

Center Releases New Study Examining Rural Public Libraries as Partners for Small Business and Workforce Growth



The Center recently released the report, *Connecting the Dots: Rural Public Libraries as Partners for Small Business and Workforce Growth*, by researcher Dr. Xiaofeng Li of the Pennsylvania Western University Clarion. This study examines the current and potential role of public libraries in supporting small business development and workforce growth in rural Pennsylvania. The researcher used online surveys to sample librarians and conducted in-depth individual interviews with small businesses and residents in rural Pennsylvania. In total, 185 survey responses were received, and 19 individual interviews were conducted with small businesses and key community stakeholders. Derived from the research findings is a comprehensive list of resources for rural libraries.

Key Findings from Librarian Survey Responses

- **Technology services:** While most rural libraries offer technology services, few provide dedicated web resources for career development and small businesses. Almost half of

the libraries provide digital skills training and support. Innovative spaces such as makerspaces with tools (e.g., sewing machines) and newer technologies (e.g., 3D printers) are limited in rural libraries.

- **Patron support:** On average, libraries report that about one-fourth of their patrons are small businesses and that they support approximately one-third of their patrons in workforce development through existing resources.

- **Business- and career-related resources:** Rural libraries rely heavily on Pennsylvania government resources for small businesses, which are available at no cost; some libraries do not purchase any other online resources.

- **Business- and career-related programs and classes:** 58 percent of the libraries provide programs and classes for small businesses (e.g., technology and digital tools for website design, search engine optimization, and e-commerce; financial management; marketing and branding; legal procedures and issues). Comparatively, 82 percent of the libraries provide workforce development programs and classes (e.g., job search skills such as resume writing or interview techniques, planning for educational expenses, careers and occupations, and English as a Second Language skills).

- **Partnerships:** Local businesses, government agencies, and other libraries were the primary partners for libraries in supporting small business and workforce development. However, collaboration with dedicated organizations like Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) or the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE) is minimal.

- **Library challenges:** Over half of the libraries surveyed face challenges such as limited budget and staff, as well as a lack of knowledge/training among staff in supporting small businesses and workforce development.

- **Library needs:** Libraries desire more staff, staff training, and funds earmarked to address these challenges.

Current Role of Rural Libraries:

- **Access to information:** Libraries are valued for providing internet access, books, databases, and software.

- **Learning center:** Classes, workshops, and training programs offer desired knowledge and skills for developing businesses and advancing careers (e.g., financial literacy, balancing a checkbook, customer service trainings, cooking classes, equipment operation classes such as how to use a metal detector).

- **People connectors:** Libraries facilitate networking and collaboration within communities.

- **Underutilized potential:** Many participants indicated they do not actively use libraries for small business or career-related purposes.

Small Business and Resident Needs:

The summary continues on page 3.

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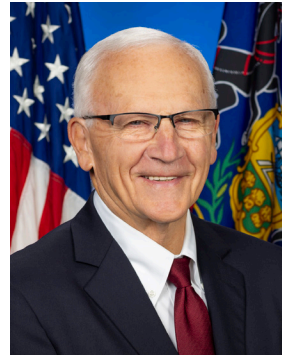
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OFFICE MANAGER
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Chairman's Message



As Chairman of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors, I am pleased to share the latest edition of our newsletter, which highlights important updates affecting rural communities in the Commonwealth.

In October, the Center hosted a public hearing at Kutztown University in Berks County to address the ongoing challenges of the opioid crisis and substance use disorders (SUD) across Pennsylvania. This event marked the Center's 20th hearing

on the topic, coinciding with the 10-year anniversary of our work tackling this public health emergency.

Over the past decade, the Center has been at the forefront of combating Pennsylvania's opioid and SUD crisis. We've worked closely with the legislature to implement key policies, such as limiting opioid prescriptions to minors, requiring additional training for medical professionals, and improving addiction treatment access in rural areas. While there is still much to be done, the Center's 20th hearing on this issue is a significant milestone, and I am proud that Pennsylvania continues to lead in this battle. A summary of testimony highlights from the hearing is available on the Center's website.

