

## Tribal Economic Development Principles-at-a-Glance Series

### **Starting or Increasing Tribal Food Production, Especially During the Current Pandemic**

This is the 22nd in a series of economic development primers produced by the Division of Economic Development (DED), Indian Affairs Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development (IEED), to offer answers to fundamental questions about creating jobs and expanding economies in tribal communities.

If you would like to discuss your Tribe's economic development strategies in more detail, please contact the Division of Economic Development at (202) 219-0740.

#### **Increased Interest in Tribal Food Production in the Age of COVID-19**

The advent of COVID-19 has encouraged many Tribes to expand their existing food production activities or to start new ones. There are three reasons for this: First, COVID-19 has imposed greater costs, delays, and shortages, in many food production and distribution operations in and around tribal areas. For example, the closure of restaurants throughout most of the United States has led to greater household demand for grocery products, while supply chains for the grocery market were not initially designed to meet that higher capacity and are still having difficulty doing so. This factor, along with various other factors such as the closure of certain meat packing plants, has created substantial food shortages and corresponding rises in food prices throughout the United States. Tribal food production may then step in to mitigate this food shortage for tribal members and for other area residents.

Food shortages in Indian Country in the age of COVID-19 have been especially detrimental to tribal communities that are in "food deserts." In food deserts, people must drive over an hour or longer to get to their nearest grocery store. Today, with COVID-19's effect on food supplies, that long drive may prove to be futile for some of the tribal members who make that trip.

Still another factor creating food shortages in many parts of Indian Country is one that has affected all low income communities in the United States. This problem is that school children who have often relied on receiving at least one meal per school day, and often two meals (i.e., breakfast as well as lunch) cannot receive those meals when the schools are shut down because of COVID-19. In some urban areas schools that are closed have still been able to provide some of these meals by arranging for parents to pick up the meals nearby the school. In remote rural areas, however, where the school itself may be an hour bus ride from the student's home, such distributions have not been feasible.

Another crucial factor, of course, is the economic downturn, and its associated losses of income for many tribal residents. This factor has certainly reduced the ability for many tribal members to acquire adequate food supplies. Given the situation, an expansion of food production and distribution by the Tribe fulfills the most basic of the Tribe's social responsibilities—a responsibility that has existed throughout the ages. Providing food to one's community members who are in need reflects the core of a Tribe's sense of community awareness and responsibility.

### **Groups Stepping Up to Meet the Challenge**

Many philanthropic organizations, including, of course, Native-American organizations, have stepped up during the pandemic to provide food relief to tribal communities. In May, 2020, in the journal *Food Tank*, [an article was written by Elena Seeley](#) entitled, “17 Organizations Providing Emergency Food Relief to Native Communities During COVID-19.” Those 17 organizations were presented by the author in the following list (though actually the first one on the list included two organizations, and the second one on the list included three organizations, so we might also be able to say there were 20 organizations contributing to tribal food relief):

1. All Pueblo Council of Governors (APCG) and Indian Pueblo Cultural Center (IPCC)
2. Decolonizing Wealth, National Urban Indian Family Coalition, and Native Americans in Philanthropy
3. Emergency Mobile Pantry in Zuni, New Mexico
4. First Nations Development Institute
5. The Hopi Foundation
6. Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health
7. Kansas City Indian Center
8. Kinłani/Flagstaff Mutual Aid
9. McKinley Mutual Aid
10. Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund
11. NDN Collective
12. Notah Begay III (NB3) Foundation
13. Northern Diné COVID-19 Relief Effort (NDCVRE)
14. Partnership with Native Americans (PWNA)
15. Seeding Sovereignty
16. Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Peoples, Inc.
17. Torreon Community Alliance

## **Food Production: a Stable Industry**

The economic downturn has created great uncertainty over the stability of different industries, especially the hospitality industry (including gaming) in which many Tribes have been heavily invested. In economic terms, food is a necessity while recreation is a luxury, in the sense that, when income levels decline people will spend a higher proportion of their incomes on necessities, and a lower proportion on luxuries. Food thus becomes the backdrop industry that can always be relied upon to remain in demand, while the demand for other products may come and go. Food production thus offers a level of comfort that most other industries (unless they are necessities as well, like medicine during a pandemic, of course) simply do not offer, and so, the pandemic has made food production a much more attractive industry from the standpoint of stable investment, and a more comforting industry from the standpoint of ensuring that community members will at least be guaranteed to “get what they need” even when they cannot “get what they want.”

