

# TUG HILL REGION

of  
NEW YORK STATE

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# THE REGION

The Tug Hill region is 2,100 square miles, or 1.2 million acres, of New York State and is located between Lake Ontario and the Adirondack Park to the west and east. Oneida Lake and the Black River frame the region to the south and north. Larger than Delaware, it is one of the most rural and remote sections of New York State and the Northeast. The region consists of 41 towns (containing 18 villages) in portions of Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida, and Oswego counties.

With nearly 104,000 residents, about 50 people per square mile, one of Tug Hill's most notable characteristics is its relative lack of people. In 2010, population by town on Tug Hill ranged from a low of 78 people to a high of 9,450 people. Two-thirds of the region's population is concentrated in villages around its edge. Nine of the core towns have 15 people or fewer per square mile. According to the 2019 residents and landowners survey, the region's rural setting is what makes it such a great place to live and to recreate.

Survey results also indicate support for continuing renewable energy production, and increasing tourism and recreation. The amount of open space, feeling of safety, the high quality drinking water as well as farming, forestry, and recreational opportunities add to the overall quality of life.

## Average Seasonal Snowfall



Within that center of Tug Hill is a core forest of 200 square miles, containing the headwaters of Fish Creek, Salmon River, Mohawk River, Deer River, and Sandy Creek. Congress has recognized the region as an integral part of the Northern Forest area, and is significant in Great Lakes efforts as they relate to Lake Ontario.

The rocks that underlie Tug Hill, mostly shales and sandstones, help define the region. They rise from 250 feet at Lake Ontario to 2,100 feet on the east where escarpments drop almost 1,500 feet to the Black River. Another notable characteristic of the Tug Hill landscape is the abundance of gorges, known locally as "gulfs," that were carved by rapidly flowing water from the melt of glaciers.

Tug Hill's elevation and position with respect to Lake Ontario results in an average annual snowfall of 200 inches, the heaviest snowfall east of the Rockies. Snowpack is often 3 to 4 feet with record snowfalls of nearly 8 feet in a single snowstorm and 40 feet in a winter season. Total annual precipitation averages 55 inches, making Tug Hill one of the wettest portions of the state.

The Tug Hill Commission, a non-regulatory state agency, provides technical assistance, offers skill development opportunities, and distributes information to help local governments, organizations, and citizens shape the future of the region, especially its environment and economy.





# ENVIRONMENT

Tug Hill is the third largest forested area in the state, following the Adirondacks and Catskills, which cleans the air and sequesters carbon. About 20% of the region is considered protected through a combination of publicly owned and eased land, as well as conservation organizations' property. Landscapes include valley farmlands, large flowing rivers, and scenic waterfalls providing beautiful and essential natural benefits to residents of the region, the state, and beyond.

Clean water is abundant on Tug Hill with 117,000 acres of wetlands, 4,000 miles of streams and rivers, and four reservoirs fed by heavy winter snows and seasonal rains. The water originating from Tug Hill supports the region's fish hatcheries, supplying trout and salmon to the Salmon River, and walleye and bass to Oneida Lake. The Tug Hill Aquifer has been identified as an important source of drinking water for communities along the western edge of Tug Hill Plateau.

Tug Hill provides abundant wildlife habitat. The region is home to many species, including deer, fishers, and bald eagles, even an occasional moose visitor. Audobon recognizes important breeding and nesting habitats in the region. There are few invasive species in the region thanks to natural resource management practices.



Spotted Salamander © Tug Hill Commission



Bald Eagle Soaring Over Lorraine  
© Anthony Machia



Fisher © Tim Pyszczynski



Bucks © Robert McNamara



Salmon River Fishing © Oswego County Tourism



Farm Landscape © Anthony Machia



Cows © Jennifer Harvill



Vineyard © Jennifer Harvill



Maple Production © Emily Sheridan



Sled Dog Race © Brad P. Smith



Tourathon in Winona State Forest © winonastateforest.com



Fatbikes © Brad P. Smith



Snowmobiling © Anthony Machia

# ECONOMY

Historically, the region's forests have supported wood products and paper manufacturing. Although elements of that economy have declined in recent years, logging and forestry remain important elements of both the economy and way of life on Tug Hill. Major employers in the region include Harden Furniture and the Nature Conservancy. Maple syrup production is growing industry in the region and is a crucial part of local culture.

