



## **FACT SHEET: USDA Tribal Accomplishments 2023**

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is committed to Indian Country and is proud to share some of its 2023 tribal accomplishments to coincide with the President's annual Tribal Nations Summit. USDA's tribal priorities broadly fit into three areas: 1) Removing the unique barriers for Indigenous and tribal access to USDA programs and services, 2) Promoting tribal self-determination throughout USDA, and 3) Adapting USDA's programs to include unique tribal values and Indigenous perspectives.

### **STRENGTHENING THE NATION-TO-NATION RELATIONSHIP AND TRIBAL SELF-DETERMINATION**

**USDA Announces Members of the Inaugural Tribal Advisory Committee (TAC).** The USDA Tribal Advisory Committee is a permanent committee created by the 2018 Farm Bill to ensure tribal perspectives are well represented at USDA and to ensure the Department's policies and decisions are informed by the unique nation-to-nation relationship. The Tribal Advisory Committee is an 11-member board, with eight members appointed by the Chair and Ranking member of Senate Indian Affairs and House and Senate Agricultural Committees, and three appointed by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack. USDA is honored to coordinate with these House and Senate Committee leaders to seat and announce the inaugural [USDA Tribal Advisory Committee](#).

**FDPIR Tribal Self-Determination Demonstration Project Expanded to 16 Tribes.** The 2018 Farm Bill authorized the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDIPR) Demonstration Projects. Through these projects, tribes have more control over the contents of their FDPIR food packages, selecting and purchasing some of the foods themselves. USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has finalized the round two awards to the eight new tribes selected. This round of funding totals nearly \$4.4 million; USDA previously funded eight other tribal nations, bringing the total to \$10 million across the 16 tribal nations participating in this demonstration project. FNS worked with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) on the negotiation of the final contracts with the selected tribes.

**USDA Moves the Tribal Colleges and Universities Program to the Office of Tribal Relations in Response to Indian Country Requests.** USDA moved the Tribal College Program to the Office of Tribal relations on January 29, 2023. This move was a result of tribal leaders and tribal colleges and universities presidents' requests, in acknowledgement that tribal colleges are created and owned by tribal nations.

**Tribal Treaties Database Announces Extensive Expansion.** USDA, along with the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) and the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), have been partnering with Oklahoma State University (OSU) on the creation of a [Tribal Treaties Database](#) as directed by The Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Interagency Coordination and Collaboration for the Protection of Tribal Treaty Rights and Reserved Rights announced by President Biden at the 2021 White House Tribal Nations Summit. The first phases of the database included working with OSU to create the interface for the database, digitizing and



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indexing Charles Kappler's Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties, and on enhanced indexing with emphasis on refining all tribal connections (signatory tribes to modern federally recognized tribes a.k.a. successor-in-interest tribes). In phase three OSU completed extensive research on additional resources not found in Kappler's Volume II. These resources are being populated into the public facing database and include the identification of 350+ new agreements (treaties, unratified treaties, Congressional Acts, and other related documents).

### **USDA-DOI TRIBAL BUFFALO INITIATIVE**

**USDA-DOI Tribal Buffalo Initiative.** USDA and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) are working together on a joint Tribal Buffalo Initiative. Towards this end, USDA has entered into a formal Memorandum of Understanding with the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) and cooperative agreements with the Tribal Alliance of Pollinators and the Institute of American Indian Arts to propagate native grasses and other plants to assist in grasslands reseeding and tribal buffalo restoration. USDA has also strengthened bison markets through a new Bison Purchasing Pilot Project and the purchases of bison and Indigenous foods through the Local Food Procurement Agreements (LFPA) and the FDPIR Tribal Self-Determination Demonstration Project. USDA has also strengthened value-added bison meat processing through ITBC's creation of a mobile buffalo processing trailer and the development of the first Indigenous Animals Meat Processing Grant.

