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This Trump-voting county in Maine heavily relies on food stamps. The shutdown is hitting it hard.

About 20 percent of residents in rural Aroostook County get SNAP benefits, which lapsed Saturday. Food banks can't make up the gap.

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Farmland in

Presque Isle, a city in Maine's rural Aroostook County, seen in 2016. Jessica Rinaldi

Good morning. Today we're visiting Aroostook, a rural Maine county that's struggling as the government shutdown disrupts federal food benefits.

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TODAY'S STARTING POINT

Many Mainers just call it The County.

Aroostook, named for an indigenous description of a nearby river, is Maine's northernmost county, located a few hours' drive from Portland. It's also New England's biggest, as if Connecticut and Rhode Island were nestled together along the Canadian border.

Like other rural counties, Aroostook has trended rightward in recent elections. It handed President Trump a 26-point win last year and is the birthplace of Susan Collins, Maine's long-serving Republican senator. A recent Portland Press Herald headline asked "[Is Aroostook County more politically conservative than Alabama?](#)" (It isn't, but just asking the question says a lot.)

And here's another factor that sets Aroostook apart: It's the Trump-voting New England county [that relies most heavily on SNAP](#), the federal aid program commonly known as food stamps, which has come under strain as the government shutdown drags on. That, in turn, has strained food banks and pantries that distribute aid across the county.

SNAP is "the 8,000-pound gorilla in the room," said Jon Blanchard, an Aroostook native and program director for Catholic Charities Maine. "To have it just disappear when families are counting on it as part of their monthly budget, it shocks the system."

Big county, big problem

A few factors make Aroostook especially vulnerable.

Math is the main one. Overall, SNAP disburses \$29 million in aid to 170,000 Mainers each month — \$7 million more than the annual budget of Good Shepherd Food Bank, the state's biggest hunger-relief organization. "When you remove that safety net, those 170,000 people fall to the emergency food network," said Heather Paquette, Good Shepherd's president. "We're not built for that."

By the numbers, Aroostook's needs are greater. About 20 percent of the county's roughly 67,000 residents get food stamps, surpassing the state and national rates. It's among the oldest counties in the oldest state, with more than a quarter of residents aged 65 or older. Its residents also have fewer resources, with one of Maine's highest unemployment rates and a median household income of around \$54,000, about 25 percent lower than the statewide figure.

Aroostook's size also makes it harder to reach those in need. Catholic Charities has as many distribution trucks for Aroostook alone, Paquette said, as Good Shepherd does for the entire state. Pantries, which need residents to come to them, are less efficient than SNAP, which deposits money directly onto a debit-like card.

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Courts have ordered the Trump administration to tap emergency funding to restore SNAP benefits, which lapsed Saturday. But the administration initially agreed to disburse just half the normal amount. “Fifty percent would be way better than zero,” said Paquette. “That’s still going to have a catastrophic impact.” (Yesterday, a federal judge in Rhode Island ordered the administration to [fully fund this month’s SNAP benefits](#) by today.)

Still, the reductions might bite less if Aroostook hadn’t already been struggling. Well before the shutdown, inflation and Trump’s tariffs helped push up food costs, leaving food banks with less buying power. His threats to annex Canada tanked tourism, [hurting local businesses](#). And the Agriculture Department [canceled funding](#) for food banks to buy from local farmers.

Now the need has deepened. On Wednesday, Blanchard traveled to a parking-lot food pantry in the county seat of Houlton. Last year, he told me, the site distributed between 30 and 40 boxes of food each week. That morning, it had already given out 120.

What’s next?

Aroostook highlights one political tension of the Trump era: voters who depend on government benefits like SNAP, Obamacare, and Medicaid but back candidates who tend to favor cutting them. Asked who his constituents faulted for Aroostook’s struggles, Trey Stewart, a state senator who represents part of the county, blamed Maine Democrats. “This hardship isn’t Trump’s doing,” he said in a statement.

Until SNAP is restored, aid groups are adapting. When I spoke to Blanchard, he was driving a 26-foot box truck to pick up donated clothes, which Catholic Charities sells to benefit Aroostook food pantries. “There’s definitely people coming out of the woodwork” to help.

For now, giving is unlikely to be enough. Supplemental funding from private donors and the state only amounted to about \$1,000 per food pantry Good Shepherd works with, Paquette said. Some are discussing restricting how many times someone can visit or limiting which zip codes they serve.

“These are not decisions pantry partners should have to make,” Paquette said. “And they’re not decisions they’ve ever had to make before.”

Read more: Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey urged residents [to donate to local food banks](#) to offset lost SNAP aid. If you’re interested in helping Maine, here are links to [Good Shepherd](#) and [Catholic Charities](#).