

FORGING LAST-MILE PROTEIN SUPPLY CHAINS IN INDIAN COUNTRY

EVALUATION REPORT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed gaps in food supply chains across the United States and demonstrated how these gaps can jeopardize the well-being of communities. Nowhere else have these gaps been more apparent than in tribal protein supply chains. With large meatpacking plants closing to contain virus outbreaks and disruptions in nationwide transportation, tribes' dependence on non-tribal resources for their protein supply quickly resulted in food shortages and increased meat prices (Hotvedt, 2021). Moreover, Native ranchers and producers, who depend on these large meatpacking plants, were unable to process their herds due to a lack of available processing facilities.

In late 2020, with support from First Nations' Keepseagle Endowment and funding from the Ronald W. Naito Foundation, First Nations began the Forging Last-Mile Protein Supply Chain in Indian Country pilot project. Through this project, First Nations partnered with six tribal grantees to strengthen their protein supply chains. Using the following strategies, these grantees sought to identify and capitalize on existing assets that could increase tribal ownership of protein supply chains and thus overall tribal food sovereignty:

- Identify ways to increase tribal control of food supply through supporting research on the viability of new and/or expanded meat-processing facilities and the development of value-added products.
- Increase the capacity of existing Native processors to meet the needs of their communities through purchasing equipment to process, store, and market locally-produced meat and value-added products.
- Strengthen tribal workforces and increase economic opportunities by investing in certifications and butchering programs, and increasing understanding of related food codes and regulations.
- Increase the viability of smaller farms and ranches through connecting Native producers in the local protein supply chain.

Although additional setbacks from COVID-19 and its lasting impacts on the nation's economy posed challenges, the majority of the six grantees completed their projects and/or have plans for subsequent phases. Upon review, increased inflation combined with a lack of workforce and the complexities of the protein supply chain were common challenges across the six projects, while the identification of additional funding sources and the creation of diverse stakeholder networks provided opportunities. Ultimately, all grantees in this cohort reported an increase in tribal economic opportunity and community engagement in the short and long term. Additionally, grantees predicted increased access to traditional foods and overall protein supply leading to the improved health and well-being of their communities.

While the COVID-19 pandemic may have exposed the vulnerabilities in tribal food chains, this project and the work of these six grantees provide a better understanding of how to build more resilient and self-reliant meat supply chains in Native communities.



INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

Establishing food sovereignty has long been a goal for many tribal nations and doing so requires building a system in which all parts of the supply chain, from seed to pasture to plate, lie solely within a tribe's control.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of tribal food sovereignty by clearly illuminating the vulnerabilities in tribal supply chains. One of the most apparent and common shortcomings of tribal food systems lies in the protein supply chain. Despite the presence of tribally-raised cattle and other protein sources, the inability to process meats due to the closures of off-reservation meatpacking plants and processing facilities has left many tribal residents with limited access to reliable sources of protein.

Working closely with six tribal communities, the Forging Last-Mile Protein Supply Chains in Indian Country project sought to strengthen the tribe's protein supply through tailored technical assistance and funding to support on-reservation meat-processing capabilities. In doing so, these communities created replicable models that increase both their own tribal sovereignty and that of tribes across the United States.



COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE PROTEIN SUPPLY CHAIN IN INDIAN COUNTRY



COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE PROTEIN SUPPLY CHAIN IN INDIAN COUNTRY

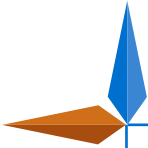
The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the shortcomings of food supply chains across the nation. For tribal nations, of whom the vast majority rely on off-reservation resources for at least part of their food supply, gaps in their food systems quickly became larger and more urgent issues (Hotvedt, 2021). On many reservations, these gaps emerged as significant disruption in their protein supply chains.

As meatpacking plants closed across the nation and without processing plants of their own, tribal farmers and ranchers were unable to process their meats, sometimes needing to wait two to three years for an available date leading to supply shortages and waste (V. Miller – personal communication, July 26, 2021). This problem was compounded by a disruption in nationwide transportation and supply delays, leaving some tribes with limited or no reliable access to protein sources (Hotvedt, 2021). In some tribal communities, delays and unreliable deliveries meant that there was only sufficient protein to last two to three days, not knowing when they would get more (Lengkeek, 2022). Additionally, price increases felt across the nation were exacerbated in tribal nations, with costs of meat increasing at an exponential rate (J. Murray – personal communication, July 26, 2021).

