The "Two Maines" Revisited

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ABSTRACT

Fifty years ago, George Mitchell used "Two Maines" to characterize the economic gulf between prospering coastal Maine and lagging rural regions. In 2005, the authors documented socioeconomic distress in six border counties labeled "rim counties" by the State Planning Office. Here, we update that analysis to the 2020s and find wide disparities remain between the rim counties and the rest of Maine. Employment and business formation have fallen; substantial poverty persists; and the aging population is heavily dependent on "safety net" programs. Rural Maine has faced restructuring and decline in its legacy industries. The shift to a service-dominated economy has led to a preponderance of lower wage jobs. Signs of economic dynamism include the near universality of high-speed internet and innovations in the food system, tourism, and forest products, illustrated here by new ventures in Skowhegan and the Moosehead Lake region. Major challenges include aging in place, climate change, workforce housing, and recent adverse federal policies.

Half a century ago, gubernatorial candidate George Mitchell used "two Maines" to describe rural Maine's socioeconomic distress. Later, the State Planning Office divided the state into three regions for planning purposes: coastal, central, and rim counties. *Rim* counties were the chronically lagging border counties: Oxford, Franklin, Somerset, Piscataquis, Aroostook, and Washington. Maine's rural regions, heavily dependent on legacy sectors—forest products, agriculture, footwear, and outdoor recreation—faced epochal social and economic challenges.

In 2005, we contributed to a Maine Center for Economic Policy report, *Spreading Prosperity to the "Other Maines."* It portrayed the rim counties' economic and social conditions by combining county-level statistical analysis with interpretive stories about dislocated workers, youth out-migration, welfare dependency, and other features (Pohlman and Vail 2005).

This article brings the two Maines picture up to date, using a similar methodology. We start with a statistical overview that reveals both continuities and changes in rim county conditions. Many features of the two Maines problem persist. But we also highlight stories of economic and community revitalization, with sidebars focusing on Skowhegan and the Moosehead Lake region. These stories underscore the critical role of innovative leadership from entrepreneurs, towns, state agencies, and nongovernmental organizations. And they point to the potency of clustered investments—a *silver buckshot* strategy—rather than a vain search for big *silver bullet* solutions.[1]

Two themes stand out. First, the rim counties still face the challenge of supplanting the paper plantation, which shaped their economies for a century, supported many thousands of well-paid careers and underwrote community prosperity. Second, as rural Maine transitions to a service-dominated economy, its jobs are heavily weighted toward lower wage occupations. Even larger service center towns like Oxford, Farmington, and Houlton lack the scale and economic density to support large clusters of highly paid service occupations.

We noted in 2005 and stress again here that counties are handy but potentially misleading units for analysis. Penobscot County is not a designated rim county, for example, yet its former paper mill towns are suffering the characteristic two Maines difficulties. And even prosperous York County has interior towns with features similar to their rim county counterparts. Our analysis shows both the similarities and the characteristic differences across county groupings.[2]

THE DEMOGRAPHIC STORY

What can population data tell us about the two Maines? There has been substantial overall population growth in the state since 2000 (Table 1), reversing a previous out-migration trend. In-migration accelerated with the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Adverse climate change impacts elsewhere and expanding opportunities for remote work were additional contributors (Bouvier and Grandbois 2025). Population also increased in the rim counties, by 5.8 percent between 2000 and 2023,

