Who, What, Why: Why does a cabbage cost $28 in Canada?

Would you pay C$28 (US$27; £18) for a cabbage? $65 for a bag of chicken? $100 for 12 litres of water? That's not the cost of a meal at a world-class restaurant, but the price of basic foodstuffs at supermarkets in the territory of Nunavut, in northern Canada.

Residents in Iqaluit, the territorial capital, and Arctic Bay, Pond Inlet and Igloolik, and sympathisers in the national capital, Ottawa, have been protesting in a bid to raise awareness of the high cost of food in remote communities. So why is their food so expensive?

Nunavut is as large as Western Europe and covers most of the Canadian Arctic, with a population of more than 30,000, mostly Inuit. Its harsh, northern climate means there is no agricultural industry.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, indigenous people in the area survived by hunting, fishing and gathering. But lifestyle changes mean local people are now reliant on imported food. And for most of the year, these communities are only accessible by air.

"We don't have any roads or railways from the south so all goods have to be flown up every day," says Madeleine Redfern, mayor of the capital, Iqaluit. "Fresh produce, milk, bread is delivered here daily, and less frequently in smaller communities further away."

Michael McMullen, vice president for the northern Canada division of the North West Company, which runs 132 stores in remote Canadian communities, says getting food into stores in the north can cost 11 times more than it does in the south of the country.

"Transport generally makes up 13% of our costs," he says. "It costs typically one cent a pound to send stock to Winnipeg, and 30 cents a pound to send something to Iqaluit by sea, but it costs $1.27/lb to air freight stock to Arviat in southern Nunavut, and $3.65/lb to fly something to Clyde River in northern Nunavut."

"We also have higher running costs," Mr McMullen says. "Our electricity costs up north are 68 cents a kWh, whereas they are six cents a kWh a typical store in Winnipeg. A typical store in the north will use $686,000 (£430,140) worth of electricity in a year."

"Fresh food doesn't travel well either. We lose five to six times more food during transport to the north than we do down south."

And while it is cheaper to send non-perishable items by ship in the summer, this creates its own problems. "There are issues with storage," says Ms Redfern. "Imagine a whole year's worth of toilet paper for a community."

Leesee Papatsie, who organised the protests and lives in Iqaluit, has a good job but still spends more than a third of her pay on food - about $500-$600 (£314-£376) a week.

"Food has always been expensive," she says. "The cost doesn't shock me any more. Luckily, I live in a large town, smaller towns are more expensive."

The minimum wage in Nunavut is the highest in the country at $11 an hour, but high living costs mean it doesn’t have the same purchasing power. And the unemployment rate is high, at 16%.

"Most people will know someone who is hungry or has been hungry," says Ms Papatsie. "Lots of kids go to school hungry and don't have proper meals. It's cheaper to buy an oven dinner than the separate ingredients, it's not a good diet, but people think at least they have food."
She started a Facebook group earlier this month to raise awareness of the issue, which has grown to 20,000 members and has been flooded with pictures of high-cost foodstuffs.

Many southern Canadians have been asking the group whether locals hunt and gather for traditional foods to mitigate the impact of costly imports.

Foraging and hunting for so-called country foods are important, says Ms Redfern, but it can hard for people to get hold of them.

"They often have to travel for days, and it is expensive," she says. In summer, hunters need boats with motors, fuel, nets, gun and bullets. In the winter they need snowmobiles, sleds, tents, stoves and warm winter clothing.

Hunters used to be able to use meat to feed their families and sell pelts to offset the costs, but Ms Redfern says an EU and US ban on seal products has meant many people can no longer afford to hunt.

A federally funded programme, Nutrition North Canada Program (NNCP), gives subsidies to retailers who are supposed to lower the prices of essential healthy foods in communities without regular road or water access.

Mr McMullen says the scheme, which pays $53.9m a year, has brought the cost of four litres of milk down from $15.19 to $7.79, but he concedes that more needs to be done to make food affordable.

*Reporting by Sarah Shenker*