To sufficiently and effectively address the gaps in tribal food systems, meaningful and timely investment in tribal protein supply chains from both tribal and non-tribal sources is necessary. The focus must be placed on working with tribes to identify the gaps in their systems and build the capacity and infrastructure needed to create sustainable long-lasting solutions. These lessons must then be shared between tribes so that Native nations across the U.S. are able to create more sovereign and self-sustaining food systems.

CURRENT PROTEIN SOURCES AMONG GRANTEE COMMUNITIES





CURRENT PROTEIN SOURCES AMONG GRANTEE COMMUNITIES

Access to sustainable, local, and reliable protein sources, including beef, bison, chicken, and pork, varies widely among tribal nations. Factors such as economic resources, weather, proximity to urban centers, and landmass all heavily impact a tribe's protein supply chain. For tribes located near large urban centers, protein options may be ample, but finding affordable high-quality sources outside of off-reservation supermarkets is extremely limited. For rural tribes, tribal ranchers often have more cattle than the capacity to process them, and the distance between grocery outlets causes barriers to community food access.

For all six grantee communities in the Forging Last-Mile Protein Supply Chains project, access to reliable and affordable high-quality protein is limited and almost always depends on the availability of non-tribal resources. Except for a few communities that incorporate more individual hunting and ranching, the majority of the six communities rely almost exclusively on non-tribal supermarkets for their animal proteins. Access to protein needed for cultural ceremonies is even more sparse due to the requirements around how the animal must be raised, fed, and processed.

A photograph showing three men in white lab coats and gloves working with large pieces of meat on a table in a laboratory setting. The man on the left is wearing a blue cap and white gloves, the man in the middle is wearing a black cap and blue gloves, and the man on the right is wearing a white cap and blue gloves. They are all focused on their work. The background shows a clean, industrial environment with stainless steel tables and equipment. The text "GRANTEE MODELS" is overlaid in white on a blue background with orange and white decorative lines.

GRANTEE MODELS

BENSON + TURNER FOODS, INC.

Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, Minnesota

Organization and Project Overview

Benson + Turner Foods, Inc. (Benson + Turner) is increasing access to protein products for the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (Bois Forte Band, Fond du Lac Band, Grant Portage Band, Leech Lake Band, Mille Lacs Band, White Earth Band). Based on the White Earth Reservation, the start-up business is developing a state-of-the-art meat-butcher facility that offers the only reservation-based meat-processing plant for tribal farmers and ranchers. The fully equipped facility will process a variety of livestock at an affordable price using locally trained butchers from the tribe.

Prior to completing the facility's blueprints and beginning construction, Benson + Turner completed extensive research and a thorough feasibility study, as well as developing full business and financial plans. To confirm the site's preliminary eligibility for processing, USDA representatives conducted an on-site inspection and design review.

Partners

Throughout this project, Benson + Turner has worked with a variety of partners. Representatives from the USDA helped to advise during initial planning, and both the tribal government and the state of Minnesota supported the feasibility study. Additional support was provided by the Agriculture Resource Institute, the Intertribal Agriculture Council, and the Minnesota Development Corporation. Both the local Cattlemen's Association and Ottertail Power helped in the design of the facility.

Successes

Benson + Turner's dedication to this project and to meeting the needs of its community have resulted in several successes over the past year. One of the largest accomplishments is the completion of a comprehensive feasibility study and the finalization of both the architectural plans and the facility drawings. These documents, in addition to the full business plan, will pave the way for the site's construction and future operations. Benson + Turner was also able to share its passion for its work through a food demonstration at the casino's banquet where community members tasted the high-quality beef that will be provided when the full facility is completed.

Challenges

Benson + Turner is setting a new precedent for how food systems can work in its community. As a result, there has been a continuous need to educate the people and systems around them to ensure buy-in and access to additional financial support. Moreover, projects of this scale and novelty require the input and support of various stakeholders, and fostering relationships with these organizations has been challenging. Despite this, Benson + Turner Foods has created meaningful networks in its field with time and effort spent on continuous outreach.

Long-term vision and benefit to the community

The Benson + Turner facility started as a vision to create a meat-processing plant that was locally run on the reservation that would increase food access and promote tribal sovereignty. Upon its completion, the facility will move toward achieving this vision by creating immediate economic opportunities for tribal members, as its operation will require trained butchers and processors. The on-site butchering capabilities will offer tribal ranchers an alternative processing option, increasing their production and reducing the number of cattle that age out of processing.