TABLE 1: **County Population Patterns**

Region	County	Population 2023[a]	Population % change since 2000[b]	% age 65 and over, 2020[b]	Median age, 2020[b] 2020[b]	Median age % change since 2000[b]	Dependency ratio 2020[b]	Dependency ratio % change since 2000	% age 25 and over with bachelor's degree or higher, 2023[a]
Coastal	Cumberland	310,230	16.8	19.7	42.4	4.8	68.2	-0.4	52.2
	Hancock	56,526	9.1	26.4	49.5	8.8	83.2	9.6	39.2
	Knox	40,977	3.4	26.9	49.6	8.2	83.6	7.2	39.1
	Lincoln	36,507	8.6	29.5	52.2	9.6	90.6	10.3	40.0
	Sagadahoc	37,513	6.5	23.7	47.4	9.4	74.8	3.1	41.1
	Waldo	40,620	12.0	24.2	47.3	8.0	82.0	9.7	34.8
	York	218,586	17.1	21.4	45.7	7.2	72.0	-0.6	34.6
Central	Androscoggin	113,765	9.6	18.6	41.2	4.0	74.0	-0.5	23.4
	Kennebec	127,259	8.7	21.1	44.9	6.2	73.6	-0.4	30.9
	Penobscot	155,312	7.2	19.7	42.0	4.8	71.2	1.7	30.5
Rim	Aroostook	155,312	7.2	25.3	48.9	8.2	86.7	8.2	22.4
	Franklin	30,828	4.6	23.6	46.9	8.7	82.0	5.9	29.9
	Oxford	59,905	9.4	22.8	47.6	7.4	78.4	-0.2	22.5
	Piscataquis	17,486	1.5	27.5	52.0	9.9	87.5	6.7	21.8
	Somerset	51,302	0.8	22.1	46.9	8.0	75.7	0.5	20.3
	Washington	31,555	-7.0	26.1	49.4	8.9	87.4	7.4	24.9
State		1,485,706	16.3	21.8	45.1	6.5	74.8	1.8	35.3

a 2023 population from US Census American Community Survey 5-year estimates 2019–2023.
b 2000 and 2020 population from Decennial Census

with net in-migration offsetting low birth rates and all but Washington County sharing in the growth. However, this was just a fraction of population growth in coastal and central regions, led by Cumberland and York Counties.

Maine has an aging population and the highest median age in America. The rim counties have both a higher median age than the state and a larger share of population aged 65 and older. We note that coastal Hancock, Knox, and Lincoln Counties also have a high median age and a large over 65 population, but for a strikingly different reason. They have benefited from an influx of well-off retirees. The rim counties, by contrast, have experienced a mix of younger people leaving and older residents aging in place.

As Maine's population ages, the proportion of working-age people is shrinking. The *dependency ratio* shows the number of nonworking-age population per 100 of working age. The ratio helps identify potential economic strain, as a larger dependent population typically requires more social support and public resources. All the rim counties have dependency ratios higher than the state average. (That is also true of the three coastal counties mentioned, where wealthier older retirees are not an economic burden because they bring retirement and investment income to the local economy.)

Educational attainment reveals a stark contrast between the rim counties and the rest of the state. A growing share of Maine's adults age 25 and older have at least a bachelor's degree, now 35.3 percent. But in five of six rim counties, fewer than a quarter have a bachelor's degree. This is part of the two Maines story because, on average, college graduates have significantly higher yearly and lifetime earnings than those with less education. Mainers with a bachelor's degree, for example, earn 33 percent more on average than those with an associate's degree (CWRI 2025a: 9).

A WIDENING ECONOMIC GAP

Nationwide, the rural economy chronically lags metropolitan areas, a tendency that has intensified so far this century (McFarland 2018; Julien et al. 2025). Table 2 compares the performance of Maine's rim counties with the rest of the state since 2001. Was there evidence of an economic two Maines problem back then? Does it persist today? Four indicators help address those questions: per capita gross domestic product (total production), growth of business establishments, employment, and earnings.

TABLE 2: **Comparative Economic Indicators**

	2001	Rims % of state	2023	Rims % of state	% growth 2001–2023
Gross domestic product[a]					
Rim counties ($)	10.38	17.2	11.73	12.6	11.3
Rest of Maine ($)	57.64		81.54		41.4
Number of employers					
Rim Counties	8,006	17.2	8,552	13.3	6.8
Rest of Maine	38,567		55,530		43.9
Employment[a]					
Rim counties	96,351	16.2	84,884	13.3	-11.7
Rest of Maine	496,684		554,811		11.7
Average earnings					
Rim counties ($)	42,402	84.0	49,214	80.0	16.1
Rest of Maine ($)	50,566		62,029		22.7

a GDP figures in billions of 2023 dollars.
Sources: US Bureau of Economic Analysis, GDP by county and metropolitan area; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages

From 2001 to 2023, rim county production (GDP) increased by a sluggish 11.3 percent, just under 6 percent per capita. Production in the rest of Maine grew nearly four times as fast, a robust 41.4% percent, or 21 percent per capita. As a result, the rim counties' share of Maine's total production dropped from 17.2 percent to just 12.6 percent. Not surprisingly, business formation also lagged in the rim counties, with a net increase of about 500 establishments, or roughly 7 percent, while in the rest of Maine there were nearly 17,000 more employers, or 44 percent growth.

