



Douglas County, Nebraska

Home to Omaha, which *Forbes* magazine identified as the nation’s number one “Best Bang-For-The-Buck City,” Douglas County is situated along the Missouri River in the heart of the Midwest. Renowned for TV dinners and Duncan Hines® cake mix, major food manufacturers – such as Kellogg’s and Tyson Foods – underpin the local economy.



City Sprouts Garden, Omaha

Geographically small with only 328 square miles, Douglas County is home to a third of the state’s population. Most county residents live in Omaha, Nebraska’s largest city. The U.S. Census Bureau reports the county’s population is 79% White alone, 11% Black alone, and 9% is foreign-born, much of which is comprised of Sudanese and Burmese refugees. In addition, 61,516 people identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. While the median household income in the county is \$53,444, about 15% of the population falls below the poverty line.

Agriculture and Food Production The county has a rich farming history, ample water, and an abundance of high quality soils suitable for most types of agricultural production. Of its 396 farms, 83% are small – the U.S. Department of Agriculture classification for farms with annual gross cash farm income less than \$250,000. The state average for small farms is 71%. Cattle production dominates, supported by commodity grains, such as corn and soybeans, and a well-established infrastructure of feedlots and slaughter houses that serve the rest of the nation. Local food production is on the rise with a handful of small livestock operations; fruit, vegetable and nut farms; and an apple orchard producing for local markets. An expanding urban agriculture sector includes Whispering Roots, an organization

that uses aquaponics to educate children and provide food to underserved families. Wineries, dairies, cheese producers, farm stands, and a 1,500-member Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm also support the community food system.

While the region has significant infrastructure for processing livestock, most of what is processed in Douglas County is shipped in from and out to other places. Still, while the big food businesses located in the county supply the global food system, 25 farmers markets and Tomato Tomato – a local food distributor representing more than 100 local producers – are increasing the availability of local food to county residents. Omaha has a vibrant restaurant scene and corporate culture, and many eateries and corporate cafeterias include products from local farms on their menus. Community gardening is growing across the city, and some schools are starting to install school gardens.

Despite a well-established agricultural sector, it is hard for beginning farmers to enter agriculture. The county’s 86,000 acres of farmland are tightly held, and high quality land is expensive. There is ample support for skilled commodity growers, but beginners in particular, as well as farmers interested in local and regional food production, need support gaining access to land, education in marketing, and additional processing and aggregation facilities tailored to a local food economy.

Douglas County Agriculture

Number of farms ¹	396
Percent of land in farms ¹	41%
Percent of land with high quality soils ²	74%
Percent of farms that are small ¹	83%
Average market value of agricultural products sold per farm ¹	\$152,000
Average age of farmers ¹	57 years old

Sources: ¹ USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2012 Census of Agriculture; ² USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. General Soil Map, 2007

Food Access Countywide, about 48% of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, but in the Omaha public school district, about two-thirds of students receive these benefits. Most poverty is concentrated east of 42nd Street and in northern and southern Omaha, where venues are limited to purchase healthy food. The Douglas County Health Department has mapped grocery stores and found that while stores carrying food are fairly well distributed through the county, stores in Omaha’s lower income neighborhoods tend to have less variety. In addition, convenience stores dominate in northern Omaha rather than fully stocked grocery stores.



Douglas County Population

Area ³	328 sq. miles
Population ⁴	531,057
Percent of population below the poverty line ⁴	15%
Percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch ⁵	48%

Sources: ³ U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts; ⁴ 2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; ⁵ Nebraska Department of Education, Free and Reduced Lunch Counts by School, 2014-2015

Food access is improving in the city – the Health Department found a 25% increase in coverage of stores carrying healthy food from 2009 to 2015 – but transportation is still a challenge for low-income populations, especially the elderly. An emergency food system that includes a major food bank, food reclamation, plant reclamation, and gleaning serves low-income residents. In addition, a successful Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program provides about \$250,000 in coupons to low-income senior citizens at 240 senior centers across the state and has a 93% redemption rate. All farmers markets in the county redeem Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and two markets match funds for SNAP recipients up to \$5.

Growing Food Connections Douglas County was selected to be one of eight Communities of Opportunity across the country to participate in Growing Food Connections (GFC), a 5-year initiative funded by USDA-NIFA to improve community food security and support local agriculture and food production. County leadership demonstrated a need and a strong commitment to strengthening the county’s food system and created a steering committee of local government representatives and food system stakeholders to accomplish this work. This steering committee works with the GFC team of researchers and technical assistance providers to identify and address local policy opportunities and barriers to achieve its food system goals.

The steering committee is dedicated to strengthening the food system by supporting widespread access to good food, sustainable systems, civic engagement, and economic prosperity. Its goals focus on increasing education and food security, encouraging local food production and markets for farmers, and measuring progress toward a food system that contributes to the county’s economic stability. These goals are driven by the following vision statement:



UNL Extension – Hope Garden, Omaha

“We envision a robust, integrated food system where all residents can choose to buy and eat healthy foods and communities thrive.”

June 2016

DOUGLAS COUNTY STEERING COMMITTEE

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|--|---|
| Mary Balluff
Metro Omaha Food Policy Council | Catherine Plumlee
Gretchen Swanson Center for Nutrition |
| Anne Branigan
Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce | Adi Pour
Douglas County Health Department |
| Ali Clark
Big Muddy Farms | Vicki Quaites Ferris
Empowerment Network |
| Connie Fisk
University of Nebraska Extension | Chris Rodgers
Douglas County Commission |
| Casey Foster
Nebraska Department of Agriculture | Sarah Schram
Douglas County Health Department |
| Vic Gutman
Vic Gutman & Associates | Elisabeth Smith
City of Omaha Planning Department |
| Kent Holm
Douglas County Environmental Services | Jeff Spiehs
Metropolitan Area Planning Agency |
| Jayne Hutton
University of Nebraska Extension | Jim Steffen
Massena Farms |
| Michael Kult
Tomato Tomato | Susan Whitfield
No More Empty Pots |
| Elwin Larson
University of Nebraska, Omaha | Lucy Wilson
Edible Omaha |
| Mary O’Donohue
Office of U.S. Congressman Brad Ashford | |

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS PARTNERSHIP



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