This edition of our newsletter features recent research initiatives, including a study examining the role of public libraries in supporting small business development and workforce growth in rural Pennsylvania. Additionally, we present updated findings to a previous 2007 Center study on biosolids management for municipal wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) in Pennsylvania, based on data from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and a survey of WWTPs. This study covers solids handling, disposal, recycling, and associated costs. Also featured is a demographic profile of rural Pennsylvania families, along with facts on holiday horticulture.

The Pennsylvania Rural Population Revitalization Commission, sponsored by the Center's Board of Directors and established as Act 21 of June 2024, has been hosting Listening and Learning Sessions across the Commonwealth. These sessions provide rural stakeholders, including residents and community leaders, the opportunity to discuss key issues such as population decline and economic challenges. The Commission is gathering valuable input to ensure that policies reflect the needs of rural communities. As the Commission continues its work into the new year, we look forward to the ongoing collaboration that will help revitalize rural areas across Pennsylvania.

Thank you for your continued support as we work together to empower rural communities throughout the Commonwealth. Together, we can make a meaningful impact and improve the quality of life for all Pennsylvanians.

Senator Yaw

- **Skills development:** Trainings on diverse topics (e.g., marketing, especially digital marketing; customer services; accounting/finance; communication; management; and computer skills) are needed in specific small business- and workforce-related skills.

- **Information access:** Reliable and curated resources are needed for business-related decision-making (e.g., number of employees needed, business location, start-up costs), navigating complex application processes for grants and loans, and providing information about local communities and events.

- **Social networks:** Strong social networks are needed to provide support and mentorship for both businesses and individuals.

- **Improve rural communities:** Growth in the quantity and variety of businesses along with growth in the number of younger residents to fuel the prosperity of rural communities.

- **Lifelong learning:** Continuous access to educational opportunities is necessary for personal and professional growth.

- **Financial resources:** Grants, loans, and other incentives (e.g., tax incentives and subsidiary rates for business equipment) are needed to provide vital financial support for business ventures and training.

Potential Roles of Libraries:

- **Expand information resources:** Curating small business-specific resources, career development, and community needs.

- **Develop educational programs:** Offering targeted workshops, classes, and training programs to address identified skill gaps.

- **Create community social hubs:** Fostering a welcoming space for networking, events, collaboration, and supporting social connections.

- **Become human resource connectors:** Partnering with relevant organizations to link community members and individuals with business and career experiences and support.

- **Promote local businesses:** Highlighting local entrepreneurs and businesses within libraries and through community outreach.

Potential Partners for Libraries:

- Economic development organizations, such as AmeriCorps, Pennsylvania CareerLink, Chamber of Commerce, Economic Alliance, Small Business Association (SBA), Small Business Development Centers (SBDC), and the Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE).

- Local leadership and community organizations such as community foundations, local businesses, lawyers, and marketing firms.

- Educational institutions such as local universities, colleges, and technical schools.

Recommendations for Library Budgets and Programming:

- Curate information for businesses and local communities in various formats.

- Allocate funds for learning resources and provide training across various business- and career-related topics, such as customer service, accounting/finance, communication, management, marketing, and computer and information literacy.

- Support initiatives that leverage library spaces for public events, community meetings, and social gatherings, fostering the role of libraries being community hubs for information and networking.

- Invest in equipment, training, and programs that encour-

age business idea incubation, creativity, collaboration, and innovation among all ages through library makerspaces and innovation hubs.

- Provide funds and support for library staff to engage in ongoing professional development.

- Provide incentives for library staff to go beyond library communities and seek partnerships with local and regional organizations that support small business and career development, and rural economic development.

- Provide incentives and support for library staff to participate and take leadership roles within committees from local to regional and state levels, increasing opportunities for collaborations across different sectors and industries.

- Provide competitive salaries and benefits to attract and retain library professionals with experience and training.

Recommendations for the Next Five-Year Plan for the Commonwealth Libraries:

- Strengthen the role of libraries as the primary place for information, organizing trustworthy and accessible information effectively to alleviate information overload prevalent on the open web. For example, libraries may curate a list of resources on grants that support starting a small business that is relevant to local economies.

- Emphasize the role of libraries as a central hub for local information and resources, establishing referral programs and cultivating partnerships with organizations at local, regional, and state levels.

- Expand the role of libraries in providing lifelong learning opportunities by fostering partnerships with local entrepreneurs, experts, businesses, and organizations beyond library communities.

- Transform library spaces into dynamic community hubs for social engagement, networking, and incubation for business ideas and innovations.