The rim counties' continuing economic distress is starkly reflected in labor market performance. They lost nearly 12 percent of jobs from 2001 to 2023 (-11,000 jobs) while the rest of Maine gained nearly 12 percent (+58,000 jobs). Despite declining job numbers, the rim counties' average real earnings did rise by 16 percent over the 22 years, but fell from 84 percent of the rest of Maine to 80 percent.

This brief article cannot go deeply into the many reasons for the rim counties' weak employment and earnings performance. However, two major factors stand out. First, the on-going contraction of paper and forest products industries has displaced thousands of highly paid workers (average paper mill earnings were $82,600 in 2015) (MFPC 2018: 16). Second, as the rim counties evolve toward a service-dominated economy, job creation has been skewed toward three generally low-wage sectors: health and social services, retail trade, and leisure and hospitality (CWRI 2025a). Much of rural America shows a similar pattern (Dumont 2024).

Paper industry contraction goes back decades and has multiple causes. The effects have been stark. In 2001, paper making employed 10,208 workers with a payroll of $565 million. By 2015, employment had shrunk by more than half and payroll by more than $200 million (to 4,069 jobs and $336 million). From 2019 to 2024, paper sales revenue declined a further 41 percent. Automation, global competition, and the decline of print media have all taken a toll on jobs (MFPC 2024: 4). Nearly all the mill closures and layoffs have been in the rim counties plus northern Penobscot and northern Androscoggin counties (MFPC 2018: 5, 17).

Despite this downward trend, the rim counties remain enmeshed in the forest economy. In 2024, the forest products sector's aggregate employment impact was 29,637 jobs, adding together direct employment, indirect employment (e.g., legal and consulting services) and multiplier effects in local economies. County employment shares vary, with high levels in Aroostook (17.1 percent), Somerset (14.7 percent) and Oxford (12.4 percent)

(MFPC 2024: 4, 9). In contrast to paper making, wood products sales and job creation actually show encouraging signs of revitalization that are explored below.

The three lower-wage service sectors carry substantial weight in all modern economies, but they stand out in the rim counties, generating 53 percent of all jobs, versus 47.6 percent in the coastal counties. Every rim county currently promotes tourism, and leisure and hospitality account for 13.2 percent of rim county jobs. The dilemma is that average leisure and hospitality earnings were just $32,000 in 2023, barely half of Maine's economy-wide earnings level(CWRI 2025b: slide 8). Many such jobs are seasonal or part-time, and creating livable wage careers through tourism is a big challenge.[3]

WELL-BEING AND DISTRESS

Indicators of individual and community well-being in Maine show a mixed and complex pattern over the past 20 years. However, disparities between the rim counties and other regions persist, as seen in Table 3. The statewide poverty rate has declined slightly since 2002. However, poverty increased in three rim counties, Oxford, Piscataquis, and Washington. All four of the poorest counties in 2023 were rim counties and all six rim counties were well above the state average poverty rate. We note that Waldo (coastal) and Androscoggin (central) have comparable poverty rates to some of the

