



Doña Ana County, New Mexico

A vast county of about 3,800 square miles, Doña Ana County, New Mexico, spans a large portion of the Mesilla Valley from the base of the Organ Mountains to the borders of Mexico and Texas. The treasured Rio Grande River runs through it, producing a fertile locale for the nation's oldest wine-producing region, the world's largest pecan orchard, and the birthplace of the highly coveted Hatch green chile.

Only about 13% of the county's land base is privately owned, while the federal government—largely the Bureau of Land Management and Department of Defense—owns 85% of the rest. Many of these public lands are used for grazing. A temperate climate and an agrarian heritage form the backbone of a strong agricultural economy, despite the county's metropolitan status as home to Las Cruces, the second-largest city in the state.

Of the 213,000 residents of Doña Ana County, nearly half live in the county seat of Las Cruces, one of the fastest-growing communities in the United States. About one-third of the county's population lives along the Rio Grande or the Texas border in semi-urban incorporated entities, towns/villages and in unincorporated rural/semi-rural areas, which include 37 *colonias* (communities designated by the state as lacking basic infrastructure). The U.S. Census Bureau reports 29% of the population is White alone, 2% is Black alone, and 17% is foreign born. In addition, about 141,100 people identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

Doña Ana County Agriculture

Number of farms	2,187
Percent of land in farms	27%
Percent of farms that are small	95%
Average market value of agricultural products sold per farm	\$351,000
Average age of farmers	61 years old

Source: USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service, 2012 Census of Agriculture

With a median household income of \$38,426 and 28% of the population living below the poverty line, the county struggles economically. But motivated by a strong sense of loyalty and tradition, the people of Doña Ana are committed to preserving the unique qualities of their region while creating new economic opportunities. The county's "One Valley, One Vision 2040" regional plan affirms these goals to foster "a truly great place



La Semilla Community Farm, Anthony / La Semilla photo

to live, work, and play for residents of all ages, backgrounds, cultures, and economic levels."

Agriculture and Food Production With 1,000 square miles of farm and ranch land, Doña Ana County's agriculture remains strong despite a swelling urban population and 15 years of drought. A significant infrastructure of irrigation ditches dating back to the 19th century diverts water from the Rio Grande to support agriculture — especially pecan production. However, water availability is a critical limiting factor to expanding food production, and with growing urbanization, water conservation and management will become increasingly important to address.

Doña Ana County leads all U.S. counties in pecan production and leads New Mexican counties in acres of orchard production. With 84% of its farmland in pasture, it leads the state in forage production and is second in both vegetable and cotton production. It also has a significant dairy industry and produces cattle, feed for cattle, sheep and lambs, fruits, honey, and the prized Hatch green chile pepper. While Doña Ana County has some very large farms in terms of both sales and acreage, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) designates 95% of its farms as small (grossing less than \$250,000 in cash farm income annually), and 65% are very small, grossing less \$20,000 annually. In spite of all its assets, limited access to land, water rights, and infrastructure for aggregation and processing create barriers for the county's beginning, small, and mid-sized farmers.

Food Access Residents in many parts of Doña Ana County have limited access to healthy food; 28% of the county's residents live in USDA-designated "food deserts." Of these, about one-quarter live in the city of Las Cruces while the majority live in rural areas and colonias. Countywide, about three-quarters of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, but this reaches close to 100% in the southern Gadsden school district. Limited transportation options also create barriers to food access, especially for low income residents.



One farmers market, New Mexico State University (NMSU), and many emergency food providers have stepped up to the task of improving healthy food access. The Farmers' & Crafts Market of Las Cruces doubles the value of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program (SNAP) benefits redeemed at the market, and NMSU is conducting research on marketing healthy foods to recipients of SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Emergency food providers are disbursed throughout the county, but services are insufficient to meet the needs of all food insecure residents. An active Master Gardeners program and a city-operated community gardening program create opportunities for residents to grow their own food on a very small scale. While these efforts certainly help to improve food security in the county, much work is still needed to ensure that all residents are able to secure affordable and culturally appropriate food.



Munson Community Garden, Las Cruces

Doña Ana County Population

Area ¹	3,807 sq. miles
Population ²	212,942
Percent of population below the poverty line ²	28%
Percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch ³	75%

Sources: ¹U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts; ²2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; ³USDA Economic Research Service, Food Environment Atlas, 2010

Growing Food Connections Doña Ana 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, creating 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 increasing access to healthy and local food while embracing goals related to environmental, social, and economic sustainability. The committee's goals focus on increasing opportunities for aggregating, processing, distributing, growing, accessing, and recycling local food by fostering community awareness and economic development with regard to the food system. These goals are guided by the following vision statement:

"Our region has a thriving and inclusive food system that: 1) provides affordable and abundant healthy food for our families and communities; 2) provides a competitive financial return and esteem for our farmers, and generates sustainable employment and small business opportunities that promote a vibrant and equitable economy; 3) protects and regenerates the health of our farmlands and natural resources."

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DOÑA ANA COUNTY STEERING COMMITTEE

Krysten Aguilar
La Semilla Food Center

Lorenzo Alba
Casa de Peregrinos

Jeff Anderson
Doña Ana County Cooperative Extension

Patricia Biever
Doña Ana County,
Community & Constituent Services

Jorge Castillo
Doña Ana County Community Development

David Kraenzel
Extension Economics
New Mexico State University

Claudia Mares
Doña Ana County Health & Human Services

Karim Martinez
Doña Ana County Cooperative Extension

Debra Sands Miller
Independent Contractor

Martie Olivas
Doña Ana County,
Community & Constituent Services

Leah Whigham
Paso del Norte Institute for Healthy Living

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS PARTNERSHIP



cultivating
healthy
places



American Planning Association
Making Great Communities Happen