Farming continues to be an important economic driver. Production agriculture supports related businesses, such as feed stores, farm equipment dealers, and veterinary clinics, which create jobs and tie livelihoods close to the land. Large dairy farms and the introduction of smaller niche operations, such as farmers markets and fiber, are major farming trends. The greatest concentration of farms is along the Black River Valley and on the west side of Tug Hill. Dairy plants in or near the Tug Hill region include Kraft and Great Lakes Cheese.

A combination of motorized and non-motorized recreation activities support hospitality and tourism industries, including arts, entertainment and recreation venues, accommodations, and food services—all of which add key employment opportunities to the region.



# RECREATION

Tug Hill has a wealth of all-season recreation opportunities and related amenities for families and individuals of all ages and abilities. The bulk of these activities are low-impact, outdoor pursuits compatible with the undeveloped, rural character of the region. Outdoor recreation opportunities add to the quality of life for Tug Hill residents and landowners, and are important to the region's economy.

Abundant snowfall have made the region a destination for snowmobiling and cross-country skiing, as well as downhill skiing, snowshoeing, and even dog-sled racing. In the summer months hiking, mountain biking, and ATV-riding are popular recreational pursuits. Visitors come to the region to camp, canoe, kayaking and swim in the region's pristine waters. The abundant and varied wildlife allow people to enjoy bird watching, fishing, and hunting year-round.

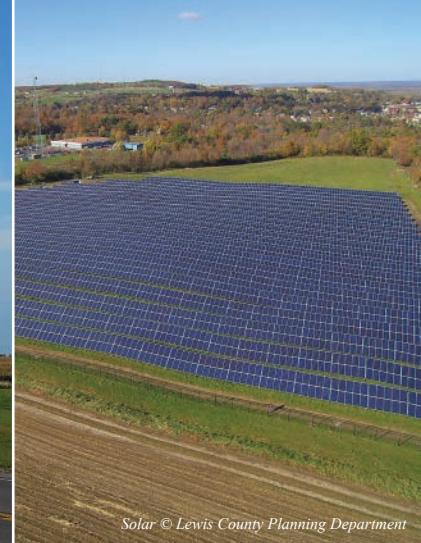
Tug Hill even offers wine trails, cuisine trails, breweries, cider mills and maple syrup operations to taste the flavors of the region. For a comprehensive publication on the communities, trail systems, and amenities on Tug Hill, request a Tug Hill Recreation Guide from the commission or on-line at [visittughill.com](http://visittughill.com).



*Birding on the Black River © Tug Hill Commission*



*Wind © Tug Hill Commission*



*Solar © Lewis County Planning Department*

## NEW YORK STATE TUG HILL COMMISSION

The uniqueness of the Tug Hill region and its natural resources were recognized by New York State in 1972 when it created the Tug Hill Commission. In 1992, the state legislature passed the Tug Hill Reserve Act, further recognizing the statewide importance of the region's natural resources and in 1998 passed legislation encouraging the use of state-held conservation easements on key working forest lands. The commission uses a grassroots approach considered a model for fostering environmental protection and appropriate rural economic development in a way that retains "home rule" by local government. The commission provides local assistance to the region's towns and villages and help them with their day-to-day issues. This, in turn, leverages conservation and sustainable development that benefits the communities and state as a whole. The nine unpaid board members are appointed by the Governor, President Pro Tem of the Senate and Speaker of the Assembly, and are all residents of the region. The commission provides technical assistance and expertise in land use planning, community development, and natural resource management, as well as skill development and information for local officials through workshops and issue papers. The commission uses a model "circuit rider" program to serve the region's five Councils of Government.

## ENERGY

Tug Hill supports many different types of "green energy" production. Hydroelectric dams on Tug Hill waterways are a renewable energy that have been in place for decades. Several hydroelectric plants operate, primarily, along the Black and Salmon Rivers.

The region is home to one of the largest wind energy project east of the Mississippi River, the Maple Ridge Wind Farm. Comprised of 195 wind turbine towers, Maple Ridge is capable of producing 320 megawatts of energy, enough to power approximately 143,000 homes. Wind energy projects have helped Tug Hill's existing agricultural farms by providing an additional source of income in the form of lease payments to the properties where the towers are located. Currently, five other wind farms are in the planning or permitting stage.

Numerous utility-scale solar energy projects are now being proposed and built on Tug Hill. This is due to advances in photovoltaic panel technology and the proliferation of government financial incentives which make projects more feasible. The Tug Hill Commission seeks to provide municipalities with the tools necessary to ensure that they are built in a way that minimizes environment impact and maximizes financial benefit.