



Report on Health Equity, Hunger, and Nutrition in Indian Country

White House Conference on Hunger,
Nutrition, and Health

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INTRODUCTION

Across Indian Country, Tribal Nations have been investing in the systems, policies, and programs that will re-center Indigenous health and wellbeing, restore Native food systems, and promote thriving Tribal communities for current and future generations. Innovation in food systems and nutrition has long been part of Indigenous lifeways. Supporting and advancing the future of Native food systems includes the improvement or development of agricultural infrastructure.

Many of the healthy foods that might be discussed at an event like this conference likely have their roots in Tribal communities — foods like wild rice, salmon, walleye, and tepary beans, just to name a few, have been recognized by Western science in recent years for their extraordinary health benefits. These foods have been part of Indigenous foodways for thousands of years and continue to support Native health and well-being today — when these foods are accessible.

Indian Country is deeply aware of the critical linkage between access to healthy food and the health of people and communities; that linkage has been part of Indigenous lifeways from time immemorial. Indian Country is also deeply aware of the devastating impacts that colonization continues to have on Native food systems and health. Food insecurity across Native households remains too high. Over 25% of all American Indian and Alaska Native people across the country rely on SNAP each month, and over 80,000 Native households a month rely on FDPIR. The pandemic exacerbated these pre-existing disparities and food insecurity at rates well above what non-Native households were experiencing at the same time. To combat the issues faced during the pandemic, Tribes must be empowered to administer programs and services to their citizens and community members.

The White House Conference on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health must provide opportunities for Tribal Nations and Native-led organizations to speak to Indigenous principles of nutrition and health, and bring a modern Indigenous perspective to federal nutrition law and policy. When Tribal Nations have that strong voice in processes like this one, Tribally-led change can lead to great outcomes: an increase of fresh fruits and vegetables and traditional foods available through programs like the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), Tribally-procured and produced healthy foods in USDA's food assistance programs, stronger support and access for Tribal producers for USDA grant and loan programs — all of those kinds of changes happened in the 2018 Farm Bill process and came directly from Indian Country's recommendations.

To ensure that Indian Country has a robust voice in the planning of this conference, the Native Farm Bill Coalition (NFBC) and Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF) cohosted two virtual listening sessions in June 2022 on the White House conference, providing a dedicated forum for Indigenous voices on the needs of Tribal Nations and Indian Country in the space of health equity, hunger, and nutrition.

INTRODUCTION

The NFBC also hosted a Tribal caucus and informational briefing session prior to the official Nation to Nation consultation on the conference. This report summarizes recommendations from attendees at all of these events, including both substantive policy recommendations and general recommendations about the conference format itself. Recommendations are divided into two categories for each pillar, with recommendations that can be accomplished through federal agency action alone, and recommendations that would need to be accomplished through legislative change. To preserve anonymity, comments and feedback received from attendees has been summarized and edited so that no individual identifying information is included.

In general, there was significant overlap in the feedback received at all sessions in several key areas: the need for federal nutrition policy to fully recognize the importance of traditional foods and facilitate access to those foods for Tribal citizens, the need for flexibility in federal grant and loan programs supporting food and nutrition work, the need for acknowledgment of Tribal sovereignty in food systems and for Tribal governments to have full authority to directly administer all federal nutrition assistance programs, and the need for federal nutrition policy to link meaningfully with federal agricultural policy through better support for Native food producers who are growing, raising, and harvesting the kinds of foods that best support Indigenous health.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONFERENCE FORMAT AND INDIGENOUS INCLUSION

- 1 Include Tribal government representation along with other sovereigns—states and local governments—any time opportunities for government-led action are included or discussed.
- 2 Intentionally include Tribal citizens in any panels or discussions about lived experience of hunger.
- 3 Intentionally include Indigenous-led programs in any panels or discussions about community efforts to improve health equity through improved food access to healthy food.
- 4 Bring attendees together around food. Satellite events in Indian Country or on-location in Washington, D.C., can showcase the incredible diversity of healthy traditional and culturally appropriate foods in Indian Country today.



PILLAR 1

Improving Food Access and Affordability
for Tribal Communities

Image owned by USDA

PILLAR 1

FEDERAL AGENCY ACTION

- Continue to include Tribal governments, Tribal producers, and Tribally-chartered businesses and nonprofit organizations as explicitly eligible in grant and cooperative agreement programs rolling out at USDA. The recent Local Foods Cooperative Agreement Purchasing Program offered through USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is a great example of this kind of inclusion.
- Amend the Federal Acquisitions Regulations (FAR) to ensure that Native-owned companies receive the same incentives for directly contracting with the federal government that non-Native companies currently receive for subcontracting to Native vendors.
- Invest in traditional Indigenous foodways revitalization to ensure long-term food access to healthy foods for Tribal citizens, including traditional seeds and small animals, big and small game.