- Prioritize the training and growth of library professionals to equip them with the skills needed to navigate the evolving information landscape effectively. For example, library staff may need training on what business resources are available through government agencies such as SBDC.

- Increase community awareness regarding the services of libraries and the capacities for partnerships, ensuring that the community at large is informed about the diverse resources and services provided by libraries.

Recommendations for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA):

- WIOA could consider incentivizing and allocating funds to support partnerships between existing WIOA programs and rural libraries, such as designating rural libraries as satellite sites for existing programs, leveraging the role of libraries in local communities to understand local needs and resources in economic development. By fostering this synergy, WIOA can maximize its impact by extending services into underserved rural communities and tapping into the unique resources these libraries offer.

- WIOA could provide grant programs for libraries to take leadership roles in establishing partnerships with small business organizations and workforce development agencies.

- WIOA could integrate language to encourage small business organizations and workforce development agencies to collaborate with libraries for outreach efforts.

- WIOA could recognize the potential capacities of rural libraries as community hubs and support their development in this role with funding for library spaces and technologies needed for the incubation of business and innovation ideas.

Data sources: 2012 and 2022, 1-year Average, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample, U.S. Census Bureau.

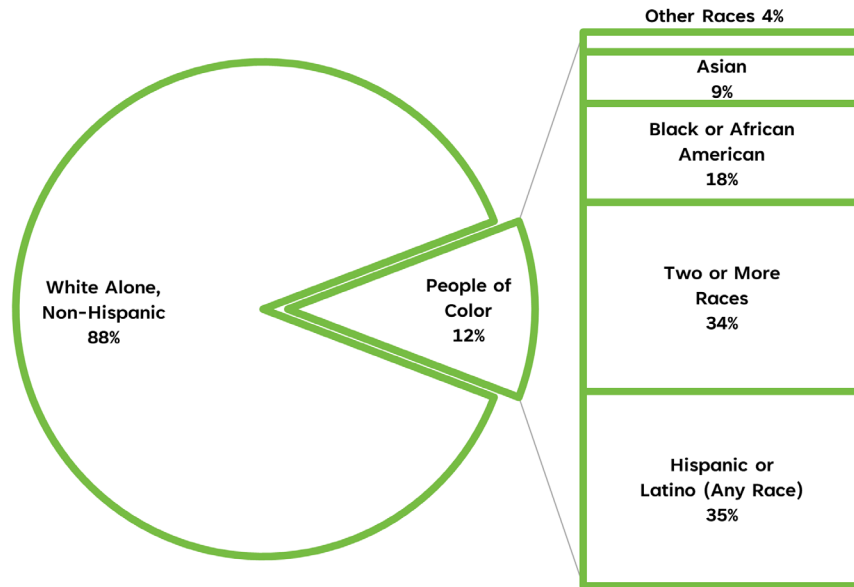
Key Findings

Families are often thought of as the bedrock of a rural community. However, families are not immune from demographic changes. Over the last decade (2012 to 2022), rural Pennsylvania families have seen significant changes. Using Census Bureau data and its definition of a family, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania found that between 2012 and 2022 there was a:

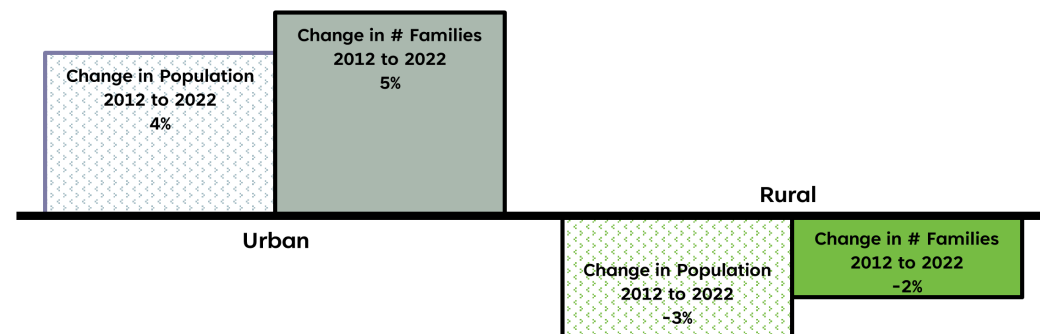
- 2 percent decrease in the number of rural families.
- 7 percent decrease in rural families with children.
- 4 percentage point increase in rural family members 65 years old.
- 7 percent increase in rural families of color.