TABLE 3: **Well-Being and Distress**

		Persons below poverty		Median household income		Personal income from transfer payments		Households receiving SNAP		Unemployment rate	
Region	County	2023[a] %	% Change since 2002	2023[a] $	% Change since 2002[a]	2023[b]	% Change since 2003	2024[c] %	% Change since 2003	2024[d] %	Change since 2004 %
Coastal	Cumberland	6.9	-1.1	96,255	25.8	15.7	2.7	13.1	3.7	2.5	-0.8
	Hancock	10.1	-0.6	72,647	17.6	23.3	6.3	13.0	5.8	3.6	-1.5
	Knox	8.6	-2.4	70,533	8.0	23.4	6.4	14.5	4.8	3.4	-0.3
	Lincoln	9.8	-0.3	74,569	10.1	24.2	7.2	12.9	4.7	3.2	-0.6
	Sagadahoc	8.7	0.0	83,180	13.3	21.2	6.2	11.5	3.0	2.6	-0.9
	Waldo	12.7	-0.5	68,345	14.0	28.4	7.4	20.6	6.0	3.5	-1.7
	York	8.1	0.2	85,445	8.7	19.7	4.7	12.8	4.3	2.8	-1.1
Central	Androscoggin	13.0	1.1	63,456	3.7	27.2	6.2	26.4	10.5	3.2	-1.3
	Kennebec	11.5	0.1	64,643	3.2	25.8	5.8	19.9	6.9	3.0	-1.9
	Penobscot	12.6	-0.2	65,215	8.8	28.0	7.0	22.1	8.1	3.3	-2.3
Rim	Aroostook	12.1	-3.2	56,361	11.5	35.8	8.8	27.3	9.0	4.2	-1.7
	Franklin	13.6	0.0	56,509	2.4	30.8	6.8	21.0	7.5	3.9	-1.8
	Oxford	14.5	1.3	60,220	5.3	32.3	7.3	24.6	8.0	3.5	-2.1
	Piscataquis	15.3	0.7	51,787	2.8	33.6	5.6	23.9	8.6	5.2	-1.7
	Somerset	13.3	-2.0	56,422	7.7	35.5	9.5	28.8	9.4	4.1	-3.5
	Washington	20.1	2.5	48,104	5.0	40.1	8.1	27.6	7.3	4.8	-2.6
State		10.5	-0.5	73,463	14.1	23.2	5.2	18.4	6.0	3.1	-1.5

a Bureau of the Census, Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates Program. 2002 median household income inflation-adjusted for comparison purposes.

b Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Department of Commerce. Transfer payments include retirement and disability insurance benefits, medical benefits (Medicare, Medicaid, etc.), income maintenance benefits (SSI, TANF, food stamps, etc.), unemployment insurance compensation, and other similar payments.

c Analysis from monthly reports from Maine DHHS. SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps.

d Maine Department of Labor, Center for Workforce Research and Information rim counties and could be considered part of the *other Maine* by that measure.

Median household income in 2023 remains lowest in the rim counties, tens of thousands of dollars below median coastal county incomes. Statewide, median household income improved 14.1 percent from 2002 to 2023, in inflation-adjusted dollars. Five of seven coastal counties had double digit increases, with Cumberland outstripping the rest. Only Aroostook among the rim counties surpassed 10 percent median income growth, yet its income, too, fell well below the state average.

Unemployment has declined in every county since 2004. Indeed Maine, with its aging population, now suffers from a chronic labor (and skill) shortage. Despite the rim counties' loss of jobs since 2001, they face labor shortages due to a history of out-migration by young working-age people. Indeed, two rim counties, Washington and Somerset, saw the greatest declines in the unemployment rate, after recording the state's highest unemployment in 2004. In sum, the rim counties continue to have the highest overall unemployment, with rates higher than any coastal or central county.

One indicator of regional differences is *total personal income,* which is comprised of earnings from wages and self-employment, income from investments, and income (or services) from transfer payments. There are two broad types of transfer payments: means-tested payments made to individuals and to providers on behalf of individuals; and non-means-tested payments, such as retirement and unemployment benefits made to individuals, plus payments to providers on behalf of individuals. Medical payments represent the largest proportion of Maine's transfer payments.

A county's degree of transfer payment dependency broadly reflects its age distribution and the extent of economic distress. Maine's rim counties are especially reliant on transfer payments, which constitute 30 percent to 40 percent of personal income, compared with 15 percent to 28 percent in the coastal and central counties. As the state's population has aged since 2003, the share of personal income from transfer payments has increased in all counties, with several rim counties showing the highest rates of increase.

Medicaid (MaineCare) is the largest means-tested benefit in terms of recipients and dollars, followed by SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps). The proportion of households receiving SNAP benefits has increased in all Maine counties, despite declining unemployment and rising household incomes. This apparent paradox is a result of greater outreach to populations with low enrollment rates, expansion of eligibility criteria, and streamlining the application process. Increased SNAP dependency has been greatest in the rim and central counties. More than one-fourth of rim county households are SNAP beneficiaries, compared with 18 percent statewide.

GOOD NEWS

Rim county economic development continues to lag the rest of Maine and many residents' well-being continues to be precarious. Yet there are also abundant signs of economic and cultural dynamism, as highlighted in the Skowhegan and Moosehead region sidebars.

Four areas of progress in Maine's rim counties are briefly highlighted here: telecommunications, forest products, the food system, and destination tourism.

