

Retailers to bring fresh produce to 1,500 places

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This Wednesday, Oct. 21, 2009 file photo shows first lady Michelle Obama as she exercises with a hula hoop during a healthy kids fair on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington. Wearing a belt, even if it doesn't sit on the natural waistline, can help add feminine shape to an athletic body type, according to Adam Glassman of O The Oprah Magazine. (AP Photo/Haraz N. Ghanbari, File)

(AP) -- Michelle Obama's campaign against childhood obesity moved a step forward Wednesday with the announcement that Wal-Mart and

other retailers plan to open or expand 1,500 stores in areas without broad access to fresh fruit, vegetables and other healthy foods over the next few years.

Company executives were joining the first lady at the [White House](#) for a formal announcement.

Mrs. Obama is leading a nationwide effort to lower childhood [obesity rates](#), including by making fresh and healthier foods more widely available. She has urged grocers to expand into so-called "food deserts," which are rural or poor areas without many grocery stores.

The White House says nearly 24 million people, including 6.5 million children, live in such areas. Studies have shown that limited access to healthy foods like fruits and vegetables can lead to higher levels of obesity and diet-related diseases.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. says it will open 275 to 300 locations in urban and rural areas by 2016. The company, the nation's largest retailer, estimates that the stores will expand food options in more than 700 of these "food deserts," serving about 1.3 million people living in those areas.

Walgreen Co., a drug store chain, is expected to announce that it will convert or open 1,000 stores in areas that need healthier choices over the next five years, said company spokesman Jim Cohn. The new stores will sell whole [fruits and vegetables](#) along with pre-cut fruit salads and green salads, according to the White House.

Supervalu Inc. has committed to opening 250 Save-A-Lot stores over the next five years.

Several regional retailers have also promised to build or expand more than 10 stores in Pennsylvania, Alabama, Tennessee and Maryland, the

White House said.

Wednesday's announcement also was cast as a jobs creator.

Wal-Mart expects to put more than 40,000 people to work in the new stores while Supervalu estimated creating 6,000 jobs, according to the companies and the White House.

Mrs. Obama's appearance with Wal-Mart will be her second this year.

In January, she joined the retailers' executives as they pledged to reformulate thousands of products to make them healthier and push its vast network of suppliers to also reduce the amount of sodium and added sugars in some items, lower prices on produce and develop a logo to easily identify [healthier foods](#).

As the nation's largest retailer, Wal-Mart's size gives it unique power to shape what people eat. The company also has huge influence on products made by other manufacturers and sold in its stores.

Wal-Mart's size and status has also made it a target for criticism from labor unions and others who oppose its expansion into cities. Local officials, however, have been more receptive as they look for ways to boost job growth amid a slow economic recovery and an unemployment rate above 9 percent.

Brian Sozzi, a retail analyst at Wall Street Strategies, said the move by Wal-Mart to align itself with the first lady's effort could help smooth its access into new markets.

"It's nice spin," Sozzi said. "It improves the image and gets people excited about Wal-Mart coming into town."

Leslie Dach, Wal-Mart executive vice president for corporate affairs, said many of the new stores had cleared the company's internal decision-making process but remained subject to local approval.

Dach, who spoke to reporters on a conference call before the White House event, said communities have become less hostile to having Wal-Mart in the neighborhood because of the jobs and lower prices.

"We have become a better neighbor and a better company over the last several years," he said.

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