



Pungso (also spelled **Phungso**) is a county seat in southern Ryanggang Province. Its 2021 estimated population is 47,066. The town's primary water source comes from the Nunggwi River.

Pungso was created as its own administrative district within Ryanggang Province in 1954, after having been part of an enlarged South Hamgyong Province for centuries prior to independence.

There are few historic sites in the county. One is a monument to the workers who built Pungso Dam, a revolutionary site is in Pungso itself, and there's a historic site in the nearby village of Mujo-ri (40.873129° 127.960801°) that is likely related to the dynastic history of Korea. There's also a small pavilion at (40.940330° 128.075858°) that looks interesting, but I don't know if it has any historical significance or not.

The county has no forts and played no major role in either the anti-Japanese liberation movements or the Korean War.

I was unable to find a definitive construction date for the 360-meter wide Pungso Dam but a Korean Central News Agency report on Aug. 10, 2012 mentions the dam in connection to crimes committed by the Japanese, which would place its construction prior to 1945 and most likely in the 1930s (as other dams were built then). The report states, *"There are also testimonies made by victims disclosing the fact that a lot of Koreans were forced to do slave labor and met miserable deaths at the construction site of the Ryonduphyong dam of Phungso at that time..."*

Of interest, internal movement between counties is prohibited without a permit and Pungso has at least two identifiable checkpoints controlling traffic in and out of the area. The largest one is here 40.961654° 128.075712° and another is located at 40.973183° 128.103170°.

Economy

Due to its position within the Puksubaek mountain range and the extended winters, Pungso's economy is driven by timber. Over 90% of the county is forested and hardwood species are plentiful. There is a lumber processing facility in Ryonduphyong village (40.924529° 128.038709°) where products are transported via road out of the county.

One of the crops that is cultivated in Pungso is the Bracken Fern, known locally as *gosari*. It is used in popular rice dishes and can also be used for animal bedding. Bracken is known to contain carcinogenic compounds and in other places where it is eaten, such as Japan and Wales, there are higher rates of stomach cancer. A definitive link has not been established, and there are no studies regarding this in North Korea, but it may be an area for future research once the country opens up. It's worth noting that, in general, North Korea has the [15th highest](#) incidence of stomach cancer in the world. Of course, numerous other factors play a role.

Pungso only has road transportation. The nearest rail line is the Pukbunaeryuk Line which runs along the Yalu River. The Pungso Reservoir can be used to transport things from the interior of the county, as its branching reservoir can extend for up to 10 km in different directions. However, waters levels can fluctuate a lot, at times by as much as 45 m, limiting its usefulness.

The town's market occupies 1,400 sq. m of space and has not grown since at least 2013. This apparent lack of growth is mirrored by a lack of substantial housing additions anywhere within the county over the same time frame.

Small mines exist in the county, but very little active mining operations can be detected.

The county was connected to the North Korean cellular system ca. 2011, but a large microwave transmission tower (40.966621° 127.818272°) has been in place for decades. However, this only facilitated long-distance communication between officials, the police, and other government entities.

Military



Pungso has no militarily important sites. The dam used to be defended by two anti-aircraft batteries, but those were either fully decommissioned or are now only acting as a reserve site. If the [development of hydroelectricity](#) from the Samsu River basin (which Pungso is in) continues and eventually includes the Pungso Reservoir, that might change its strategic importance.

The theoretical possibility of connecting the reservoir with the newly constructed Tanchon Hydroelectric Project tunnel would require new tunnel segments or canals for 24 km, and it would give local workers some extra employment during that time.

Regardless, like nearly all counties, at least one or two military-related sites exist.

There is a small base here 40.923171° 128.142865° and another here 40.922515° 128.214751° that has a tunnel as well.

There's also an unidentified complex to the north (41.025839° 128.084020°). It has a small security gate and it doesn't appear to be part of a logging, mining, or farming facility, nor does it fit the design of known prison camps, leaving its purpose somewhat of a mystery.

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--Jacob Bogle, originally published August 2021 (edited January 2024)

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