There are many legal pathways for USDA to do this. One of them is to fully embrace the authority that the 2018 Farm Bill gave to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and enter into Alternative Funding Arrangements (AFA's) with Tribal governments on key conservation programming. This ensures that as Tribal governments invest in food systems, Tribal producers are able to meaningfully access NRCS funding that helps them steward agricultural and working lands in ways that respect Indigenous stewardship knowledge and traditions.

- In delivering federal programs that increase food access, federal agencies must be mindful of the diversity in Indian Country and Indigenous communities, and the ways that needs and challenges for each community differ based on that diversity. For example, Alaska Native communities have uniquely high costs of food, housing, and related infrastructure because of their remote locations. These high costs of food and housing require higher levels of funding to support than similarly situated efforts in the contiguous US would.
- Climate change is already affecting access to all foods and in particular traditional and culturally relevant foods, and production cycles for Native producers—and all producers—across the nation. Food prices will only continue to rise as this worsens.
- Increasing investments for meat processing facilities, including storage and technical support, for Tribes.
- It is extremely difficult for Native producers to become eligible to sell food products to USDA or other federal food purchasing programs like DoD Fresh. Better technical assistance and outreach from entities like USDA-AMS that provide those certifications is much-needed.

PILLAR 1

- Most programs at USDA are designed to support the business of agriculture, and with the more than 80,000 Native food producers generating over \$3.5 billion annually in agricultural products, agriculture is great business for Indian Country. However, not all food access needs to be based on market competition in Tribal communities. More funding support for Tribally led collaborative, community-based programs, like community gardens or individual family gardens, would offer additional food systems supports to Tribal citizens. In combination with healthy economies and agricultural businesses, these non-competitive programs can stabilize food access longterm.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

Farm Bill actions:

- Apply the Buy Indian Act to USDA commodity foods purchases.
 - Expand cooperative agreement authority for both the AMS and FNS to facilitate more sourcing of Native-produced and/or culturally relevant or traditional foods into USDA food assistance programs.

Child Nutrition Reauthorization Actions:

- The flexibilities USDA was able to provide in programs like WIC during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to support broader nutrition assistance for Tribal citizens and should be broadly adopted long-term, even after the end of this pandemic. For WIC, this would include permanently extending flexibility including telehealth, virtual visits, raising benefits, and the peer breastfeeding program. Streamlining administration to minimize issues for smaller programs is also needed.
- Tribal governments must have the legal authority to administer all Child Nutrition programs, including National School Lunch/Breakfast and Summer Food/Seamless Summer Option. These foods can be a critical source of support for Native students with limited or no food options in the home.

Permanently authorize Summer EBT and ensure Tribes are eligible to administer this program directly.

- Raise the federal poverty guidelines, or enable Tribes to set their own guidelines.
- Remove the ban on dual participation for SNAP and FDPIR.



PILLAR 2

Integrating Indigenous-Led Nutrition Programming
to Improve Native Health

PILLAR 2

FEDERAL AGENCY ACTION

- Cultural relevance in dietary patterns is part of the 2020 Dietary Guidelines. To give life to that guideline for Tribal citizens using USDA food assistance programs, USDA should intentionally source more traditional and culturally relevant foods, especially for programs that are serving Tribal communities and citizens.
- Wherever possible, federal programs should provide Tribes who are administering these programs maximum flexibility in food offerings to best support the health of their specific citizens' needs. For example, many Indigenous people experience lactose intolerance, so extensive dairy offerings may be exacerbating health inequities instead of promoting better health outcomes. Tribal flexibility to tailor offerings eliminates this issue.
- This kind of flexibility for Tribes administering federal nutrition programs also respects a holistic, systems-level view of health. Traditional and culturally relevant foods are not just sources of physical nourishment for Indigenous people, they are relatives, and having access to those foods supports cultural health, spiritual health, and mental health at the same time that it supports healthy, thriving Indigenous physical bodies. The separation of diet, nutrition, and physical health and this focus on the health of individuals rather than communities is not an Indigenous framework, and applying that colonized lens to nutrition in Indian Country will never lead to better health outcomes long term. Flexibility for Tribes and established respect for thousands of years of Indigenous nutrition science that kept Native people healthy and thriving on this continent is a better way forward.
- In working to support more traditional foods, federal agencies should also be mindful that not all traditional food knowledge is always meant to be shared outside of Tribal communities. Where those boundaries arise, federal actors should respect them.
- When sourcing traditional foods for federal nutrition programs that provide foods directly to Tribal citizens, like FDIPIR or the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), sourcing those foods regionally rather than nationally is a good way to ensure that traditional foods are actually serving the people for whom they are traditional. For example, wild rice is a traditional food for Tribes in the Great Lakes region. Requiring that wild rice be supplied nationally reduces the availability of wild rice for consumers in the Great Lakes region, and also does not respect the food traditions of Tribes in the rest of the country where other foods entirely are considered traditional—salmon for the Tribes in the Pacific Northwest, bison in the Great Plains, catfish in the Southeast, and so on.
- Where federal programs provide funding support for nutrition education, prioritize Native-led nutrition education in Tribal communities.