High-speed internet is foundational in today's economy: a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for economic development and prosperity. A decade ago, the state's Three Ring Binder project brought broadband to rural population centers. Since then, government programs have induced private providers to extend "last mile connectivity" to nearly all rim county businesses and residents. The Moosehead Lake region (see sidebar) illustrates the benefits, ranging from improved emergency services to telehealth, tourism, education, attraction of in-migrants, and overall quality of life.

Forest economy diversification began decades ago, with products such as biomass electricity, oriented strand board, and wood heating pellets. A new generation of technologically sophisticated forest products is taking shape, for example, cellulose insulation manufactured at a shuttered Somerset County paper mill, biochar at a Piscataquis County lumber mill, and a planned biofuel plant at the Great Northern campus in Penobscot County. Mass timber products, like cross-laminated timber, also have promise. However, few of the new forest product facilities create more than a hundred jobs, in contrast with the thousands once employed at paper mills. It will take many new ventures to replace the paper industry's lost jobs, but that seems to be happening. From 2019 to 2024, wood products jobs increased by 19 percent even as paper industry employment fell by 13 percent; wood product shipments rose by fully 45 percent (MFPC 2024).

MOOSEHEAD REGION

Ever since Thoreau launched his *Maine Woods* adventures from Greenville, Moosehead Lake has been a famed destination for *rusticators.* Maine's largest lake is surrounded by industrial forest, but both forest industries and tourism have faced headwinds. In the forest economy, paper mill closures, loss of Greenville's log home and biomass power businesses, and mechanized logging have decimated jobs. Outdoor recreation mainstays, hunting and sporting camps, have declined. Snowmobiling is stagnant. Successive plans to transform Big Moose Mountain into an anchor ski resort have come to naught. As a result, from 2000 to 2020, Greenville's population fell 12 percent, to 1,437.

In 2013, local leaders formed the Moosehead Lake Region Economic Development Corporation, seeking to recapture Moosehead's position as a prime leisure destination. They contracted consultants to frame a strategy and energize citizens and investors around a brand, "America's Crown Jewel." The Maine Office of Tourism and Maine Woods Consortium collaborated in the effort (MOT 2021).

Local change agents have generated a surge of organizational innovations: Friends of the Mountain maintains the Big Moose ski area; the Moosehead Outdoor Alliance is developing a mountain bike trail network; and Destination Moosehead markets the regional destination. Key outside actors are the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC), Libra Foundation, and Northern Forest Center. AMC conserves more than 100,000 acres southeast of Moosehead, with lodges and trails attracting several thousand hikers, bikers, and skiers yearly. AMC also supports the community and its school programs in numerous ways (Vail 2021). The Libra Foundation has invested millions in nearby Monson, enhancing the region's destination appeal with its arts community and hospitality facilities. And the Northern Forest Center brings together tourism stakeholders and is the lead investor in critical workforce housing (Cordes 2025).

Investments by civic, private, and nongovernmental organizations have improved Greenville's downtown and lakefront infrastructure. Hospitality upgrades are exemplified by a new lakefront inn and tavern and a 190-site RV resort. Other important economic drivers include snowmobiling and all-terrain vehicle (ATV) riding on commercial forest land. Key informant interviews suggest, however, that the rapid growth of ATVing is intensifying peak season congestion in and near Greenville—a sign of peak season *overtourism*.

On the infrastructure front, high-speed internet has been a key upgrade, facilitating business development, emergency services, telehealth, education, and enhancing the region's appeal to prospective in-migrants. Modernization of Greenville's Northern Light CA Dean Hospital has direct health benefits and also appeals to settlers. (A caveat: the hospital's range of services has contracted and its parent company, Northern Light, faces financial challenges.)

Perhaps the biggest infrastructure constraint is housing for a growing workforce, with Greenville's population up 12 percent since 2020. A real estate boom, fueled by wealthy buyers "from away," has inflated property values by 75 percent since the COVID-19 pandemic, shrinking the affordable housing stock and provoking culture clash. The upside is a booming construction industry, a retail commerce boost, increased property tax revenue, and more young families (Zara 2025).

This cluster of loosely coordinated *silver buckshot* innovations is strengthening Moosehead's attraction to tourists, leisure homeowners, and new settlers, while also shaping job opportunities and enhancing quality of life for most residents.