The facility will provide tribal members with access to high-quality meats for years to come, reducing reliance on outside sources for protein and greatly minimizing the chance of experiencing the supply shortages seen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“In many ways, it [the facility] provides our people with a sense of hope; it means that achieving sovereignty is possible and we have the power to do it.”

– Paul Benson, Benson + Turner co-founder and owner

Advice to Others

This project has presented many successes and challenges for the Benson + Turner team. For other tribes and/or tribal entities interested in undertaking a similar project, Benson + Turner offers the following advice:

- ▶ A project like this requires expertise in many different fields ranging from livestock production to business and finance. Focus on identifying people with relevant expertise and building meaningful relationships with everyone involved.
- ▶ Continuously reevaluate what the project goals are and what needs to be built to meet the community's needs.
- ▶ Don't be afraid to reach out to people in the industry and learn from their mistakes.

“When we get this up and running, if people want to reach out, we can help. We wanted to create a blueprint for others.”

– Paul Benson, Benson + Turner co-founder and owner



CHEYENNE RIVER SIOUX TRIBE'S BUFFALO AUTHORITY CORPORATION

Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, South Dakota

Organization and Project Overview

Owned and managed by the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Buffalo Authority Corporation (the Corporation) manages a 20,000-acre ranch that provides tribal members with locally-raised cattle and buffalo suitable for cultural use.

With the support of a First Nations Forging Last-Mile Protein Supply Chain in Indian Country grant, the Corporation expanded its focus to include sourcing and selling meat products through the tribe's first and only market dedicated to providing a sustainable source of protein for tribal members. The Corporation sources all of its products from local Native producers, giving the tribe more direct control over their meat supply chain and helping to ensure that tribal members have access to high-quality meat products.

As a state-inspected facility, the corporation is permitted to ship bison across the country and plans to become USDA-certified, allowing them to ship beef, pork, and chicken products in the future. With these local and potentially national customers, the meat market is creating value-added marketing opportunities for the Native producers they source from. To increase its visibility, the corporation is developing detailed branding strategies that will build its customer base and create avenues for other Native producers in the industry.

Partners

To support such a large project, the Corporation sought co-funding from the Native American Agricultural Fund. Additionally, its farm-to-school efforts were supported through a planning grant received from the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. It plans to re-approach the USDA for the follow-up implementation funding.

Successes

The Corporation's dedication to this project has led to many successes. Its fully operational facility is shipping products to customers nationwide and it has established a farm-to-school partnership with five local reservation schools. Additionally, the time and effort spent on establishing a sourcing chain has resulted in trusted relationships with local ranchers and farmers who now provide access to high-quality, locally raised beef.

“A lot of kids in our schools have never tasted buffalo. We have a problem with that.”

– Jayme Murray, CEO, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Buffalo Authority Corporation

Challenges

The expansion of the Corporation’s services to include sourcing and selling products has not come without challenges. Similar to other projects in its cohort, the Corporation initially struggled to retain a workforce. To combat this issue, the Corporation is exploring partnerships and apprentice programs with local educational institutions.

Additionally, an increase in consumer demand has tested the Corporation’s smaller facility size and limited storage capacity, making it difficult to process, inspect, and store larger orders. Pandemic price inflation has compounded these constraints, as prices on necessary appliances, such as freezers, have become prohibitively expensive. The Corporation has also encountered challenges to its raw materials supply chain, which supports the raising and finishing of its bison and cattle.

Long-term vision and benefit to the community

The expansion of the Corporation to the sourcing and selling of products through its new meat market was started as a value-added venture to vertically integrate beef and bison on the reservation and has since turned into an effort to increase tribal food security. With this facility, the Corporation now can oversee and own the protein supply chain, from sourcing through processing and sale, eliminating reliance on outside resources.

The ultimate vision of the Corporation is to close the gaps in its tribe’s supply chain and work toward tribal food sovereignty. Through this newest expansion, it is one step closer to achieving its vision.

“There is no access to locally-grown meat. We are completely dependent on a corporate supply chain to stock the meat market (local grocery store).”

– Jayme Murray, CEO, Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe’s Buffalo Authority Corporation

Advice to Others

Having experienced and worked through a variety of challenges, the Corporation offers the following advice for tribes and tribal companies interested in undertaking similar projects:

- ▶ Ensure long-term business sustainability by identifying and filling existing gaps in the market.
- ▶ Create achievable strategies that will compete with the larger big-box stores.
- ▶ Establish partnerships with long-term customers. This group may include, but is not limited to, restaurants, health-care centers, and casinos.



