



Polk County, North Carolina

Divided by the Blue Ridge Mountains to the west and the Piedmont plateau to the east, Polk County, North Carolina, is a transition zone. It has a steep rugged landscape of mountains, gorges, and coves, as well as rolling pastures, cultivated fields, and orchards. A rural county with small town charm, it also boasts great restaurants, shops, and services.



Groundswell Grow Food Where People Live Permacult/ Groundswell International photo

Located in the “thermal belt,” the county has a relatively mild climate creating a comfortable environment that attracts retirees and benefits farmers. With a viticulture history reaching back to the 1890s, the region is experiencing a resurgence of grape production and wine making after the downturn in this industry due to Prohibition.

Polk County’s population is in transition. While retirees are moving in, young adults are moving away due to limited job opportunities. The U.S. Census reports that 91% of the population is White alone and 4% is foreign-born. In addition 1,140 people identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. While poverty has not historically been a visible problem, the Great Recession took a toll, especially for people working in construction and related trades. About 76% of Polk County’s 20,000 residents are homeowners, but 13% live below the poverty line.

Polk County Agriculture

Number of farms ¹	290
Percent of land in farms ¹	16%
Percent of land with high quality soils ²	33%
Percent of farms that are small ¹	99%
Average age of farmers ¹	60 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

Agriculture and Food Production Agriculture is highly valued in Polk County for supporting the local economy, culture, quality of life, and the environment. Polk County is dominated by very small farms and part-time farmers: 99% of farms are classified as small by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (farms with annual gross cash income of less than \$250,000), and 85% have annual gross sales less than \$20,000. Farmers are struggling – poultry production is on the decline and there is only one remaining

dairy operation. While hay and cattle account for the majority of agricultural output in Polk County, farmers also produce wine grapes, wheat, eggs, fruits, and vegetables. Given the pressures on agriculture, the county created the position of agricultural economic development director in 2008 to support local farms in various ways from farmers markets to value-added enterprises. Bolstered by these efforts, niche operations are emerging, such as a goat dairy, a hydroponic herb farm, some aquaponics, and a solar-powered sprout farm. With more than 150 farm-to-table eateries in the region, these operations have a robust market in the local restaurant scene.

The region has some agricultural infrastructure, including slaughter facilities, livestock auctions, and a new food hub being run by Sunny Creek Farms. However, more cold storage and dairy processing facilities are needed. The average age of county farmers is 60 years old, and many farmers are concerned with transitioning their farms to the next generation. At the same time, access to affordable farmland is a barrier for young and beginning farmers – particularly access to land with appropriate housing. While the county has an Enhanced Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation ordinance, much of its prime soils remain unprotected in areas where commercial developers are buying up high quality farmland to support tourism, especially related to the new Tryon International Equestrian Center. One five-day event at the new equestrian center was estimated to have a \$900,000 impact on the local economy. This new development pressure exacerbates the problem of farmland transition and access to land for the next generation. Recent droughts and floods have created challenges to increasing crop production.

Food Access With the county’s relatively dispersed poverty, food insecurity is somewhat hidden as there are no readily identifiable areas where access to healthy food is a particular problem. Populations most affected include children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. More than half of students qualify for



free or reduced lunch, and in 2014 the county began providing free lunch and breakfast to all elementary school students. In 2015, an anonymous donor enabled the school district to extend this provision to middle school students, as well.

Polk County Population

Area ³	238 sq. miles
Population ⁴	20,352
Percent of population below the poverty line ⁴	13%
Percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch ⁵	52%

Sources: ³ U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts; ⁴ 2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; ⁵ North Carolina Public Schools, Free & Reduced Meal Application Data, 2014-2015

Several public and private programs address food insecurity, including a handful of food pantries, a meals on wheels program, and a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit match at the county's four farmers markets. However, participation in SNAP at farmers markets is mixed depending on the location and available transportation. Lack of knowledge and cost may also contribute to low participation rates. Transportation is a significant barrier to some people, and while the county provides an



Growing Rural Opportunities photo

on-demand van service, it is underutilized possibly due to limited hours and the requirement to request the service two days in advance. The county recently expanded public transportation with a fixed route that runs a continuous loop through the major population centers of Mill Spring, Tryon, and Columbus, but service is limited to Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, 8 am to 4 pm. Thermal Belt Outreach Ministry is a leader in supplying emergency food, providing groceries to 250 families per week and sending 230 children home from school with back-packs to ensure they have meals over the weekend. Various churches also provide free meals on a weekly basis.

Growing Food Connections Polk 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 enhancing sustainability, agricultural viability, collaboration, economic development, and education. Its goals include increasing consumer demand for and access to local food, improving economic sustainability for farmers, and developing a process to better handle food waste. These goals are driven by a vision...

"to enhance Polk County by fostering a food system built upon a viable and accessible, local agricultural economy."

July 2016

POLK COUNTY STEERING COMMITTEE

George Alley
Thermal Belt
Outreach Ministry

Sofia Lilly
Overmountain
Vineyards

Jimmi Buell
NCSU Cooperative
Extension, Polk County

Patrick McLendon
Mill Spring
Agricultural Center

Kelly French
Polk County
Soil and Water

Elizabeth Nager
Polk County
Community Foundation

Michael Gage
Polk County
Government

Lou Parton
Polk County Department
of Social Services

Aaron Greene
Polk County Schools

Michelle Reedy
Thermal Belt
Outreach Ministry

Doug Harmon
Harmon Dairy

Ansley Roberts
AmeriCorps

Dawn Jordan
Polk County
Government

Scott Welborn
NCSU Cooperative
Extension, Polk County

Sydney Klein
Grow Food Where
People Live

GROWING FOOD CONNECTIONS PARTNERSHIP



American Planning Association
Making Great Communities Happen