A pair of cautionary examples remind us that not all rural industrial schemes pan out. A complex plan to produce torrefied wood from forest waste at Great Northern Paper's Millinocket mill and ship it via Eastport to British power plants came to naught. And Aroostook County's vast wind power potential remains largely untapped due to controversy over the power transmission route and connection to the New England grid.[4]

Maine's food system has undergone remarkable innovations, from farm to table. The rim counties are fully engaged in Maine's food renaissance, from Franklin County's Sandy River vegetable growers to Aroostook's barley and hops and Washington's aquaculture. The food hub taking shape in Skowhegan is an outstanding example of coordinated initiatives on many fronts. The visionary leaders at Maine Grains and Maine Street Skowhegan have launched or backed ventures creating

SKOWHEGAN

Skowhegan, like many rim county towns, has been hit hard by the closure and restructuring of nearby paper mills. In the 2000s, its population fell 3 percent to 8,589. People passing through encountered a decaying downtown.

Addressing downtown blight was Maine Street Skowhegan's top priority when it joined the *Main Street Maine* program in 2005. Today, its leaders have adopted a bold economic strategy, taking the town far beyond beautification to become a nationally recognized rural innovator. True, Skowhegan has advantages compared to many rural service centers: its anchor manufacturers, New Balance and South Africa Pulp and Paper, each continues to employ hundreds, and the town lies just 15 miles north of I-95. Skowhegan's progress and promise are illustrated by four initiatives that capitalize on these advantages.

Skowhegan is building on the region's agrarian traditions to become a thriving food hub. The process began modestly when Amber Lambke, the town's farmers market coordinator, founded Maine Grains[5] to revive local milling tradition. Maine Grains has recruited farmers from across Maine and beyond and has shaped a national marketing network for both bulk and brand-named flour and dry bean products. Maine Grains has also supported investment in value added food products, ranging from pasta to mushrooms and even ice cream sandwiches Maine Street Skowhegan[6] has also gotten into the food game, backing investments to revitalize the downtown dining scene. It is launching Kitchen at 185, a commercial kitchen providing the area's aspiring culinary entrepreneurs with incubator support, including technical and marketing assistance and state-of-the-art facilities (Schreiber 2025).

For leisure travelers, "Skow Town" had been a pass-through place on the way to Maine's lakes and mountains. Today, it is becoming a destination in its own right with varied dining options, a new riverfront hotel, an outdoor recreation gear library, a riverside trail network, and four-season events. The centerpiece will be a whitewater sports park on the Kennebec River below the old industrial dam. Skowhegan's future success as a tourist magnet remains to be seen, but a sure payoff to these amenities will be more leisure options for area residents and a stronger appeal to new settlers.

Maine Street Skowhegan's Center for Entrepreneurship annually assists about 50 current and aspiring entrepreneurs. Its services range from designing business plans to mobilizing capital. Clients have included Joe's Flat Iron Cafe, Quinn's Tree Farm, and Clark's Detailing. The Center's Business Lab is an eight-week course that has offered foundational training to 26 participants and awards cash "pitch competition" prizes.

Finally, several larger businesses also recognize Skowhegan's renewed potential and are investing to realize it. The New Balance footwear factory recently added 200 jobs. A prominent multigenerational family business is diversifying its portfolio with an affordable housing project. And real estate developer High Tide Capital has partnered with boutique hotel chain Kasa and Maine Grains to convert Skowhegan's long vacant spinning mill into a mixed-use waterfront facility, with a twenty-room hotel, the Biergarten pub, and 41 apartments (Fischer 2025).

These diverse, mostly small initiatives exemplify the *silver buckshot* revitalization strategy: building momentum and optimism by clustering projects of different scales and in a variety of economic sectors. Skowhegan's special sauce is a cohort of visionary and youthful leaders, pioneering innovative private-nonprofit collaborations.[7]

markets for local farmers, processing farm products, supporting value-added food producers, and underwriting diverse, high-quality dining options (Focus Maine 2024; MDECD 2023).