HUNKPATI PROCESSORS

Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, South Dakota

Organization and Project Overview

The Crow Creek Tribal Ranch spans 7,100 acres across the Crow Creek Indian Reservation. Traversing alongside the Missouri River, the tribally-run ranch is home to the tribe's main cattle herd with buffalo pastures nearby.

Neighboring the ranch is the tribe's newly constructed meat-processing plant, known as Hunkpati Processors. This 2,600-square-foot meatpacking facility, supported by a Forging Last-Mile Protein Supply Chains in Indian Country grant, has full processing capabilities, enabling the tribe to independently oversee and control its meat production, from pasture to plate.

With facilities such as cooling holders and storage, Hunkpati offers tribal ranchers a local option to store and process their meat without reliance on off-reservation solutions. State-of-the-art equipment ranging from meat grinders to smokers provides tribal members access to a variety of high-protein meat products, all sourced, processed, and produced on the reservation. Community members trained as butchers by the tribe's training program staff the new facility. Throughout the meatpacking process, Hunkpati is intertwining tribal customs, such as blessing and thanking the animals for being part of the food cycle.

Partners

Hunkpati has relied heavily on its own expertise and that of its tribe to move this project forward. Additional support for land assessments was provided by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and much of the construction is being handled by the selected general contractor, Midwest Construction.

Successes

The dedication to the Hunkpati project resulted in a number of important successes whose impacts will be felt community-wide. Most immediate is the sense of accomplishment and hope felt both within the project team and throughout the community.

Long-term, having a fully functional meatpacking plant that is owned and run by the tribe, means that people no longer need to leave the reservation for their meat. For the Hunkpati team, this outcome may be the largest success of all.

“Things like new infrastructure is something we haven’t seen in many years. Seeing new projects gives people hope.”

– Peter Lengkeek, Tribal Chairman, Crow Creek
Sioux Tribe

Challenges

Limited capacity combined with a backlog in materials and increased prices of materials delayed the construction of the Hunkpati facility. Additional setbacks stemming from identifying reliable access to water have increased wait time. Similar to other programs in its cohort, Hunkpati has also struggled to recruit and maintain a stable workforce. Consequently, its timeline was compressed during the last months of the project.

Long-term vision and benefit to the community

Hunkpati Processors is closing the gap in the Crow Creek protein supply chain, reducing reliance on off-reservation systems and improving access to high-quality protein for tribal members.

“We want to improve the food quality, supply, and food sovereignty for the tribe and support the local Native farmers and ranchers, buying from them [Native ranchers] to provide our community high-quality protein products.”

– Peter Lengkeek, tribal chairman, Crow Creek Sioux Tribe

Once fully operational, the plant will directly impact the economic and educational outcomes on the reservation by expanding employment opportunities for tribal members and increasing awareness of traditional food practices. In the future, Hunkpati hopes to create a partnership with the local high school, providing students with culturally inclusive hands-on butchering training. Ultimately, Hunkpati is creating a self-sustaining model with impacts that will benefit its community for years to come.

Advice to Others

Hunkpati has learned many lessons throughout this project and has the following advice for tribal entities interested in building processing facilities:

- ▶ If constructing a new building, ensure the land is tribally-owned and has sufficient access to water and electricity.
- ▶ Identify and learn from other tribes and tribal businesses working in the field.
- ▶ Use the traditional and contemporary expertise that exists within your community.
- ▶ Network with tribes and organizations that have undertaken similar projects in the past to identify additional resources and funding.



TRILOGY BEEF COMMUNITY, LLC

Various Southwest Tribes and Pueblo Nations, New Mexico

Organization and Project Overview

Located in Moriarty, New Mexico, Trilogy Beef Community (Trilogy) provides access to locally-grown protein for all 19 pueblos in New Mexico, and the Apache Nations of the Jicarilla and Mescalero, the Navajo and Hopi Nations, and the Kaibab Band of Paiute Indians. Working with family-owned ranches, Trilogy has developed an intra-tribal food network focused on locally-sourced and produced beef. Through its distribution chain, Trilogy sends fresh, frozen beef to families across Indian Country and works with local ranchers to increase their profits, minimize their risk, and add value to their cattle.

With its Forging Last-Mile Protein Supply Chains in Indian Country award, Trilogy provided tribal ranchers from at least six pueblos, nations, and tribes training in direct marketing through Trilogy's Western Meat School. Training took place via a series of hands-on and virtual lessons where tribal participants learned strategies to increase the value of its beef and market its products to a wide range of community customers. Additionally, Trilogy established a centralized point to coordinate live cattle, store fresh and frozen products, and sort products for distribution to Native communities.

