



A SITE TO BE SEEN

Eastern North Carolina boasts farms and beaches — and a network of industrial settings.

Southeastern North Carolina's 20-county region stretches from picturesque trails and lakes of the Uwharrie Mountains to more than 100 miles of Atlantic Ocean shoreline, a panorama of open land, energetic cities, agriculture and historic small towns.

Sprinkled in are 16 technical and community colleges and seven interstates, a perk for the locale halfway between New York and Miami.

"We like to think it's the ideal setting. That's how we market it," says Steve Yost, president of North Carolina's Southeast, a public-private partnership in Elizabethtown that works with business and government leaders to boost economic growth. "From a quality-of-life perspective, we have a lot of diversity. If someone wants a coastal environment, we have those towns and beaches. Then there's a lot of ambiance in our rural areas, and off to the very west, you have the oldest mountain chain in North America."

The counties have 1.85 million residents and a labor force of 904,000.

They also have a common investment.

The counties are linked by 137 business and industrial parks, several benefitting from a 2021 \$5 million appropriation from the N.C. General Assembly. Twenty-three applications to North Carolina Southeast's Project Development Fund were approved, giving sites in 18

counties money for design, construction, road access, and water-sewer, further enhancing a site trail landscape that already includes 30 Fortune 500 companies and more than 60 with international roots.

A portion of the \$5 million also went toward "large site identification analysis."

"What we did is scour all the counties in our region for land tracts that might have potential, and we hired an engineering firm to do that, and it was completed 30 days ago," Yost says, "and it identified 56 potential sites of land tracts across the region that have promise of viable industrial sites. We think about 15 or 20 have strong potential to become bona fide shovel-ready sites over time."

That step, he says, is up to the sites' local organizations.

"It's our mission to help create opportunities for our counties to gain new jobs, new private investment," Yost says. "There's a lot that goes into that. Our main ingredient in regards to our success and capabilities is collaboration, and we have many moving parts to make our organization work, many partners in the public and private sectors."

An additional \$28 million has come from local governments, private funding, Golden LEAF and elsewhere. "Those funds are being leveraged to the individual projects, by the local economic development commissions, and we've been tracking the progress and status," Yost says. Ten



Wilmington

BIGGEST COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

- East Carolina University, Greenville
- UNC Wilmington
- UNC Pembroke
- Fayetteville State University
- Fayetteville Tech Community College
- Cape Fear Community College, Wilmington
- Pitt Community College, Greenville

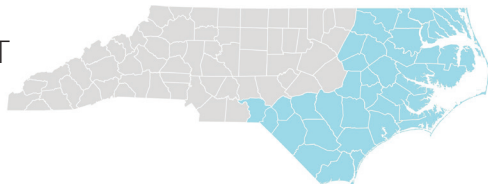
ATTRACTIONS

- Cape Hatteras Lighthouse and Wright Brothers Memorial, Kitty Hawk
- Historic Tryon Palace, New Bern
- Battleship North Carolina, Wilmington
- Airlie Gardens, Wilmington
- 1886 Roanoke River Lighthouse, Edenton
- North Carolina Aquariums: Kure Beach, Roanoke Island, Nags Head and Pine Knoll Shores
- Fort Fisher State Historic Site, Kure Beach
- N.C. Maritime Museums: Beaufort, Hatteras, Southport

INDUSTRIES

- Aerospace and defense
- Agriculture
- Biotechnology
- Marine trades
- Metalworking
- Textiles
- Tourism

EASTERN SNAPSHOT



COUNTIES:

Beaufort	Dare	Lenoir	Pender
Bertie	Duplin	Martin	Pitt
Bladen	Edgecombe	Montgomery	Richmond
Brunswick	Gates	Nash	Robeson
Camden	Greene	New Hanover	Sampson
Carteret	Halifax	Northampton	Scotland
Chowan	Hertford	Onslow	Tyrrell
Columbus	Hoke	Pamlico	Washington
Craven	Hyde	Pasquotank	Wayne
Cumberland	Jones	Perquimans	Wilson



With grants from N.C.'s Southeast, Golden LEAF and the state's Electric Membership Cooperatives, the Onslow project was designed, permitted, and built in about a year, says Mark Sutherland, executive director of Jacksonville Onslow Economic Development. Before it was completed, the group had a letter of intent from a light-industrial company that plans to buy the entire project, "As far as economic development projects go, this one was among the fastest and most successful," he says.

Target industries in the 20 counties are advanced textiles, agribusiness and food processing, aerospace and defense, metalworking, and distribution and logistics, the latter offering visual proof of success

in the enormous container ships that enter and exit the Port of Wilmington.

"The Port of Wilmington is certainly a differentiator for us in our market," says Scott Satterfield, CEO of Wilmington Business Development. "The investment and commitment the state of North Carolina continues to show to that asset is a true selling point for us as we push the near-port model – warehouse, distribution, advanced manufacturing with an import/export component located within 15 miles of the port."