**USDA Launches Bison Purchase Pilot Incorporating Indian Country Bison into Tribal Nutrition Programs.** USDA launched a new [interagency pilot project](#) aimed at offering more localized ground bison meat for tribal communities through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). The pilot changes how USDA purchases bison to better support buying meat from local, small, and mid-sized bison herd managers and delivering it directly to local tribal communities. The pilot is a collaboration between USDA's Food and Nutrition Service, Marketing and Regulatory Programs, Food Safety and Inspection Service, and USDA's Office of Tribal Relations. The producers participating in the first pilot include the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and Brown Otter Buffalo, the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, and Dakota Pure Bison operating on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation.

**DOI and USDA Support Tribal Buffalo Conservation Partnership.** USDA and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) have joined together to support the Intertribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) and Native Americans and Philanthropy (NAP) in their partnership with World Wildlife Fund (WWF), The Nature Conservancy, and other buffalo focused non-profit organizations. This relationship will improve upon the federal investments already being made by USDA-DOI Buffalo Initiative in grasslands and working lands restoration, tribal buffalo conservation and expansion, and opening tribal buffalo market opportunities.

**USDA Enters into MOU with InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC).** USDA entered into a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with ITBC in October 2023. The MOU outlines USDA's commitment to supporting restoration of tribal buffalo and supporting ITBC and their partners' efforts to increase buffalo resources.



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**USDA Tribal Buffalo Humane Handling Curriculum.** The Office of Tribal Relations has entered into cooperative agreements with the InterTribal Buffalo Council (ITBC) to prepare and make available: (1) a handbook to provide best practices for humane handling and harvesting of bison in the field; and (2) a hands-on curriculum and training focused on food sovereignty and food safety.

**Development of Public-Private Partnerships with Tribal Nations for Federal Lands and Conservation through Native American in Philanthropy (NAP).** USDA entered into an cooperative agreement to encourage public-private partnerships in tribal conservation and tribal buffalo projects. NAP will organize a series of convenings with philanthropy to encourage tribes to leverage their federal grants and investments for gap funding.

**USDA Expands Research on Diseases Affecting Bison.** USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) engaged tribal bison herd managers on *Mycoplasma bovis* outbreaks. Through the National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program, USDA is funding research in partnership with the InterTribal Buffalo Council on disease management for buffalo.

### **INDIGENOUS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY**

**USDA Releases Indigenous Foods Foraging and Cooking Videos for Northeast and Southeast Regions.** The Office of Tribal Relations Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative partnered with the North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems (NATIFS) to produce a series of regional-based videos on Indigenous foods foraging and cooking for the Northeast and Southeast regions to complement USDA's Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) (commonly referred to as "commodities") food packages. Last year, USDA released videos for the Midwest, Mountain Plains and Southwest regions, and next year videos will be produced for Alaska and Hawaii.

**USDA's Forest Service Creates Curriculum for Navigating Federal Subsistence Board.** Subsistence is essential to Alaskan tribal and rural ways of life. As a Federal Subsistence Board member, USDA's Forest Service is committed to improving access to the Board. The U.S. Forest Service and USDA's Office of Tribal Relations have partnered with the Sitka Conservation Society to expand citizen engagement in Federal Subsistence Management by engaging rural citizens, with a focus on Alaskan youth, by teaching the history of federal subsistence policy, introducing the components of federal subsistence management, and guiding citizens through involvement in the process.

**FNS Strengthens Support for Serving Indigenous Foods in Child Nutrition Programs.** USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) created a [landing page](#) for a suite of resources designed to support serving Indigenous foods in USDA Child Nutrition Programs. On November 1, 2023, FNS also updated a memo, TA 01-2023 [Crediting Traditional Indigenous Foods in Child Nutrition Programs](#), which provides guidance on incorporating traditional Indigenous foods that meet Child Nutrition Program meal pattern requirements and includes an updated and expanded list of traditional Indigenous foods that credit the same as similar foods currently listed in the [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#), including beaked hazelnuts, steamed



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lambsquarters, and wild raspberries. This memo clarifies that USDA Food and Nutrition Service does not place any additional requirements on Child Nutrition Program operators when serving game meat, such as bison, venison, and reindeer, on top of applicable federal, state, tribal regulations, and inspection requirements. This important clarification will facilitate serving game meat, often important to Indigenous diets and foodways, in Child Nutrition Program meals.