Partners

Trilogy's programs have been supported by various partners including Mesalands Community College, which provided the technology (internet access, laptop, and chrome books) needed to support its virtual platform. Additionally, nutritional educators from three different pueblos provided their expertise on the training curriculum. Meetings have also been held with various tribes that are working on their own food-systems feasibility studies to explore future partnerships and encourage knowledge exchange.

Successes

For the Trilogy team, success has come primarily through building relationships and networks between tribes. Throughout the project, Trilogy has seen both community and individual interest in its programming grow. Additionally, shared learning and conversation have led to more critical thinking among ranchers who are reexamining their processing and ultimately re-thinking where and how their meatpacking is done.

Challenges

Servicing nearly 25 tribes and pueblos as a private business, Trilogy has needed to balance multiple demands throughout its project. With a variety of stakeholders involved and regular communication with its processing plants, Trilogy faced various logistical challenges. Increased prices in materials and labor costs added unexpected expenses to its project budget, for which it solicited additional funding from various sources. Lastly, the restrictions on in-person gatherings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic delayed Trilogy's in-person learning components and made some of its mentoring activities more difficult.

Long-term vision and benefit to the community

Trilogy beef exists to strengthen the supply chain of rural tribal communities across the Southwest, revitalizing trading routes that were established long ago. The programs it offers help to ensure that tribal ranchers have the technical skills and knowledge needed to prevail in the challenging field of agriculture. In doing so, Trilogy is building a pipeline of Native ranchers who can continue to provide high-quality products for their communities for generations to come.

“Most people who go into animal protein supply will not survive because it is rigorous. Agriculture is not for the faint of heart.”

– Manny Encinias, Ph.D., founder and president of Trilogy Beef Community LLC

Although Trilogy is a private business, it believes its knowledge and methods can be shared. The education and skill set it is providing are lifelong lessons that can be replicated among tribal ranching communities.

Advice to Others

With the experience it has gained, Trilogy offers the following advice to tribes and tribal companies interested in food systems:

- Reach out to fellow businesses and organizations working in the field. Try to connect with allied organizations who are willing to fully disclose their systems.
- Learn about relevant systems such as EBT, Double Up Food Bucks, and other state and federally-sponsored programs.
- Keep the community and what you are working toward at the front of your mind.



MAJOR MARKET INC.

Zuni, New Mexico

Organization and Project Overview

Located on the rural Zuni tribal lands and serving both the Zuni and Ramah Navajo communities, Major Market is one of the only grocery stores for nearly 40 miles. This comprehensive market offers a wide range of products and services, including traditional ingredients, fresh produce, custom butchered meat, a Starbucks, and an Amazon hub. On weekends, Major Market also hosts pop-up shops and spaces for local artisans.

With the support of the Forging the Last-Mile Protein Supply Chains in Indian Country award, Major Market was able to invest in up-to-date butchering equipment and partner with Trilogy Beef Community to train local butchers to work in its shop. Additionally, a market feasibility study on the sale of locally-produced meat and cost analysis of a full-scale beef and protein facility helped Major Market more fully understand the needs of its communities and what would be required to scale-up operations.

Partners

Major Market's success has been supported by a range of partners. To train butchers and increase business and marketing capacity, Major Market partnered with Trilogy Beef Community, a fellow Forging Last-Mile Protein Supply Chains in Indian Country grantee. Additionally, to ensure a consistent supply of high-quality protein, Major Market secured partnerships with Shamrock, Laguna Beef Producers, and farmers from the Acoma Tribe. La Montanita Co-op and a variety of local artisans also add a variety of products to the Market's offerings.

Successes

Successes of Major Market have come in many forms. As the first enterprise of its kind in the area, the market has paved the way for other producers and retailers who are now starting to emulate its model, further increasing the Native-owned and operated business presence. Additionally, by offering traditional foods and many foods needed for ceremonies, Major Market is reducing the need for residents to travel outside the community to search for ingredients.

“We procure ingredients for people so they can stay in the community and be home to practice.”

– Darrell Tsabetsaye, owner, founder, president, and CEO, Major Market Inc. and Shaun Tsabetsaye, co-founder and chief of marketing and development, Major Market Inc.

Challenges

Workforce, supply chain constraints, and increasing costs largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic have been continuous challenges for Major Market. With support for its expansion, Major Market is eager to move forward on its project. However, increased demand for electricians has resulted in delays. Additionally, high energy costs in the region make running the necessary meat refrigeration extremely costly, therefore Major Market is exploring the possibility of solar energy solutions.