Native-led efforts can help simplify the Dietary Guidelines in culturally relevant way.

PILLAR 2

- Cultural relevance of foods in Indian Country varies greatly from Tribe to Tribe and region to region, so working with individual Tribes, Native organizations, or Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) to tailor culturally relevant nutrition education is key. For example, the plate method is helpful as it can include traditional foods, but the traditional food on that plate for a tribe in the Great Lakes is much more likely to be wild rice or whitefish, while a traditional food for a Pacific Northwest Tribal citizen is much more likely to be salmon or geoduck.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

- Apply “638” Tribal self-determination contracting/self-governance compacting to USDA programs to make these programs more flexible and effective in serving Tribal citizens.
- Ensure Tribal governments are eligible to administer The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).
- Where programs are administered through a State, make sure that a Tribal set-aside exists.





PILLAR 3

EMPOWERING TRIBAL CONSUMERS TO
HAVE ACCESS TO HEALTHY CHOICES

PILLAR 3

Tribal lands are often in extremely rural and remote locations, making availability of food options extremely limited. In some places in Indian Country it is still a four-hour trip to a full service grocery store, and rising transportation costs only make it more challenging for Tribal citizens to make those trips—and to find fresh food at reasonable prices when they arrive. To support opportunities for healthy food choices, then, Tribal Nations must first have federal support to build out the required infrastructure to support the existence of those choices. This includes agricultural investment through better lending opportunities for Tribal producers as well as Rural Development programming through USDA and infrastructure supports across federal agencies to increase broadband access, shore up electrical grids, and ensure robust water/sewer systems and roadways throughout Indian Country.

AGRICULTURAL INVESTMENTS RECOMMENDED BY ATTENDEES

- Federal investment of \$10 billion for Tribal food system development, including land transfer and acquisition, infrastructure development, climate change mitigation, development of hydroponic facilities, workforce development.

The Native American Agriculture Fund's Reimagining Native Food Economies provides a detailed roadmap for this investment.

- Specific Tribal set asides for USDA program funding in all USDA programs.
- Better outreach from federal agencies to Tribes when federal programs supporting food and agriculture are available.

Federal agencies should send information on new programs to Tribal partner organizations to help spread the word. Too often, Tribes don't hear about opportunities until they have passed.

Federal agencies should also send information about new programs directly to Tribal Nations, but in doing that, they should send it to the most relevant entity within the Tribal government structure. For example, sending a flyer about a farm loan program to the Tribal headquarters instead of the Tribe's Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources, Economic Development, or similar, is a good way to ensure that no Native producer from that Tribe hears about the opportunity. This is essentially the same thing as sending a flyer to the White House and hoping it makes its way to a farmer.

Hiring federal Tribal liaisons who are from Tribal communities or have significant experience working in Indian Country is another good way to make sure that program information reaches Indian Country.

PILLAR 3

- In drought-stricken areas, there's a significant need for funding to develop irrigation infrastructure and incorporate greenhouse infrastructure, especially large-scale hydroponic buildings to grow multiple crops.
- Funding and authorization to develop aquaculture- based classrooms that produce sustainable crops of seafood and teach environment science.
- Funding for three classroom size nurseries to teach students how to grow Indigenous edible and medicinal plants.
- Solution for farming equipment and startup costs being expensive and out of reach for most individuals.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

- Legal authority for Tribal governments to administer federally funded programs like SNAP. Tribal governments are better equipped to successfully address food security for their citizens and shouldn't have to go through states.

This authority should be administrative— i.e., Tribal governments should be able to administer SNAP just as State Agencies do currently—and should also be available via “638” authority for more robust Tribal program delivery.

- Increase funding for Tribal high school agriculture programs and education as well as incentives for Native students to go to college for agriculture—fully fund and maintain the New Beginnings for Tribal Students Program through NIFA, for example. This also includes increased funding for 1994 Tribal Colleges & Universities.