**USDA Supports Food Sovereignty by Funding Direct Food Purchases From Tribal Nations – Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA).** USDA will be providing up to \$112 million through the [Local Food Purchase Assistance Plus program](#) for tribal nations to purchase minimally processed food from underserved and tribal producers and distribute that food through their communities. This program was initially authorized under the American Rescue Plan Act and reauthorized by Congress through funding made available to the Commodity Credit Corporation.

**USDA FNS Proposes Updates to School Nutrition Standards to Better Incorporate Indigenous Foods.** USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) [proposed a rule](#), expected to be final in 2024, that would update Child Nutrition Program standards to align with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. FNS proposes to allow tribally operated schools, schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Education, and schools serving primarily American Indian or Alaska Native children to serve starchy vegetables such as tumpsila (prairie turnip) as substitutes to meet the grains requirement, in order to better align with traditional Indigenous diets that relied on starchy vegetables instead of grains. The rule proposes to explicitly state in regulation that “traditional foods” may be served in reimbursable school meals. The proposed rule would allow “locally grown, raised, or caught” as procurement specifications for unprocessed or minimally processed food items, making it easier for schools to source culturally appropriate foods from nearby producers. These changes will facilitate efforts to serve traditional Indigenous foods in school meals, supporting Indigenous food systems and local economies.

**USDA Expands Access to Traditional Indigenous Foods in Schools.** Soon, USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) will open applications on Grants.gov for the Supporting the Use of Traditional Indigenous Foods in the Child Nutrition Programs Cooperative Agreement. FNS will award a total of \$2 million in grants to four organizations – either led by or partnering with an Indigenous organization or tribe – to provide regionally focused training and technical assistance to school nutrition professionals. The training and technical assistance will focus on school food procurement, preparation, and crediting of traditional Indigenous foods. Funds may be used to support the use of traditional Indigenous foods in school lunch, school breakfast, summer meals, meals and snacks served to children after school, and culturally relevant nutrition education for students. Each of the cooperative agreements will be awarded in four different regions of the country to maximize the number of tribes being served.

**USDA to Fund NDSU Creation of a Food Sovereignty and Public Health Center.** USDA’s Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) received an appropriation to develop a Tribal Public Health Resource Center at a land grant university with existing Indigenous public health expertise to expand current partnerships and collaborative efforts with Indigenous groups, including tribal colleges to improve the delivery of culturally appropriate public health services and functions in American Indian communities focusing on Indigenous food sovereignty. OTR is working with



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North Dakota State University (NDSU) to develop a center focused on the intersection of tribal food sovereignty and public health. The first project will be a summer program for students to engage with leaders and experts in the food sovereignty field to provide them with the tools to improve public health in their communities.

### **INDIGENOUS ANIMALS**

**OTR and FSIS Create New Path for Rural Tribal Food Inspectors.** Tribal nations across the country are standing up new meat processing facilities to service their and surrounding communities. The requirements to serve as a USDA meat and food inspector broadly include a four-year degree in a relevant field or a high school diploma with one-year of relevant experience. USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is coordinating with the American Meat Science Association and Tribal Agriculture Fellowship to develop and host two bootcamps in targeted locations in Indian Country that will provide aspiring tribal food inspectors with the tools to competitively apply for federal food inspection positions.