Long-term vision and benefit to the community

The Major Market project aims not only to improve access to protein within the Zuni and Navajo Nation reservations, but also, to increase economic opportunities for tribal residents. Its training program, combined with its supplier network, is creating a closed-loop system where benefits and profits stay within its communities. Additionally, by serving non-Native customers, Major Market is actively increasing recognition of, and income from, the high-quality meat and products that Native farmers and ranchers produce.

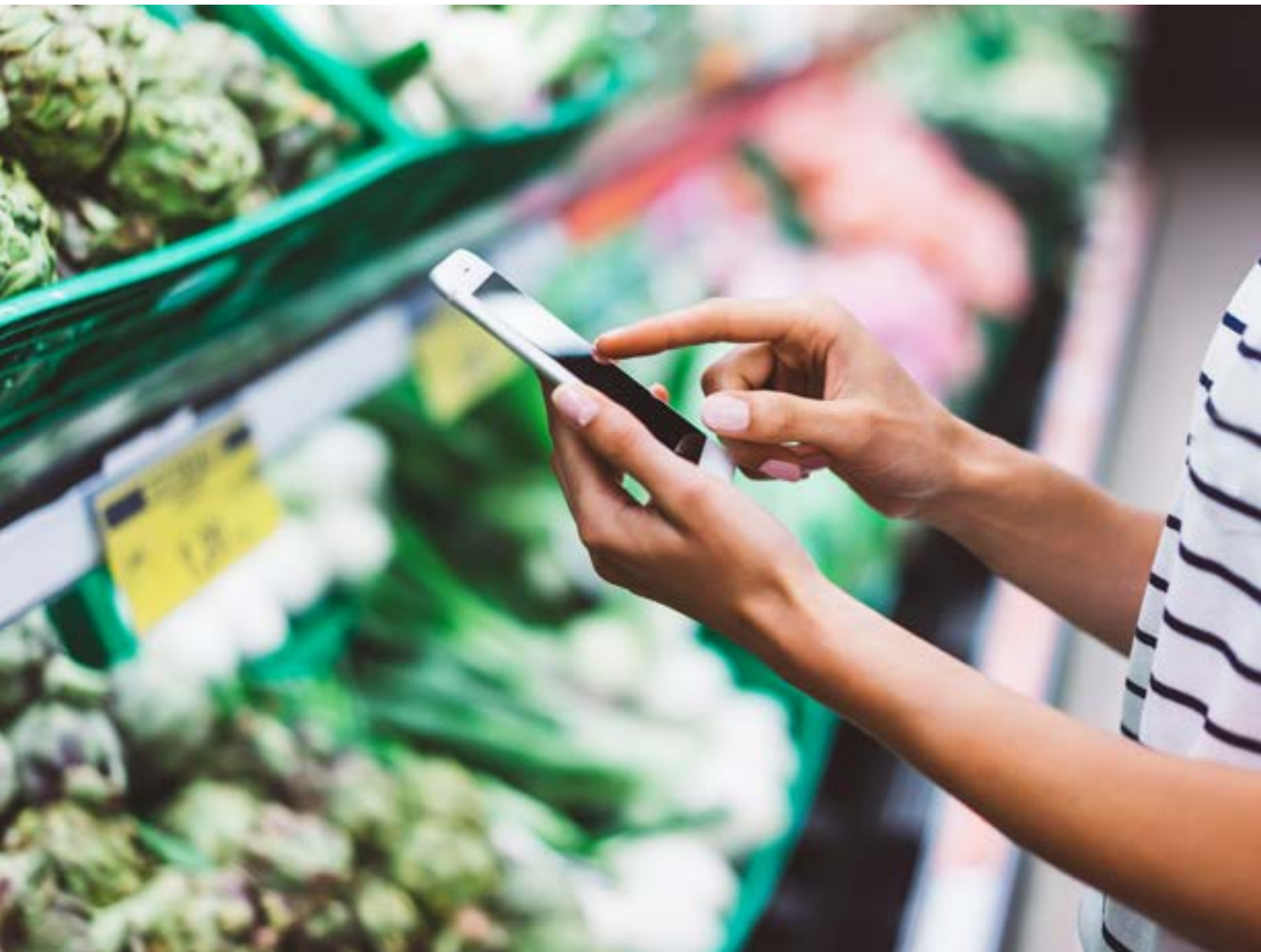
Ultimately, the Major Market project will create a model centered in, owned, and run by Native communities, demonstrating one of the many ways tribal communities can work toward food and tribal sovereignty.