The full report is available on the Center's website at www.rural.pa.gov.

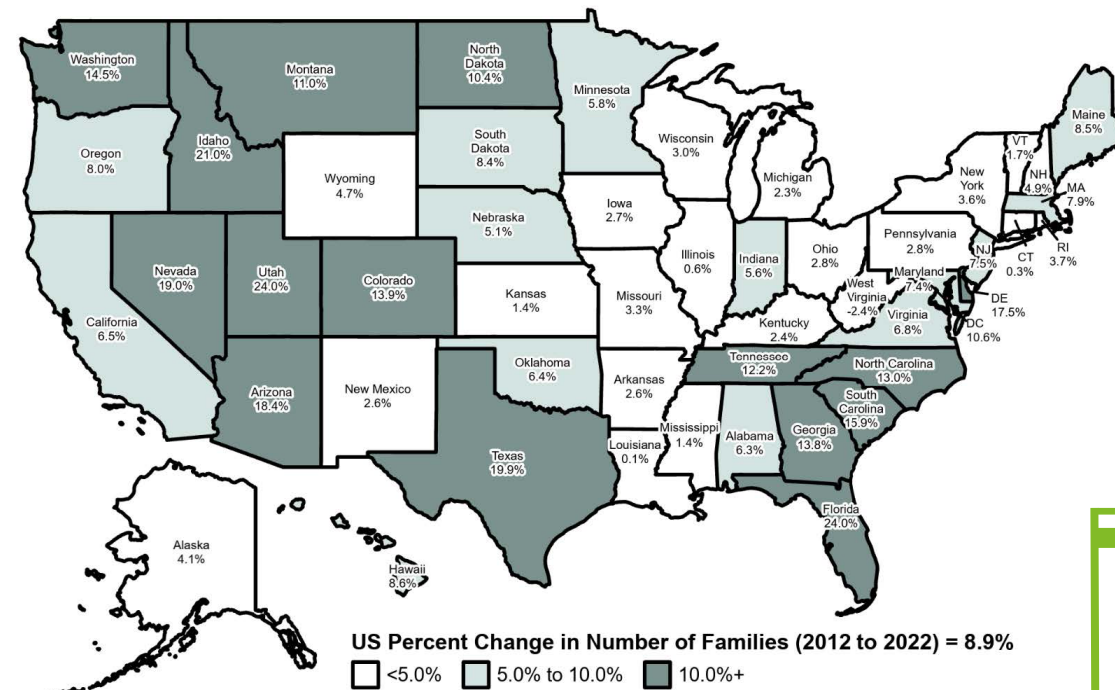
Rural Pennsylvania Family Members by Race and Ethnicity, 2022



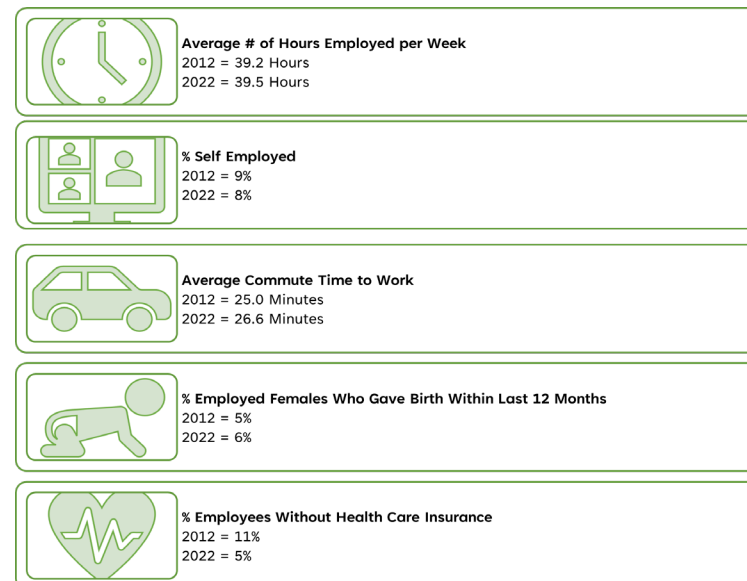
Percent Change in the Rural and Urban Pennsylvania Population and Number of Families, 2012 to 2022