**USDA Announces First Recipients of Indigenous Animals Meat Processing Grant.** For the first time USDA has created a meat processing program designed for the unique cultural and processing requirements of Indigenous animals. This program was designed with direct request and input from tribal leaders and acknowledges the unique role of Indigenous animals as an important protein source for tribal communities. The recipients will be announced on a rolling basis with the first round of grant awardees announced at the White House Tribal Nations Summit. Learn more at [www.usda.gov/iag](http://www.usda.gov/iag)

**APHIS Provides Trainings and Funding for Tribes and Tribal Organizations to Support Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Activities.** In Fiscal Year 2023, USDA has hosted 287 tribal officials representing 56 tribal nations in workshops providing technical assistance to develop animal and plant health emergency response plans, initiate memoranda of understanding, and coordinate logistical exercises. These trainings correspond with funding available for tribal nations to better understand, mitigate, and respond to animal, food, and agriculture disease outbreaks. For Fiscal Year 2024, USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) announced \$500,000 through the National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program where tribes and tribal organizations can apply until January 19, 2024. This past year, USDA awarded over \$460,000 for four tribal projects ranging from outreach and education for tribal producers to a study of a recently emerging disease outbreak facing bison herds.

**Expanding APHIS Tribal Funding Opportunities Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD):** USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) awarded a total of \$967,807 through cooperative agreements to ten tribes supporting combatting CWD. These projects will allow recipients to further develop and implement CWD management, response, and research activities in wild cervids, including surveillance and testing and strengthen protections for an important wild protein source for many tribal nations. Read more about the [detailed spending plan](#).



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## **TRIBAL PRODUCERS**

**Pilot Project Created to Place Tribal Ag Technical Assistance Experts Directly with Tribal Nations.** USDA's Office of Tribal Relations, in partnership with USDA's Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service, has entered into Cooperative Agreements with the Blackfeet Nation, Fort Belknap Indian Community, and Muscogee (Creek) Nation to empower these tribal nations to directly assist their producers navigate USDA and U.S. Department of the Interior agricultural resources and processes. The partnerships are intended to strengthen the government-to-government relationship with tribal communities.

**USDA to Highlight Tribal Products in Agricultural Trade Missions and Shows.** USDA has long supported the Intertribal Agriculture Council to facilitate and strengthen access by tribal food enterprises to international export markets. In its commitment to strengthen and expand economic equity for Native Americans, in 2024, USDA is hosting an Agribusiness Trade Mission to Canada focusing on expanding opportunities for tribally owned food and agriculture businesses.

**USDA Expands Education Efforts on Tribal Produced Products.** There are more than 80,000 tribal, American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian producers who grow a wide variety of agricultural and food products. USDA's Office of Tribal Relations procures and distributes many of these products in education activities to help educate decision makers and consumers about the wide variety of Indigenous foods and Native-produced products.

**USDA Releases New Tribal Partnerships Page on Farmers.Gov Website.** USDA launched a new [Tribal Partnerships](#) page on USDA's [farmers.gov](#) website designed to connect tribal nation leaders, land managers, agricultural producers and citizens with USDA farm production and conservation programs and services. Developed as part of USDA's commitment to its federal trust responsibility to tribal nations, the web page showcases opportunities for land access, Indigenous representation, conservation partnerships, and support for tribal producers and tribal food sovereignty. For more information, visit [farmers.gov/tribal](#).

## **USDA-DOI MOU TRIBAL AGRICULTURAL AND GRAZING LANDS**

**USDA Hires a Special Policy Advisor on Tribal Agricultural Lands.** USDA's Office of Tribal Relations and the Administrator for the Farm Service Agency have joined together to hire USDA's first Special Policy Advisor on Tribal Agricultural Lands. Jim Wabindato comes to USDA from the Indian Land Tenure Foundation. In this role, he is assisting USDA's Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) Mission Area to better meet the needs of farmers and ranchers on the ground and building institutional bridges with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to coordinate agricultural leases, permits and eligibility requirements for USDA agricultural programs operating in tribal communities.