Tourism-dependent regions are investing in host community amenities and updating their product mix to meet the demands of 21st century travelers. The Moosehead Lake region is a prime example of strategic visioning, organizational innovation, and silver buckshot projects (see sidebar). Greenville and Monson are upgrading their downtown appeal. Private and philanthropic actors are investing in the town centers and outdoor recreation infrastructure. New trail networks on industrial forest and conservation lands update Moosehead's tradition as a destination for both motorized and muscle-powered adventures. Other rim county destinations like the Rangeley Lakes, Katahdin region, Saint John Valley, and Bold Coast-Cobscook Bay are similarly re-inventing themselves (Vail et al. 2019). Since competing destinations across New England are pursuing similar tourism strategies, it would be rash to predict a tourism boom for Maine's rim counties. However, considering the downside of coastal overtourism, a moderate and managed pace of growth may be for the best (Vail 2018). These tourism strategies should not only sustain its market share but also enhance quality of life for residents, seasonal homeowners, and new settlers. These examples show Maine's rim counties on the move. However, their future is clouded by challenges and uncertainties.

RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY

According to our socioeconomic measures, Maine's rim counties and parts of several other counties continue to lag. Some persistent disparities are not diminishing. Nonetheless, private, public, and nongovernmental organization innovators in the other Maine are collaborating to revitalize economies, improve residents' quality of life, and attract new settlers. These examples confirm that sustainable rural development is possible, but also that it requires decisive leadership and innovation on many fronts—what we've labeled a silver buckshot strategy. Continued progress—and resilience to looming shocks—will require effective local, regional, and state responses to emerging challenges, uncertainties, and damaging federal policies.

This article does not prescribe policies, but the analysis points to three closely linked policy challenges. First, taking full advantage of high-speed telecommunications as an integrative force, attracting young, highly skilled settlers and countering the inefficiencies of remoteness and small scale. Second, facilitating *aging in place* for rural Maine's geographically dispersed and largely nonaffluent older population. And third, fostering collaboration among clusters of small towns and between them and larger service centers to contain the cost of public services and forge economic development alliances.

A fourth challenge is adaptation to climate change, which presents epoch-making uncertainties with both opportunities and adverse impacts. For example, the shift to climate-friendly mass timber construction and the expanding market for carbon offsets present forest industry opportunities. At the same time, Maine's vast northern forest seems increasingly vulnerable to wildfire, pests, and diseases (MFPC 2024). Similar climate-driven uncertainties will confront rim county agriculture and outdoor recreation. And climate disasters elsewhere will affect migration to rural Maine. In the face of these challenges, the current federal administration is negating past commitments to energy efficiency, renewable energy, and climate resilience. This is not only a setback for Maine's ambitious climate strategy but is also stifling rim county investments and high-wage job creation, probably at least until the 2028 election.

This last point suggests that federal government policy may well be the most severe near-term challenge to rim county economic dynamism and to residents' well-being. With the Republicans' monopoly control on the national level, rural America is expected to bear the heaviest impacts of the recently enacted federal budget and several other drastic policy changes. Rural Mainers' heavy reliance on safety net programs, especially Mainecare (Medicaid), Affordable Care Act subsidies, and SNAP, makes them exceptionally vulnerable. Services provided by financially fragile rural hospitals are at high risk (Barkin 2025). A host of recent federal policy decisions are also expected to have adverse impacts, for instance reduced funding for preschool and public education; tariffs on Canadian cross-border trade in lumber, blueberries, lobster, and aquaculture; shortages of visa workers for tourism and agriculture; and Canadian tourist boycotts of rim county destinations. Despite its best efforts, Maine has limited capacity to offset these drastic federal budget and policy changes.

In such challenging times, hope for the "other Maine" springs from the resilience and adaptability its people have shown in recent years.

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NOTES

1. The "silver buckshot" vs "silver bullet" approach was championed by former state economist Laurie Lachance (Lachance 2006).
2. For a nuanced analysis of different types of rural communities and their distinct challenges, we recommend the Carsey Institute's report on rural America (Hamilton et al. 2008).
3. Leisure and hospitality are only part of total tourism employment. Many workers in sectors such as retail trade and arts and entertainment also serve tourists.
4. As this is written, the Maine Public Utilities Commission, backed by other New England states, is re-opening the bidding process on a 1,200-megawatt Aroostook wind farm and applying for federal subsidies for a transmission line connecting Aroostook County to the regional grid.

5 https://mainegrains.com/
6 https://mainstreetskowhegan.org/
7 If you are interested in learning more about Skowhegan, there is a Brookings Institution podcast by Anthony Pipa: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/skowhegan-maine-is-making-waves-as-it-builds-a-vibrant-future-along-the-kennebec-river/

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