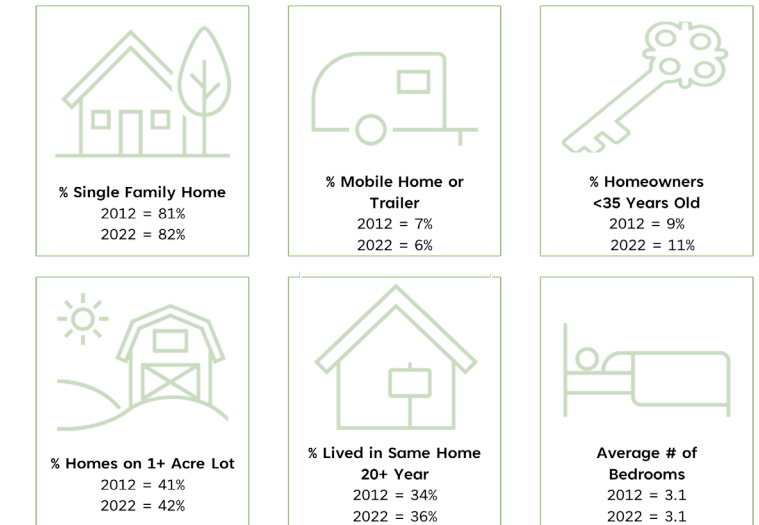
Percent Change in the Number of Families by U.S. State, 2012 to 2022



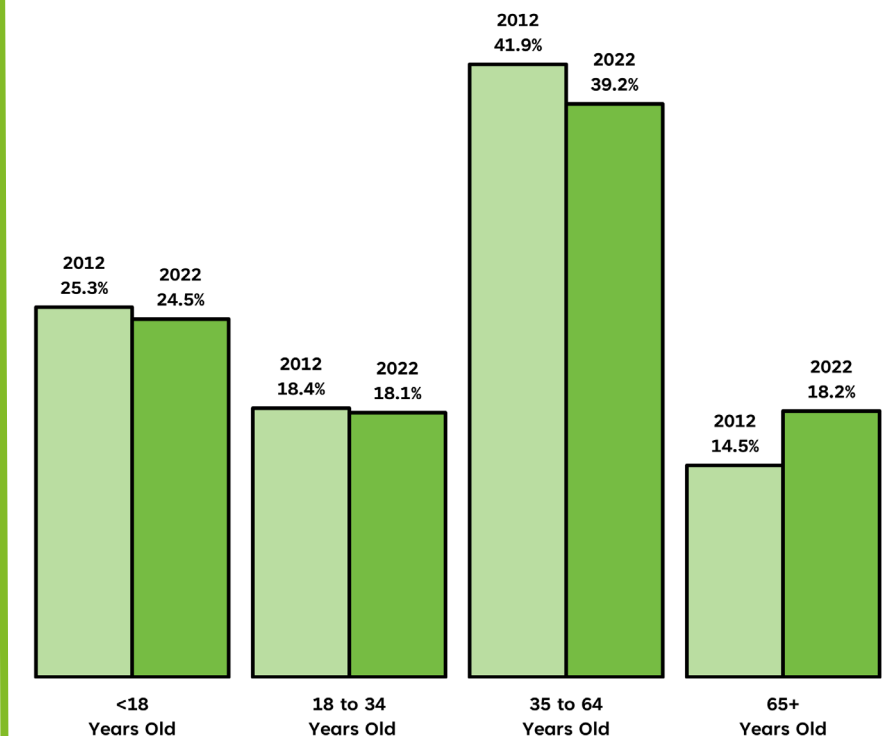
Characteristics of Rural Pennsylvania Working Families, 2012 and 2022



