



Cumberland County, Maine

On the striking coast of Maine, Cumberland County is home to the state’s most populous city of Portland. With a working waterfront and a U.S. Economic Development Administration Sustainable Food Production Cluster designation, Portland has built much of its economy around its food resources. Dubbed “Foodiest Small Town in America” by Bon Appétit magazine in 2009, Portland is a popular tourist destination not only for its food culture but also its arts, history, and spectacular landscape.



Characteristic of a New England county with strong “home rule” government, most policy decisions are made among the county’s 28 town and municipal governments. These towns and cities are home to more than 284,000 residents, roughly a quarter of whom live in the city of Portland. While the median household income is \$59,560, 12% of the population lives below the poverty line. The U.S. Census Bureau reports 93% of the population is White alone, 3% is Black alone, and 6% of the population is foreign-born, including a significant number of refugees – especially from Somalia and Sudan. In addition, about 5,300 people identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

Agriculture and Food Production Small-scale farming is important in Cumberland County for its ecological, economic, and community benefits. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) classifies almost all (96%) of Cumberland County’s 718 farms as small (farms having an annual gross cash income less than \$250,000), and many supply local markets with fruits, vegetables, beef, dairy, hogs, poultry, sheep, goats, honey, maple syrup, and ethnic crops like African eggplant. Fishing is also important to the local food economy – especially Maine’s famous lobster, which has supported generations of fishing families along the Maine coast. Urban agriculture is taking off in the city of Portland with an expanding community gardens program that now accommodates

more than 400 people, a youth-driven urban farm, and a garden-based education program at Title I elementary schools.

Cumberland County boasts a thriving local food scene. The Maine Department of Agriculture’s “Get Real Maine” website lists 158 farms (25%) in Cumberland County that sell directly to consumers. Twenty-one farmers markets and dozens of farm-to-table eateries feature locally grown foods, and the Gulf of Maine Research Institute works with many restaurants to help them source their seafood sustainably. During the 2014–2015 school year, Portland’s public schools’ food service sourced more than 35% of its food locally. St. Joseph’s College also purchases about 40% of its food from within a 300-mile radius. In 2015, to strengthen local farm-to-institution opportunities, the University of Maine released a Request for Proposals that requires vendors to source 20% of their food purchases – including dairy, eggs, produce, meats, fish, and seafood – from within 175 miles of state campuses.

While demand for local food is high, expanding production is hindered by a shortage of land and high land values, which make it hard – especially for beginning farmers and new Americans – to enter agriculture or expand their operations to meet market demand. In addition, there is a shortage of food system infrastructure for cooling, packing, processing, and otherwise adding value to local farm products. The Sustainable Food Production Cluster designation provides a great opportunity to address this challenge.

Food Access According to the USDA Economic Research Service’s “Household Food Security in the United States in 2014,” Maine is the 12th most food insecure state in the country, the most food insecure state in New England, and has the third highest rate of very low food security in the United States. Despite the county’s relative affluence, according to Feeding America, Cumberland County has a 14% food insecurity prevalence. This was exacerbated in 2014 when the governor decided to forego a federal waiver that allowed Maine residents to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits regardless of

Cumberland County Agriculture

Number of farms ¹	718
Percent of land in farms ¹	12%
Percent of land with high quality soils ²	33%
Percent of farms that are small ¹	96%
Average market value of agricultural products sold per farm ¹	\$37,000
Average age of farmers ¹	58 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



Cumberland County Population

employment status. As a result of this change, the number of able-bodied adults without dependents receiving SNAP benefits dropped by 75% in Cumberland County. One-third of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch with eligibility as high as almost 60% in some school districts. Rural residents in Cumberland County – particularly in the Lakes Region – also face transportation barriers to healthy food access.

Area ³	825 sq. miles
Population ⁴	284,351
Percent of population below the poverty line ⁴	11%
Percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch ⁵	34%

Sources: ³ U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts; ⁴ 2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; ⁵ Maine Department of Education, Cumberland County, 2014

Various entities work to address Cumberland County’s food security issues. A strong emergency food system, in place since the early 1980s, today includes more than 50 food distribution sites. Nonprofit organizations also have programs to increase food access. For example, Cultivating Community provides healthy food options to rural areas via mobile market, teaches youth how to grow food to supplement Senior Farm Shares, and provides matching dollars for SNAP benefits redeemed at their farm stands. The three major farmers markets in Portland also accept SNAP benefits. Lastly, the Cumberland County Food Security Council and the Portland Initiative for a Healthy and Sustainable Food System bring together stakeholders to address food access issues through policy and long-range planning.

Growing Food Connections Cumberland 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 strengthen 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’s goals emphasize enhancing agricultural viability, establishing food system infrastructure, increasing access to local food for vulnerable populations, protecting farmland, increasing access to land on which to grow food, involving local government in food system decision-making, and promoting sustainability. Toward these goals, the steering committee envisions...

“A Cumberland County in which:

- Each local government and community is actively working to improve the food system.
- Everyone has access to adequate healthy food as well as the knowledge and means to prepare it.
- Food and agricultural enterprises thrive using just, fair, and sustainable business practices and production methods.
- More than 50% of the food consumed in Cumberland County is produced in Maine.
- Cumberland County is a significant and positive force in shaping the food system of surrounding regions.”

May 2016

CUMBERLAND COUNTY STEERING COMMITTEE

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| Nadeen Daniels
Cumberland County Government | Sarah Murphy
The Opportunity Alliance |
| Tim Fuller
Portland Public Health & Human Services | Caroline Paras
Greater Portland Council of Governments |
| Jim Hanna
Cumberland County Food Security Council | Richard Rudolph
Rippling Waters Farms |
| Lesley Heiser
Cultivating Community | Kathy Savoie
University of Maine Cooperative Extension |
| Stuart Leckie
Saint Joseph’s College | Ben Smith
Town of Windham |
| Jason Lilley
University of Maine Cooperative Extension | Ben Tettlebaum
Conservation Law Foundation |
| Zoe Miller
The Opportunity Alliance | |

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS PARTNERSHIP