**USDA's Forest Service Clarifies Tribal Trust Lands are Eligible as "Base Property" for Grazing Permits on National Forests and National Grasslands.** The U.S. Forest Service reviewed rangeland management program policies, and identified a need to clarify the flexibilities available for base property requirements to ensure that the Forest Service grazing



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program aligns with its goals and policies for tribal lands. Specifically, tribal trust land can be used for satisfying the base property requirement.

**USDA Works with BIA on Agricultural Leasing Regulations.** The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) is entering into tribal consultations to update BIA Agricultural Leasing Regulations. USDA worked closely with the BIA to improve opportunities for agricultural conservation efforts, to reduce barriers for participation in USDA farming and ranching programs on BIA-managed trust and restricted-fee lands and streamline their regulations where both agencies' responsibilities overlap.

**USDA-DOI Creates Permanent Interagency Working Group on Tribal Agricultural Lands.** Over the years there have been three Memoranda of Understanding between USDA and the Department of the Interior (DOI) directing both to increase coordination to improve customer service to tribal producers. USDA and DOI are working together to build a permanent Interagency Working Group on Tribal Agricultural Lands to ensure we successfully change the way both agencies support agriculture throughout Indian Country.

### **TRIBAL HOMELANDS AND CO-STEWARDSHIP OF FEDERAL LANDS**

**USDA's Forest Service Releases Financial Resources for Tribes and Co-Stewardship.** At the 2023 Tribal Nations Summit, the U.S. Forest Service's Office of Tribal Relations provided a publicly available document that identifies financial resources available in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and the Inflation Reduction Act. Additionally, the Forest Service produced and published, in line with JSO 3403, a publicly available resource that identifies the legal authorities that may support tribal co-stewardship of Forest Service lands.

**USDA Reference Manual for Land Exchange Authorities Released.** As directed by the Joint Secretarial Order 3403, USDA is releasing a list of statutory authorities that govern land exchanges, purchases, and in limited circumstances transfers.

**USDA Signs Double the Number of Tribal Co-Stewardship Agreements From Last Year** USDA's Forest Service entered into 120 new co-stewardship agreements this FY, double the of 60 new co-stewardship agreements that they entered into last year, and they tripled the investments -- \$68 million in Fiscal Year 2023, up from nearly \$20 million in Fiscal Year 2022. Of these agreements, approximately 13 of them are Tribal Forest Protection Act self-determination agreements, with nearly \$37 million in investments. This is also an increase from fiscal year 2022, where we had four self-determination agreements and approximately \$4.3 million in obligations.

**U.S. Forest Service and The Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska Enter Historic Memorandum of Understanding to Co-Steward the Mendenhall Glacier Visitor Center.** The Forest Service recognizes the importance of the Mendenhall Glacier Recreation Area (MGRA) within the Tongass National Forest to Tlingit and Haida people and acknowledges the value of Tlingit and Haida Indigenous knowledge in the administration of the MGRA. The purpose of the historic MOU is to meet the spirit and intent of Joint Secretarial Order 3403 to cooperate with tribes in the



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stewardship of federal lands and waters, and to ensure that management decisions affecting those lands and waters consider the expertise and traditional, cultural, and historical knowledge of the tribes wherever possible.

**Co-stewardship Memorandum of Understanding Agreement Signed Between the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and the Superior National Forest.** On May 2, 2023, the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa (the “Bands”) and the USDA Forest Service Superior National Forest signed a Memorandum of Understanding to provide for co-stewardship and protection of the Bands treaty-reserved rights under the 1854 Treaty within the Superior National Forest. The agreement is the first of its kind between the Bands and the Superior National Forest.

**Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Reservation Restoration Act Implementation.** Prior to 1959, parcels of individual tribal allotments on the Leech Lake Reservation were sold and transferred to the U.S. Forest Service for inclusion in the Chippewa National Forest. It was later determined by the Solicitor of the Department of Interior that these transactions violated statutory process, and the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe (the Band) successfully sought and received a legislative correction. With enactment of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Reservation Restoration Act (Act) of December 2020, the Band and Chippewa National Forest began a close collaboration to implement the Act, working together to identify potential transfer lands, research parcel histories, prepare legal descriptions, and identify title encumbrances. We are pleased to report that we are in the final stages of finalizing a plan of transfer of the initial approximately 11,760 acres. Further, we remain committed to working with the Band to transfer the additional lands, as proposed in legislation before Congress, that had been transferred to the Chippewa National Forest.

**USDA’s Forest Service Releases Tribal Action Plan on Strengthening Tribal Consultation and Nation-to-Nation Relationships.** Acknowledging that the millions of acres managed by the Forest Service include the ancestral homelands of American Indian and Alaska Native tribal nations, and the tragic history involving the forced displacement of Indigenous people, the U.S. Forest Service has begun to reclaim its commitment to federal trust and treaty responsibilities this year with the release of [Strengthening Tribal Consultations and Nation-to-Nation Relationships: A USDA Forest Service Action Plan](#). This plan represents an organizational shift in Forest Service culture, beginning with reflection on agency policies, programs, and practices – and the real-life implications they have on Indigenous peoples. As the Forest Service begins to implement a new way of working to build trust and create innovative opportunities with tribal nations, it begins that journey by very publicly and intentionally renaming the State and Private Forestry Deputy Chief as the State, Private and Tribal Forestry Deputy Chief to emphasize our commitment.

**Tribal Keystone Agreements.** The U.S. Forest Service seeks to create parity for tribes in the award and execution of “keystone” and other agreements that support co-stewardship at scale. On par with other traditional partners, the Forest Service committed \$100 million for





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agreements that address tribal priorities within Forest Service mission critical work. In the coming months, the Forest Service plans to execute one or more national tribal agreement(s) for technical assistance, active engagement, and outreach in the delivery of Forest Service programs and services. The Forest Service has been working with numerous tribal organizations and through national consultation to give tribal issues the attention, focus, and engagement necessary to address them appropriately. The agency is also working to expand agreements designed to increase tribal workforce capacity and engagement in co-stewardship with the Forest Service on tribal priorities and mission critical work.

### **ENGAGING TRIBAL YOUTH**

**USDA Launches “Sovereignty Gardens” Children’s Educational Animated Series.** This series of short educational shows will help build excitement and pride with children about using Indigenous knowledge in gardening, food sovereignty, traditional foods, and healthy eating habits. [“Sovereignty Gardens”](#) uses animation and puppetry to follow Stompy the buffalo and his friend Bran through a series of learning adventures, which include cameos by Indigenous and scientific leaders. USDA’s Office of Tribal Relations entered into a cooperative agreement with Dr. Lee Francis (Pueblo of Laguna) (Indigi-Nerd/Native Realities) to create this animated series.

**USDA Expands Existing USDA-TCU Internship/Scholarship to Cover Four-Year Tuition.** The USDA 1994 Tribal Scholars Program provides full tuition, fees, books, a housing stipend, and paid workforce training to any interested and eligible student pursuing degrees in agriculture, food, natural resource sciences, or related academic disciplines at a tribal college or university (TCU). Eligible applicants include graduating high school seniors, full-time students currently enrolled at a 1994 land-grant tribal college or university, or recent TCU associate degree graduates. For Fiscal Year 2024, 27 scholarship slots are available at: Agricultural Research Service, Farm Service Agency, Farm Production and Conservation, Forest Service, National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and Natural Resources Conservation Service. Visit the [USDA 1994 Tribal Scholars Program](#) or email [1994@usda.gov](mailto:1994@usda.gov) for further information.