Characteristics of Rural Pennsylvania Family Housing, 2012 and 2022



Age Cohorts of Rural Pennsylvania Family Members, 2012 and 2022



Biosolids Disposal in Pennsylvania

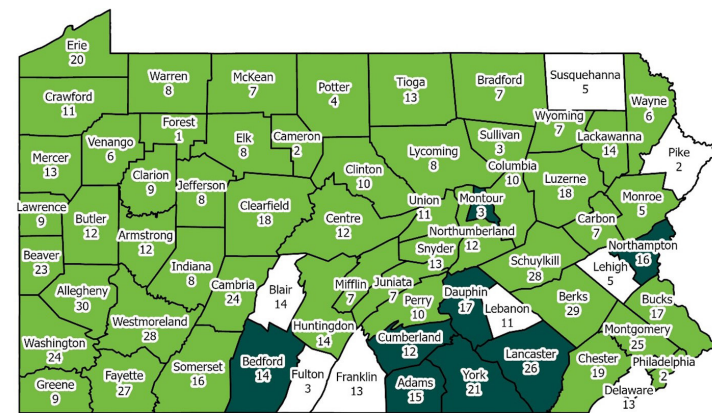
In 2007, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania published a research study to assess biosolids management practices and associated costs for Pennsylvania's municipal wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs). In addition to data provided by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), that study incorporated findings from a survey distributed in 2005 to 870 active WWTPs that requested information on solids handling processes, biosolids disposal or recycling practices, and costs related to biosolids management. The Center repeated the same methodology for this study, with these two sources of data to provide an update to those research findings in the new fact sheet.

Key Findings

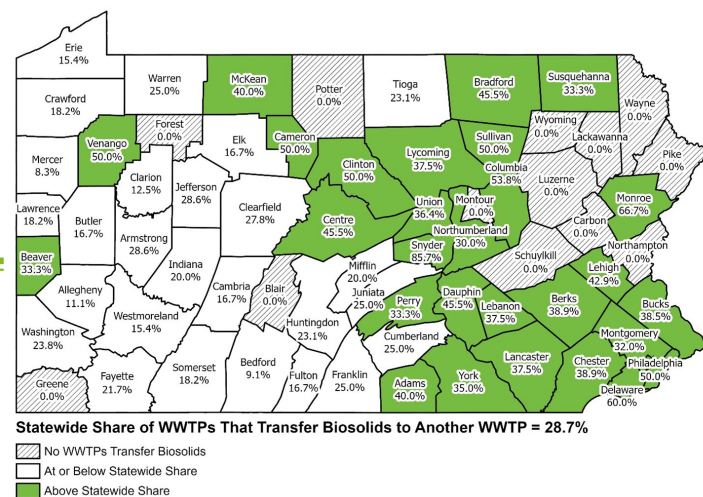
- There are 841 active municipal WWTPs in Pennsylvania, with 614 reporting the type of disposal method they use for their biosolids to DEP. These data show that the majority of WWTPs (43 percent) landfill their treated biosolids.

- Small facilities, which tend to be located in rural counties, are more likely to transfer their biosolids to another WWTP for final disposal instead of undertaking the disposal processes themselves.
- Municipal wastewater authorities that responded to the survey indicated that cost and regulatory requirements were their highest priorities, which was unchanged from the previous study.
- Survey respondents raised significant concerns over impending regulation of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), noting that increased regulation is likely to reduce the use of biosolids in agricultural production or mine land reclamation.
- According to survey respondents, it costs more than three times as much for small facilities to landfill their biosolids than it is to apply them to agricultural or mine land.
- Survey respondents suggest that biosolids disposal costs have generally declined over time, when adjusted for inflation.

The full report is available at www.rural.pa.gov.