"The port was a key factor in the location of (India-based) Epsilon, because of the need to import materials into the plant," Yost says of the recent addition to Mid-Atlantic Park in Leland, in Brunswick County. Epsilon manufactures graphite material that goes into EV batteries. It's Epsilon's first U.S. facility.

Transportation assets also include the Department of Defense port, Military Ocean Terminal at Sunny Point; rail lines through CSX, Norfolk Southern and North Carolina Railroad; commercial airports in Wilmington, Fayetteville, New Bern and Jacksonville; and interstates 40, 95, 74, 295, 275 and the future 42.

Twelve counties are certified Work Ready Communities, and NCWorks helps with customized training, pre-employment assistance, facilities for equipment training and business incentives. As a region, the 20 counties have seven military installations, \$3.4 billion in annual spending by the Department of Defense and 135,000 active duty, reserve and Guard soldiers, making it the largest military presence on the East coast.

Other completed or near-completed projects include:

- Brunswick County** (Mid-Atlantic Rail Park)
- Wayne** (shell building)
- Craven** (industrial park infrastructure development)
- Pender** (water and sewer expansion)
- Moore** (infrastructure and due diligence planning)
- Columbus** (site identification analysis)
- Duplin** (industrial park master plans)
- Hyde** (Ponzer water tank restoration and resiliency project)
- Craven** (Purchase of shell building and shell building and grant to add infrastructure to industrial park)
- Bertie, Hertford and Northampton** (Roanoke-Chowan Community College weld to work pipeline)

of the 23 projects are complete, Yost says. Seven involved development of shell buildings, while projects in Anson and Sampson counties are planning for new industrial sites and parks.

In Scotland County, a 50,000-square-foot shell building was finished in January and has received interest from a wood products manufacturer and agricultural processing company. In Onslow County, Project Frontier is the code for a new industrial park in Jacksonville on 50-plus acres.

THE THRIVING HUB OF EASTERN NORTH CAROLINA

About 80 easy miles each to Raleigh and the beautiful beaches of the Crystal Coast, Greenville has emerged as a thriving economic, educational, medical, and cultural hub of eastern North Carolina.



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AGRICULTURE

North Carolina agriculture has a \$111.1 billion economic impact. A large portion of those crops and animals are raised in eastern North Carolina.

The three counties with the most harvested acres in 2022 — Robeson, Sampson and Duplin — are in the region, according to the N.C. Office of State Budget and Management. It's home to some of the state's richest soil, the Blacklands of the Tidewater region along the Albemarle and Pamlico sounds, where streams and rivers empty into the Atlantic Ocean.

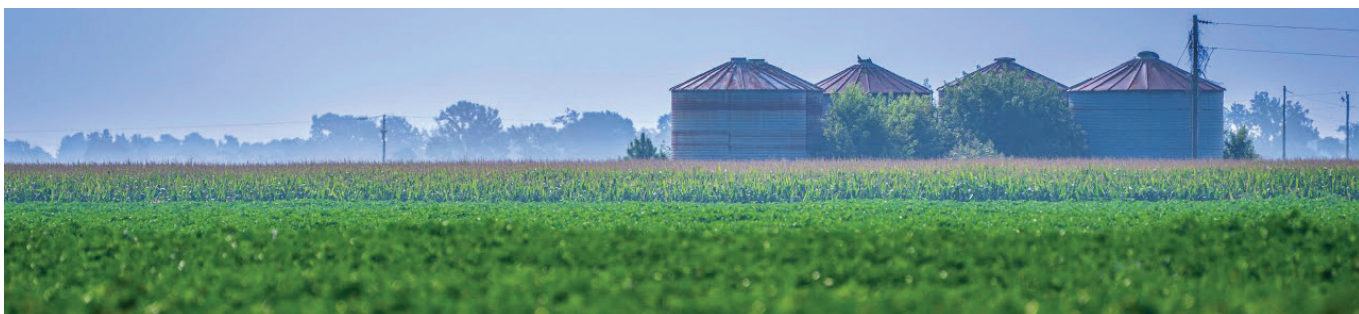
Agriculture is just one industry at work in the East. The region is home to one of the state's largest universities. Manufacturing and energy are thriving, too. California-based battery-maker Natron Energy, for example, recently pledged a \$1.4 billion investment at Kingsboro CSX Select Megasite, which will create more than 1,000 jobs that pay an average of \$64,071 annually, more than Edgecombe County's \$43,183 average, according to the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina. And tourism includes historic sites, conferences and conventions, coastal activities, and professional and amateur sports.

Even with all that, some of the East's economic pieces are frayed. It's home to some of the state's poorest counties:

Many residents live where poverty rates exceed 20%, and droughts are sapping agricultural yields this year, leaving farmers to struggle with fuel and seed bills. And they face other concerns, including losing farmland to housing developments, developing new markets for products and finding skilled workers for the ever-increasing presence of technology.

