



# Luna County, New Mexico

Luna County is nearly 3,000 square miles of open space and striking natural features. Located in southwestern New Mexico, it shares a 54-mile border with Mexico, and its International Port of Entry provides round-the-clock service between Chihuahua and the United States for a variety of agricultural products. More than two-thirds of its land base is managed by the federal or state government, and the county receives payment in lieu of taxes on public land.



Diaz Farms, Deming

More than half of Luna County's 25,000 residents live in the city of Deming, and most others either live in colonias (unregulated, unincorporated rural settlements), rural agricultural areas, or the incorporated village of Columbus. This was once a fast growing region, but population growth has slowed in recent years. The U.S. Census Bureau reports 90% of the county's population is White alone, and 15,806 people identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. The median income is \$28,489, and although 30% of the population falls below the poverty line, residents do not consider themselves poor because of their strong sense of cultural identity, supported by community values of family, generosity, diversity, and a love of the land.

**Agriculture and Food Production** Luna is a large rural county with a proud heritage in farming and ranching. With low humidity, hot sunny days and cool evenings, its desert climate provides a long growing season and favorable conditions for wine grapes and other specialty crops. Best known for its world class chile production and Mizkan Americas, Inc., the largest U.S. chile processing plant, the county's agriculture is quite diverse. In addition to chile peppers, farmers use irrigation to grow pecans, melons, onions, and grapes, which are mostly processed locally at St. Clair, New Mexico's largest winery, and Luna Rossa, another

award-winning winery. Ranchers take advantage of abundant public lands to graze cattle. With a couple of remaining dairies, other farms grow forage—especially alfalfa to feed cows and cattle. Home gardening is popular, as is the county's Master Gardeners program, and some county schools have gardens.

Most of Luna County's agricultural products are sold wholesale and shipped out of county. Aside from Mizkan Americas, some onion sheds, small-scale chile processing, and wineries, little infrastructure is in place to support aggregating, processing, storing, or other ways of adding value to local products. Even though 80% of the county's producers are small (grossing less than \$250,000 in cash farm income annually), very few sell directly to consumers.

Access to water and water rights is a major limiting factor for expanding food production. The county is fortunate to have an aquifer to supply high quality water, but after years of drought, concerns are rising about depletion. In response, with support from the local Natural Resources Conservation Service office, more than 90% of current farmers have installed drip irrigation and other conservation practices.

**Food Access** Many individuals and families across Luna County find it challenging to afford and secure healthy food. At one local grocer, redemption of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits has more than doubled since 2008. With shopping concentrated in the city of Deming, transportation is a barrier, especially for people living in the colonias, rural areas, and Columbus. However, the county has responded with an on-demand transportation service, which residents can use to get to grocery stores.

More than 99% of Luna County's school children qualify for free and reduced lunch, and schools provide all students with

## Luna County Agriculture

|   |              |
|---|--------------|
| Number of farms   | 190          |
| Percent of land in farms                                    | 29%          |
| Percent of farms that are small                             | 80%          |
| Average market value of agricultural products sold per farm | \$329,000    |
| Average age of farmers                                      | 59 years old |

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



two meals a day plus an afternoon snack. This includes about 400 Mexican children who are bused across the border daily to attend school in the county. The county also supports a backpack program that provides school children with food on weekends. During the summer, feeding sites are available for children to receive free meals. The county's extensive and well-established emergency food system includes a food bank and numerous food pantries. However, without shared documentation, it is hard to know how well the system is working or reaching those in most need of assistance.

### Luna County Population

|   |                 |
|---|-----------------|
| Area <sup>1</sup>   | 2,965 sq. miles |
| Population <sup>2</sup>   | 24,947          |
| Percent of population below the poverty line <sup>2</sup>           | 30%             |
| Percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch <sup>3</sup> | 99%             |

Sources: <sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts; <sup>2</sup> 2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; <sup>3</sup> USDA Economic Research Service, Food Environment Atlas, 2010

**Growing Food Connections** Luna 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



Luna Rossa Vineyard, Deming

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 increasing local production, reducing food insecurity, and creating jobs and value-added businesses to achieve economic sustainability and improve the quality of life. Among the committee's priorities are revitalizing, promoting and expanding markets for small farmers and food producers, improving the emergency food system, and expanding vocational and culinary education. These goals are driven by a vision:

**"To enhance food security, safety, and awareness by ensuring sustainable and economically viable agriculture for Luna County."**

May 2016

### LUNA COUNTY STEERING COMMITTEE

**Jack Blandford**  
Luna County  
Extension

**Lori Coleman**  
Spanish Stirrup  
Rock Shop

**Dorian Dodson**  
Friends of the  
Columbus  
Community Garden

**Ben Etcheverry**  
Mizkan Americas

**Jessica Etcheverry**  
Luna County  
Government

**Leedru Hyatt**  
Flying U Ranch

**Ginger Jones**  
Deming Public Schools

**Kenneth Leupold**  
Western New Mexico  
University

**Joe Padilla**  
Luna County  
Government

**Olivia Paez**  
Deming Public Schools

**Zach Penn**  
Farmer

**Claire Phillips**  
First United Methodist  
Church of Deming

**Reggie Price**  
Dignity and Pride  
Charter Limo, LLC

**Ben Rasmussen**  
National Center for  
Frontier Communities

**Matt Robinson**  
Luna County  
Healthy Kids

**Mark Schultz**  
Peppers Supermarket

**Matthew Stong**  
Preferred Produce

## GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS PARTNERSHIP



cultivating  
healthy  
places