PILLAR 4

SUPPORTING PHYSICAL
ACTIVITY FOR ALL

PILLAR 4

- Ensure that tribes have the ability and authority to include their own unique cultural parameters to programming. Prioritize Tribally led programming for Tribal communities.
- Support Tribal agricultural production: traditional food gathering ways, land stewardship activities, harvesting, hunting, and agricultural production are important for physical activity and healthy communities. These activities supported healthy Indigenous communities for thousands of years.
- Historically, traditional games also increased physical activity in Indigenous communities. Federal programs should think outside the box about physical activity and work to incorporate more traditional and culturally relevant activities like this when working with Tribes.
- Fully fund the Good Health and Wellness Grant Program for Indian Country to support Indigenous-led physical activity and nutrition education.





PILLAR 5

ENHANCING NUTRITION AND
FOOD SECURITY RESEARCH

PILLAR 5

FEDERAL AGENCY ACTION

- Embed respect across all federal programs for the Indigenous food and nutrition science that kept Indigenous peoples on this continent healthy and thriving for thousands of years prior to colonization.
- Put Indigenous scientists on the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee. Make room for Indigenous knowledge-keepers, like elders, to sit on this committee or otherwise provide recommendations for Indigenous nutrition as well.
- Support research and facilities funding for Tribal Colleges and Universities.
- As part of its work to advise USDA and HHS, the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee surveys existing literature to make its recommendations and answer agency questions. Indigenous-led research is not funded or prioritized at the rate that non-Indigenous research is supported, which leads to a dearth of relevant literature. In turn, this lack of available literature makes it even more difficult for Indigenous-led recommendations to find a place in the Dietary Guidelines, which functionally are federal nutrition policy.
- Intentional funding by federal entities of Indigenous-led research on nutrition and traditional foods, in combination with seating Indigenous scientists on the Committee, is the first step in correcting this longstanding inequity in federal nutrition policy for Indigenous people.
- Both state and federal actors continue to pose barriers to additional inclusion of traditional foods in federal programs, often citing liability issues tied to food safety.



PILLAR 5

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

- Expand and/or make permanent the “638” demonstration program for FDPIR from the 2018 Farm Bill, so Tribes can continue to determine which foods they want to procure. Incorporate traditionally/culturally relevant foods instead of using FDPIR available foods list.
- Not all Tribes choose to participate in 638 efforts. To ensure direct services Tribes are not left behind as 638 moves forward, USDA should also look at cooperative agreement authorities and similar opportunities that will facilitate more traditional food offerings for direct services Tribes. The Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement (LFPA), is a great existing example of how that might work.
- Federal investment in nanotechnology needed to understand water quality and to improve water quality for primary use and recovery of gray water for recycling and cleaning for potable consumption.

GRANTS & FUNDING – GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM ATTENDEES

- The inclusion of Tribal set-asides in all USDA grantmaking or lending programs would affirm the federal trust responsibility and ensure Indigenous access to farm and food systems support programs that improve food access and health equity long-term.
- Any program offered to a state or local government must also be offered to a Tribal government to ensure Tribal citizens are appropriately served.
- Tribally chartered organizations—nonprofits or for-profit entities—should also be included as eligible for grant grants and loan loans if similar state-organized entities are eligible.
- Non-competitive funding for Tribal Nations is always more ideal than competitive grant or cooperative agreement programs. When limited federal opportunities force Tribes to work against each other and compete for resources, this damages relationships and inevitably means that some Tribal citizens are left unserved.
- Make sure technical assistance is available for Tribes on grant opportunities or cooperative agreement programs. “Virtual office hours,” like those offered by the USDA-AMS staff on their recent LFPA program, are one example of this.
- Flexibility in grant processes is appreciated, and lower paperwork burdens where possible for Tribes, especially those that require Tribal leaders’ signatures.
- Flexibility in reporting processes is also appreciated, especially for programs that are working to improve food access. Many Tribal organizations run with limited staff.

PILLAR 5

- Streamlined reporting on federal grants would help ensure that more work can be done to support communities.
- Because of the remoteness of many places in Indian Country and the current limited outreach to Tribal Nations, it takes longer for potential applicants to hear about programs. This combined with paperwork-intensive grant processes often prevents Native-led organizations or Tribes from applying for federal opportunities. Extended grant deadlines beyond 30 days help address this issue.
- USDA should engage in budget negotiation processes with Tribal Nations similar to those of most other federal departments. This will ensure that Tribes and Tribal citizens are not left behind in funding formulas for programs that provide food systems and nutrition assistance support.

NATIVE FARM BILL COALITION: www.nativefambill.com
NATIVE AMERICAN AGRICULTURE FUND: <https://nativeamericanagriculturefund.org>