Some residents have moved. The total population of the 29 counties represented by NC East Alliance, an economic development organization with offices in Greenville and Edenton, is about 1.4 million, nearly 30,000 fewer than a decade ago. Twenty-two counties have seen a decrease in population, says Todd Edwards, chair of the Alliance's board of directors. "These issues also affect the labor sheds of our growing areas and businesses," he says.

Wesley Beddard, part of the Alliance's STEM East leadership team, says the population of many counties in the region has been in decline over the past couple decades. "We didn't get here overnight," he says. "And we will not reverse things overnight. But we believe our proactive approach over the next 20 years involving education and industry partners, along with community development efforts, will help reshape and develop all of eastern North Carolina."



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TEACH THEM WELL

Travel is a requirement of many eastern North Carolina jobs. “Our major employers often have a labor shed of 20-plus counties,” Beddard says. “For these companies to continue to expand, we need all of our counties to have trained workers who want to continue to live in their home counties and commute one or two counties to work and bring those paychecks back home.”

Workforce development efforts are varied. One of the most recent begins with bolstering the number of National Science Foundation Advanced Technological Education grants awarded locally. They fund partnerships between academic institutions and industries that focus on science and engineering. “To the best of our knowledge, only one community college in our 29-county region has received an NSF ATE grant during the last decade,” Beddard says. “We hope to change that.” An NSF-ATE workshop this fall will prepare for grant application submissions in fall 2025.

STEM East, an Alliance initiative that organizes collaborative efforts between businesses and schools to give students real-world STEM — science, technology, engineering and math — learning opportunities, kicked off its Industry in Schools Initiative at NC East’s Vision 2024 conference in January. “This program is being invented and implemented for the purpose of stopping the export of our most valuable resource — our homegrown workforce,” Edwards said at the event, held at East Carolina University.

Beddard says Industry in Schools focuses on six industries, each with a robust presence in the region, offering well-paying positions and expected to continue adding jobs. They include: aviation, blue economy, green energy, smart agriculture, health sciences and biopharma. The Biopharma Crescent, for example, is a swath of Johnston, Pitt and Wilson counties where manufacturers make therapeutics, vaccines, insulin and other life-saving medicines, employ almost 10,000 workers, and made more than \$4 billion in investments.

Under the Industry in Schools Initiative, employers in STEM industries work with community college presidents and school district superintendents across the region to help teachers — the goal is to involve 13,000 — prepare students for careers. “We provided nine industry-focused workshops this summer for public school teachers to make



them aware of the opportunities for their students to find great high-paying careers within our region and of the training opportunities available through our community colleges,” Beddard says. “If our teachers are more aware of the opportunities in our area, they can be the conduit that connects students to those careers.”

The green energy workshop, which included a tour of Dominion Energy’s hydroelectric dam on the Roanoke River, was hosted by the Center for Energy Education and Halifax Community College in Roanoke Rapids in July. The aviation cluster met for two days in Elizabeth City that same month. Its lead, former Wayne County Schools Superintendent David Lewis, says elementary, middle and high school teachers from nine school districts took part.

Lewis says teachers also visited the College of the Albemarle-Currituck campus in Barco, which is home to its Aviation Technology program. “Participating teachers worked to develop connections between STEM and aviation concepts and their own curriculum standards,” he says. “Our participating teachers represented a wide range of subject areas across all grade levels, so the emphasis was on helping them understand how STEM, and more specifically aviation, could be used to make their lessons more engaging for their students.”

Smart agriculture workshops were held at Martin and James Sprunt community colleges. “The purpose of it, as we bring the teachers into it, is they learn how to integrate into their daily lessons what is available,” says Cluster Lead Ben Thigpen, who retired as Jones County Schools superintendent in January. “The workshops expose teachers to what’s there and how to put it into their standard course of study and share with the students.”

Thigpen says agriculture is more than plants and animals. “The industry is so deep and vast,” he says. “You have to have welders and truck drivers and mechanics to keep those John Deeres and Massey Fergusons running. There are electrical systems, monitoring systems, seeds and watering.”

The blue economy industry workshop, hosted by Carteret Community College, focused on aquaculture and marine construction. Teachers toured Jarrett Bay Boatworks in Beaufort. Career paths include offshore wind; Sea Grant program, which works to maintain a healthy coastal environment and economy; and Center for Marine Sciences and Technology. Further south, UNC Wilmington’s Blue Economy program partners with Cape Fear and Carteret community colleges and the Coastal Studies Institute at ECU’s Outer Banks campus.

SAMPSON COUNTY

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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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“Of course as we move forward, we hope to add many more businesses and workforce connections that will benefit from the work that we’re doing,” says Cluster Lead Lisa Jackson, who retired as Pamlico County Schools superintendent last year. “As we succeed in our region, this model could be applied to other regions throughout the state and the country.”

The blue economy industry workshop, which was hosted by Carteret Community College.



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