**USDA’s Office Of Tribal Relations Establishes a New Internship for Students Interested In Indian Country Agriculture And Foods.** USDA and the Partnership for Public Service have collaborated to create the Future Leaders in Public Service Internship Program – Department of Agriculture: Tribal Agriculture and Food. Undergraduate and graduate students will be recruited to work within Indian Country agriculture and food portfolios. Learn more about [the application](#).

**USDA Establishes New Forest Corps National Service Opportunity for Native Youth.** [AmeriCorps and the U.S. Forest Service launched Forest Corps](#) – a five-year \$15 million agreement, and the first major interagency partnership under President Biden’s American Climate Corps. Beginning Summer 2024, this program will engage 80 young adults, ages 18-26, in wildland fire prevention, reforestation, and other natural and cultural resource management projects to support the U.S. Forest Service’s Wildfire Crisis Strategy and Reforestation Strategy. Native youth will be recruited for Forest Corps in key locations to support cultural resource management projects. AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps/Forest Corps members will receive a compensation package equivalent to \$15 an hour, including lodging,



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transportation, clothing, a living allowance, health benefits, and more. Members will receive extensive training, hands-on-experience, and leadership skills for future careers in natural resource management, forest health, and climate resilience at the U.S Forest Service or other organizations.

**USDA Renews Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with Tribal Colleges.** In February 2023 the Secretary renewed USDA's commitment to Tribal Colleges and Universities through a new memorandum of agreement with 1994 Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities with land-grant status, to ensure they have equitable access to the Department's employment, programs, services, and resources.

**Re-Establishment of the Tribal College Faculty Fellowship.** This Faculty Fellowship program seeks to strengthen tribal college and university research capacity and introduce Tribal College and University faculty and staff to USDA programs and services. In June 2024, the Faculty Fellows will spend a week in Washington, D.C. to meet with USDA program leads, identify areas for collaboration, and learn more about USDA resources. During a second week, they are placed at a USDA research facility that aligns with their academic research interests. This year's research collaborations will take place with USDA's Agricultural Research Service, Forest Service, and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. The Faculty Fellows return to their institution with new knowledge to benefit their community, cooperative research opportunities, and advance their tribal college land-grant mission of research, education, and extension. Learn more at USDA's [Tribal College Program](#) website.

### **INVESTMENTS IN TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE**

**Indigenous Knowledge AISES Research Track Winners.** USDA's Office of Tribal Relations, in partnership with the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES), announces the first students selected for the newly launched AISES research track celebrating the intersection of Indigenous knowledge (IK) and western science and engineering. Selected students will carry out research projects studying topics such as ethnobotany, mental health, and traditional medicine. This year's cohort will be the first in a three-year series.

**ARS Increases Indigenous Traditional Knowledge Research Collaborations.** The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) created collaborations with 1994 Tribal Colleges and Universities (1994 TCU) to promote Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Food Systems. Cooperative agreements between ARS and United Tribes Technical University (UTTC) and ARS and Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College (NHSC) have been implemented to rematriate traditional cultivars and develop propagation techniques for culturally important native plant species. This information provides a building block to replicate ITEK systems. This will provide a model that can be developed to enhance 1994 TCU research relationships celebrating Indigenous Knowledge throughout ARS research facilities. ARS will collaborate with UTTC to evaluate native prairie plant species that have medicinal and edible uses and determine their feasibility for plant propagation. ARS and NHSC will focus their partnership on seed sovereignty by increasing the varieties and quantities of seeds available to Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara tribal members. The goal for these agreements is to develop best practices



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for working collaboratively with 1994 TCUs and tribes on propagating tribal traditional seeds and plants and developing Native food systems.