Advice to Others

Major Market has learned a lot throughout this process and has the following advice for other tribes interested in replicating its model:

- ▶ Creating a privately-owned company may help ensure long-term investment in the success of the business.
- ▶ Gain as much knowledge as possible about all aspects of the company. This plan includes investigating and learning from other companies and tribes working in the field.

- ▶ Minimize setbacks through continuous evaluation and monitoring of past mistakes and next steps.
- ▶ Investment and buy-in from a reputable bank to help with navigating and soliciting support from the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other state and federal institutions.
- ▶ Learn the steps involved in relevant loan guarantee programs.



ONEIDA NATION

Oneida, Wisconsin

Organization and Project Overview

The Oneida Nation sits just off the shores of Lake Michigan, on the outskirts of the metropolitan center of Green Bay. The Nation has long sought food sovereignty, and while its proximity to a metropolitan area results in increased access to potential food sources (big-box stores, markets, etc.), there remain few options for locally-sourced and tribally-produced products.

Oneida Nations' Forging Last-Mile Protein Supply Chains in Indian Country grant project is focused on conducting a full feasibility study examining the tribe's capacity to create its own meat-processing business that will train and hire tribal community members as butchers to process locally raised cattle and bison.

Currently, limited processing options result in many tribal ranchers and farmers facing delayed processing times of up to two years. Additionally, constrained processing led to the inability to expand meat production for the tribe. When complete, the tribally-operated and owned business will not only provide an on-reservation processing option for farmers, but also, will reduce dependency on non-tribal sources of protein by selling a wide array of meat products for tribal residents to purchase.

One interviewee noted, "What we really need is a 'cultural climate change'" or paradigm shift, grounded in the worldviews of Indigenous peoples. This encompasses all aspects of value systems and education practices – especially land-based intergenerational knowledge transmission. As many communities face the loss of first-language speakers, which was compounded through COVID-19, supporting initiatives that ensure language and associated land-based knowledge transmission within communities is of utmost priority.

Partners

One of the most significant partnerships throughout the project has been the Oneida community; a partnership that was established and maintained via continuous communication and engagement. Additionally, support from New Venture Advisors LLC and Native American Business Development Institute has been vital in the creation of the feasibility business plan. Projects supported via Bureau of Indian Affairs self-governance funds and a partnership with the Menominee Nation have also added to the Nation's wider food sovereignty agenda.

Successes

Oneida's long-standing dedication to establishing a sovereign food supply chain has supported this project in many ways. In October of 2021, Oneida Nation passed two pieces of legislation that directly address the tribe's food systems, further supporting the creation of a stand-alone processing facility. Additionally, the recent procurement of a mobile processing unit that can do limited on-site processing has both provided an educational opportunity for community members and has demonstrated the demand for on-reservation processing capabilities as the unit sees a continuous stream of customers.

Challenges

To conduct the full study, Oneida has compiled and submitted multiple project bids to study consultants. Unfortunately, due to the scale of the project, many of the bids have been quoted at a higher price than initially planned, requiring Oneida to identify additional sources of funding. Once the study is completed and the construction is underway, the tribe will also need to begin the USDA certification process. To reduce setbacks during this process, Oneida has spent considerable time and effort learning about the various aspects and requirements for certification.

Long-term vision and benefit to the community

Once its facility is complete, the Oneida Nation will have the capability to determine how and when their animals are processed. It will meet the immediate needs of farmers and ranchers who currently have no other option for processing and will have the ability to treat its animals in a manner that is consistent with traditional practices.

"Being able to capture that [meat-processing] makes us more sovereign and self-reliant and able to feed our people and consume what we are inputting. It is about being less reliant on external forces and meeting immediate needs."

– Manny Encinias, Ph.D., founder and president of Trilogy Beef Community LLC

For the Oneida Nation, this project is about tribal sovereignty. By taking control of its food system, the Nation is increasing its ability to feed its own people, reducing reliance on outside sources, and ultimately increasing self-sufficiency.

Advice to Others

For tribes interested in working on a similar project, Oneida shared the following advice:

- ▶ Educate yourself on the process through research and webinars.
- ▶ Reach out to other tribes and organizations doing similar work. Ask questions and gain knowledge about lessons learned, budgets, and project size.
- ▶ If interested in USDA certification, start the process as soon as possible. This effort will help ensure that all necessary materials and information are collected.