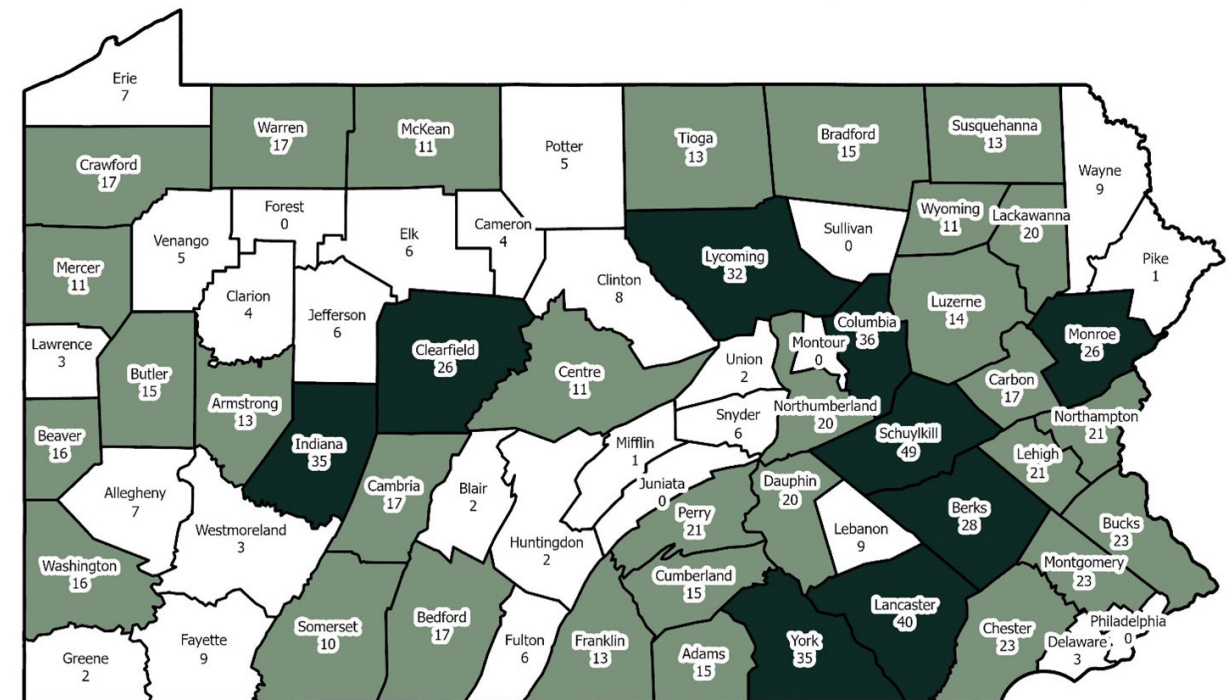
Number of Active Municipal Wastewater Treatment Plants (WWTPs) by Primary Method for Biosolids Disposal, 2024



Data source: Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

JUST THE FACTS: HOLIDAY HORTICULTURE

Number of Christmas Tree Farms by Pennsylvania County, 2022



Data source: U.S. Census of Agriculture.



With the holidays approaching, Pennsylvania's horticulture industry is gearing up for the season. According to the U.S. Census of Agriculture, in 2022, there were 906 Christmas tree farms on approximately 24,700 acres of land, representing less than one percent of all farmland in Pennsylvania. However, in the prior Census year (2017), there were 962 Christmas tree farms on a little over 30,700 acres of farmland, meaning that in the span of five years, there were 56 fewer Christmas tree farms and nearly 20 percent fewer acres dedicated to growing Christmas trees.

Also in 2022, there were 61 farms that primarily grew poinsettias. Those farms sold roughly two million pots of poinsettias for roughly \$10 million in 2022, meaning that the average retail price paid for a poinsettia was \$3.99. Retail price data for Christmas trees are only available through 2019. In that year, approximately 652,900 Christmas trees were sold for \$19 million, making the average retail price for a Christmas tree \$29.38.

Over half of all Christmas trees grown are expected to be cut after about five years, with just 10 percent of trees expected to be cut after just one year. The most common types of Christmas trees sold at retail were Fraser (33 percent) and Douglas (32 percent) firs, with Scotch pine and Nordman and Noble firs being the least common species of Christmas trees sold.



Center for Rural Pennsylvania
625 Forster Street, Room 902
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Resources

Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program is Open

The Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority (PBDA) announced the Commonwealth's \$1.16 billion Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program is open and accepting the first round of funding applications through January 21, 2025.

Ensuring every Pennsylvanian can connect to the internet is critical for students who want to learn, patients in rural communities who want to see their doctor, and small business owners who want to find new customers and succeed in Pennsylvania.

More information and resources for applying to the BEAD program, including webinars and FAQs, can be found on the PBDA's BEAD Program Page at www.broadband.pa.gov.

USDA Rural Development Water and Waste Disposal Direct Loan and Grant Program

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development has the Water and Waste Disposal Direct Loan and Grant Program available.

The program can provide funding for clean and reliable drinking water systems, sanitary sewage disposal, sanitary solid waste disposal, and storm water drainage to households and businesses in eligible rural areas. Additionally, it can help private lenders provide affordable financing to qualified borrowers to improve access to clean, reliable water and waste disposal systems for households and businesses in rural areas.

To learn more about this program, contact your local Pennsylvania USDA Rural Development office at www.rd.usda.gov/pa.