**New Cooperative Agreements to Expand Native Grasses and Forbs.** USDA's Office of Tribal Relations has entered into two Cooperative Agreements with the Tribal Alliance for Pollinators (TAP) and the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) to expand native grass and forbs seeds for pollinators, grasslands, and working lands restoration. The TAP agreement includes work to improve access to USDA's resources and programming for our tribal partners and producers through educating consumers, agency staff, and federal policy decision makers about native grasses and forbs that complement native grassland conservation and livestock consumption. TAP will partner with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to update the NRCS state foraging seed lists to incorporate more native grasses and forbs and amend EQIP reimbursement for seeding as appropriate. The IAIA agreement focuses on improving access to USDA's resources and programming for 1994 Tribal Land-Grant Colleges and Universities, tribal partners and producers through educating consumers, agency staff, and federal policy decision makers about the cultural importance of pollinators and their products.

**NRCS Systems to Advance How Indigenous Knowledge Informs NRCS Conservation Practices and Programs.** USDA's Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) created an Indigenous Practices Team under the Science and Technology Deputy Area. The team is working with tribal leaders and subject matter experts to develop new NRCS conservation practice standards including a variant of the seasonal high tunnels adapt to conditions in western states and a standard to include the benefits inherent to the three sisters gardening concept. The NRCS added an Indigenous Stewardship Method incentive under the EQIP program. The applicants to the Conservation Innovation Grant program were prioritized if the proposal involved the advancement of Indigenous knowledge. The NRCS deeply appreciates the wise counsel from tribal leaders and subject matter experts that have made these and other advancements possible.

## **TRIBAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

**Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) Program Guidelines Clarify Eligibility of Tribal Owned Entities.** Tribal nations have expressed their frustration with the RBDG program not incorporating the ways in which tribal nations structure their economic development. In response to these concerns, and following a tribal consultation and listening session, the RBDG guidelines are being updated to clarify the eligibility of tribal arms and instrumentalities. Rural Development is also looking into other RD programs that could benefit from this type of clarification.

**Native Languages Prioritized in Distance Learning/Telemedicine.** In Fiscal Year 2023 USDA Rural Development included scoring considerations for projects focused on preserving and teaching Native languages through the Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grant program. This was the first time Native language project proposals received specific consideration in this program.



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**USDA Releases New Rural Development Tribal Relations Web Page.** USDA launched a new [Tribal Relations web page for Rural Development](#)'s programs and services showcasing critical investments and opportunities for infrastructure, schools, health clinics, housing, and businesses, to benefit tribal nations, Native families and communities across rural America.

**USDA Uses HUBZones To Improve Market Opportunities for Local and Tribal Producers.** USDA is one of the largest purchasers of food in the country. It can be very challenging for small, local, and tribal producers to sell to USDA. USDA launched a new interagency pilot project aimed at offering more localized purchases for tribal communities through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). The pilot uses HUBZone federal procurement preferences to better incorporate smaller local and tribal producers into the purchase. The initial pilot started with bison purchases for the FDPIR program. The goal is to learn best practices from the pilot and expand for future USDA purchases.

**USDA Expands Local Partnerships to Increase Homeownership Opportunities for Native Americans.** USDA Rural Development provided funding to nine Native Community Development Financial Institutions (NCDFIs) to expand homeownership opportunities for Native Americans living on tribal lands through the Native CDFI Relending Demonstration Program. This USDA program provides loans to NCDFIs to relend to eligible homebuyers on Native lands. The pilot program is being administered under the [Single Family Housing Direct Loan program](#). In the Midwest, Wisconsin Native Loan Fund is receiving a \$1 million loan to finance eight homes. Lake Superior Community Development Corporation in Michigan is receiving a \$500,000 loan to finance five homes. White Earth Investment Initiative in Minnesota is receiving an \$800,000 loan to finance eight homes. In South Dakota, Mazaska Owecaso Otipi Financial is receiving a \$500,000 loan to finance four homes and Four Bands Community Fund will receive a \$1 million loan to finance eight homes. In the West, Hawaii Community Lending is receiving a \$2.4 million loan to finance ten homes. NACDC Financial Services, Inc. in Montana is receiving a \$1 million loan to finance ten homes. Native Community Capital which services Arizona and New Mexico is receiving an \$800,000 loan to finance ten homes.

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