A photograph of two men standing in a lush green field. The man on the left is wearing a blue and white striped short-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, with his back to the camera. The man on the right is wearing a red and white plaid short-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and a black baseball cap, facing the other man. In the background, a brown cow is grazing in the field. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. A decorative orange and white striped horizontal bar is positioned above the text.

DISCUSSION OF LESSONS LEARNED



DISCUSSION OF LESSONS LEARNED

Examination of the models, challenges, and successes presented by the grantees in this cohort have led to the emergence of key trends and lessons learned, which will help to guide other tribal nations interested in addressing gaps in their protein supply chains.

Understanding the Landscape and Complexities of the Protein Supply Chain

For all six grantees in this cohort, the complexities and costs of the protein supply chain presented both a challenge and an opportunity. The majority of grantees reported difficulties in gaining the appropriate knowledge needed to support its navigation of the systems, highlighting the importance of performing the necessary research and information-gathering prior to launching further into any project of this kind.

Depending on the project of interest, tribes may need to increase their capacity in, and understanding of, state and federal certification and financing, waste and water management, facility design and safety requirements, business and marketing, construction and general contracting, and meat sourcing and packaging. To reduce potential setbacks and unforeseen cost increases, grantees in this cohort recommend that individuals and/or entities speak with and learn from tribes and other tribal partners who have previously undertaken similar projects.

Collaboration with Tribal and Non-tribal Institutions

The complexities of the protein supply chain discussed above requires collaboration and partnership with a range of institutions. For all project partners, collaboration with at least some state and federal institutions, as well as tribal stakeholders was necessary. Some grantees spent significant time educating stakeholders, such as non-tribal banks and lenders, and others created a wide network of partners that included institutions ranging from tribal schools and businesses to cattlemen associations and non-tribal ranchers. Additionally, nearly all projects were required to work with state and federal institutions (USDA, Bureau of Indian Affairs, SNAP, etc.), capital and financial entities (FDIC banks, loan programs, etc.), and their own tribal governments. Educational institutions and training programs provided valuable support in conducting research and workforce development.

Understanding the Market

Regardless of their previous business experience, all grantees realized the importance of having an in-depth understanding of the current meat supply market and their place in it. To do this, grantees conducted a thorough market evaluation and worked to identify gaps in the offerings. Grantees in this cohort continuously highlighted the importance of creating unique in-demand products to increase long-term sustainability and compete with larger, big-box chain stores.

Community Education and Traditional Practices

Principal motivations for addressing gaps in the protein supply chains among grantees were improving the health and wellness of tribal communities and promoting traditional practices. As such, many of the projects in this cohort prioritized providing proteins and ingredients used for ceremonies and emphasized the health benefits of consuming high-quality, locally-grown protein rather than the more frequently consumed lower-quality products. Partnerships with local schools, farmers' markets, and the inclusion of traditional processing practices were commonly used strategies to accomplish these goals.







CONCLUSION



CONCLUSION

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become abundantly clear that tribes across the United States must own their food and protein supply chains, from beginning to end, to achieve tribal sovereignty. For all six grantees in this year's pilot program, dependence on outside resources for part or all their protein supply led to severe, negative impacts, such as food shortages, uncontrollable price increases, and the inability to process cattle, bison, and hogs. In response, each grantee developed its own community-tailored solution to close the gaps in its protein supply chain.

Ultimately, each of these grantees demonstrated that with improvements in the protein supply chain, community well-being can be improved. For all projects, the creation of on-reservation processing plants has or will drastically reduce barriers for farmers and retailers, and increase economic opportunity and workforce training for tribal members. Additionally, the promotion of traditional knowledge and treatment of animals, as well as increasing access to traditional and ceremonial foods, may help to further strengthen and preserve unique cultural traditions (Hotvedt, 2021). In the long term, the ability to fully own the protein supply chain creates a closed-loop economic cycle that circulates cash flow within the tribal communities, allowing for further reinvestment. According to a study recently conducted by researchers at the University of Arkansas, introducing meat-processing ability alone has the potential to more than double the revenue shares captured by producers and operators (Hotvedt, 2021). When done at scale, this amounts to an additional \$3.7 billion in revenue for tribal communities (Hotvedt, 2021).

Overall, the Forging Last-Mile Protein Supply Chains in Indian Country program has offered a necessary and effective response to gaps in the food chains of these six grantee communities. Continued investment in programs such as this one will offer further insight into the ways in which funding dollars and programmatic expertise can be used to support tribal sovereignty and the overall well-being of tribes across the United States.

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