School of Public Health (SPH); Kathleen Carroll, Stephen M. Ross School of Business and School of Natural Resources and Environment; Sarah Ladin, Law School

U-M FACULTY ADVISORS

Laurie Lachance, School of Public Health; Rob Goodspeed, TCAUP; Barbara Israel, SPH

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Patrick Weems and Benjamin Saulsberry, The Emmett Till Interpretive Center; Carla Ross, The Tutwiler Community Education Center; The community members of West Tallahatchie, Mississippi, specifically in the towns of Glendora, Sumner, Tutwiler, and Webb.

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Made possible by The Dow Chemical Company, the Dow Sustainability Fellows Program at the University of Michigan supports full-time graduate students and postdoctoral scholars at the university who are committed to finding interdisciplinary, actionable, and meaningful sustainability solutions on local-to-global scales. The program prepares future sustainability leaders to make a positive difference in organizations worldwide.



“In West Tallahatchie, residents typically drive an average of 45-minutes to get to a grocery store, a trip that many can make just once a month, if at all,” says Anna Bengston, one of the Dow team members. For those who don’t have cars, public transportation or car-pooling are the only options. This limited mobility means that many residents are only two weeks away from disaster. (According to a 2015 USDA Food Insecurity Supplement, 97 percent of households surveyed in the U.S. reported that the food they bought did not last, and they did not have money to get more.) The combination of economic and transportation challenges means that many do not have enough food.

NOT JUST ABOUT THE FOOD

One reason food insecurity in Mississippi is a significant problem is the history of economic and racial inequity embedded in communities. Food security solutions in West Tallahatchie need to account for these racially-based social challenges. For instance, says Bengston, one nearby farmer’s market is organized by white women and is a place where, according to some West Tallahatchie residents the team interviewed, “the black community does not feel comfortable shopping.” These challenges and the Emmett Till Interpretive Center’s racial healing goals helped inform the project’s underlying goals of developing a base on which to improve food access and security, but also to create inclusive spaces where racially diverse groups of people can come together to discuss sustainable food solutions.

COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH

“A major barrier to achieving a more food secure future is that it’s difficult for people who are concerned with the many issues of poverty to devote time to community organizing,” says Bengston. Another is the amount of food exported. Currently, in West Tallahatchie, residents typically do not consume or sell food from the area, with the agricultural industry focused on commercial exports.

The team identified these factors as key barriers after a trip to West Tallahatchie at the start of their project. During their field work, they interviewed nearly 20 community members, from preachers to business owners, about personal shopping habits and what they thought about food access in the community. Engaging with the community helped the team form a picture of the community’s needs and the barriers that hindered previous local food security initiatives. Talking and listening to residents was a key part of the team’s community-based methodology, where study participants were included in every stage of the research process, informing the project with their knowledge and experience.

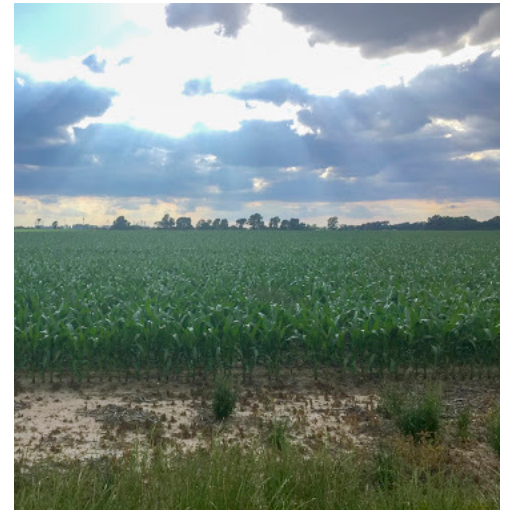
PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE(S)

To ensure their work was guided by and inclusive of community members’ needs and ideas, the team also held community workshops. They used the information gathered to create a set of scenarios to help the community “imagine, illustrate, and assess possible futures.” Although scenario-building focuses on positive outcomes, it also helps people consider both positive and negative outcomes to prepare for both successes and setbacks in their journey.

BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

To begin addressing challenges and to take steps toward a more food secure future, the team suggested community members share and discuss the scenarios, and then form a Food Access Council of 8-12 community members. The council would vote on which scenario to follow, taking into account community input from the meetings, and begin to plan the steps for achieving the future laid out in that scenario.

West Tallahatchie has a history of outsiders making promises and failing to deliver, an outcome the team hopes to avoid. “The community welcomed us into their homes,” says Taylor-Penn, inviting the Fellows to be part of the community and asking them to follow through with what they started. To honor this commitment the team connected nonprofits to the West Tallahatchie area, and three team members from this project will continue to serve the community in an advisory capacity for a time. “This is just the tip of the iceberg,” says Taylor-Penn. A new Dow team is actively being recruited to take over the project and will continue to organize the community and act on the scenarios developed.



Common agricultural crops grown in Tallahatchie County include corn (pictured), soybeans, and wheat (Webb, MS). Photo by Anna Bengtson



The team’s four scenarios are based on the history and needs of the community and are mapped to a scale of community empowerment and local food production – each a critical component of West Tallahatchie’s future ability to access healthy, nutritious foods.

1. Business as Usual: Less cohesive community empowerment and outsourced food production
2. One Stop Shop: More cohesive community empowerment and outsourced food production
3. Growing Tallahatchie: More cohesive community empowerment and locally sourced food production
4. Missed Opportunities: Less cohesive community empowerment and locally sourced food production

In their analysis, the team applied each scenario to critical community dimensions, including organizational structure and leadership, education, economic development, public health, and nutrition. Based on these dimensions, the team framed key challenges the communities might encounter and used case studies from other communities to make recommendations on overcoming them. They compiled a full report on their collected data and scenarios for the community to use as a resource.