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Where are Wood Banks Needed in Maine? Statewide Wood Bank Demand Analysis

Jessica Leahy

Mindy S. Crandall

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Where are Wood Banks Needed in Maine?

Statewide Wood Bank Demand Analysis



Neighbors help neighbors access firewood to heat their homes in Maine each winter through many formal and informal systems. At least eight organized groups in the state call themselves “wood banks” and give free or discounted firewood to households in need. Volunteers distribute firewood, often after cutting and splitting it as well. Keeping firewood distribution local is more efficient, creates a smaller carbon footprint, and prevents the spread of insect pests.

Where in Maine are wood banks most needed?

The areas that would benefit most from a local wood bank are those with both a high percentage of households with high housing costs and a high percentage of households that heat primarily with wood. We calculated demand for wood banks based on data from the American Community Survey five-year estimate from 2017-2021.

Those in households that spend over 35% of their income on selected monthly owner costs, including utilities and fuel, mortgage payments, insurance, and taxes,¹ are considered to have high housing costs in this analysis. **Map 1 - Housing Cost Burden Map for Wood Bank Demand Analysis** highlights areas where more than 20% of people have “high housing costs.” In the average Maine community, approximately 16% of households have high housing costs. Note that these data do not include renters’ housing expenses and therefore may be an underestimate of housing cost burden in each community.

In areas labeled “high wood use” on **Map 2 - Wood Heating Map for Wood Bank Demand Analysis** and **Map 3 - Wood Bank Demand Analysis Map**, more than 13% of the population heats with wood as their primary heat source. The statewide average is 9%. Note that this does not include those who use wood heat as a secondary heat source; therefore, this may be an underestimate of firewood users.

Where these two areas overlap, with high wood use and a high housing cost burden, residents may have most need of emergency fuel assistance in the form of a wood bank (see **Map 3 - Wood Bank Demand Analysis Map**).

Across all of Maine, 63 communities were identified as having potential wood bank demand. These include clusters of towns, like the stretch from Dexter to Monson that crosses the Penobscot and Piscataquis County boundaries. In Monson, where over 1 in 3 people heat with wood, more than a quarter of the people have housing costs of 35% of their income or more.

¹U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) and Puerto Rico Community Survey (PRCS).<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/note/US/HSG650221> (2023)

The closest formal wood bank to Monson is the Waldo County Woodshed, nearly two hours' drive away in Searsmont.²

In Sagadahoc County, the towns of Bowdoin, Bowdoinham, and Woolwich all see high housing cost burden and high wood use. A group of volunteers, led by Bruce Wildes, organized in Brunswick in the summer of 2023 to start the Midcoast Wood Bank as a way to meet the need they saw in their area – and a need clearly represented in these data.

Oxford County led the state with eight towns with potential demand for a wood bank. However, all but three counties in Maine (Cumberland, Androscoggin, and Lincoln Counties) were identified as having one town or more with potential wood bank demand. The tables provided in conjunction with the maps can assist communities in assessing the potential demand for wood banks in their region.

Communities and other groups interested in starting a wood bank can consult the University of Maine's "A Community Guide to Starting & Running a Wood Bank," available here: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/sfr_studentpub/1

² Note this also crosses the Maine Forest Service's emerald ash borer quarantine line, over which it is illegal to transport hardwood firewood. See the Maine Forest Service's web page "Emerald Ash Borer (EAB)."
https://www.maine.gov/dacf/mfs/forest_health/invasive_threats/eab/index.shtml (2023)