## **Tribal Food Production Is Making News**

Tribal food production during the pandemic was the topic of a *New York Times* article written by Priya Krishna, on April 13, 2020 (updated on May 6), entitled, “How Native Americans Are Fighting a Food Crisis.” The article mentions how members of the Oglala Sioux Tribe (commonly known as the Pine Ridge Reservation) have been expanding their individual household gardens to grow squash and corn (which have deep roots in their tribal culture). It also mentions how gardeners in the Navajo Nation, and the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, have increased their practice of sharing their produce with their fellow tribal members in their time of need. Likewise, corn growers in the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin have been distributing corn seeds to other residents of the reservation, during the pandemic, to grow corn in their own gardens. The article describes, as well, how Alaskan villagers are now more dependent on subsistence hunting and fishing.

An [NBC news article](#) by Erik Ortiz on May 24, 2020 was entitled, “As the Coronavirus Pandemic Strains Supplies, Native Americans Fight Food Insecurity.” The article states:

Across the country, as households turn to planting and gardening as a relaxing hobby or to become more self-sufficient during turbulent times, the act of cultivating one's own food has taken on a greater significance among Native American communities where the pandemic has laid bare an enduring food crisis and a desire to return to customs and traditions some fear are slowly being lost.

The article also refers to the concept of “food sovereignty” which is a growing movement in Indian Country, in certain respects overlapping other movements involving environmental health

and justice. It describes how farmers in the Navajo Nation are sharing seeds, for corn, squash, melons, and beans, for other tribal members to grow in their gardens. This was part of the Navajo Nation's "Seeds and Sheep" program, which distributed, by mail, 1,500 packets with varieties of seeds to families throughout the Navajo region.

### **What Tribes Can Do to Start, or Increase Food Production Activities**

It is a good time now for tribal communities to consider developing new food production operations, or to expand the operations they currently have. For those that have not yet been involved in food production, they must first determine, of course, what kind of product they might wish to produce, which would depend entirely on their natural resources and on the expertise and commitment their members might bring to the operation. If they are Tribes with little arable land available, or without access to any fishing or hunting location, then food production may simply not be feasible, unless it was specially marketed perhaps as "Indian grown." Also, if there is ample food production already in their area, then they may be unable to compete successfully in local markets in terms of selling their product, but may still benefit from distributing the product (or selling it at a discount) within their community.

As with any other form of production, a certain degree of expertise would be required for the operation to be successful. In exploring the capabilities for food production, tribal community members might first observe what kinds of food products are being produced in their particular local climate and with resources similar to their own. For instance, for crop production, soil conditions, irrigation, and equipment needs, would need to be investigated; for livestock production, how the livestock would be processed would need to be addressed; and for marine-based production, fishing rights, equipment, and processing operations, and the analysis of available fish to be harvested would all need to be explored.

Tribal communities that decide to start or expand food production operations can acquire technical and financial assistance from the federal government or from nonprofit organizations. One key source would be the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), [Office of Tribal Relations](#), which serves as a facilitator that "enables Tribes, Tribal governments, Tribal organizations and individuals to access programs and services within USDA and throughout Federal agencies." Tribal communities can also receive technical and financial assistance from the Department of the Interior, Indian Affairs through the [Division of Economic Development](#), the [Division of Capital Investment](#), and the [Office of Trust Services' Branch of Agriculture and Rangeland Development](#). With regard to nonprofit organizations, as already mentioned, the National Farm to School Network has a [Program for Native Communities](#) which could help Tribes develop educational farm programs. In addition, the Intertribal Agriculture Council has a [Technical Assistance Program](#), in collaboration with the USDA Office of Tribal Relations, which

has a program office in every American Indian region in the United States. Tribes may also find several region-specific nonprofit organizations that offer technical assistance in agriculture.

### **Food Production in Perspective**

Realistically, we must realize that food insecurity is only one of several severe problems that Indian Country is facing as a result of the pandemic. Other problems include access to adequate sanitation (e.g., sufficient clean water and disinfectants) to combat the virus, difficulties in social distancing (because of occupational and housing constraints), ability to acquire needed medical services in a timely manner, including testing no doubt, and inability to work or attend school from home because of inadequate Internet access in many tribal areas. Nevertheless, Tribes that have already been engaged in food production are finding ways to increase their food production in response to the food shortages imposed upon Tribes by the pandemic. This will most certainly help tribal communities survive through the pandemic, and will probably enable them to have more secure investments in their economies once the pandemic has finally subsided.