

# FACES OF NATIVE AGRICULTURE

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# LETTER FROM NAAF'S CEO:

Dear friends and colleagues, at the heart of every thriving community is the dedication of people who care deeply about the land, their families, and the generations to come. In Native agriculture, that dedication is especially powerful. From producers tending fields and livestock, to educators and innovators shaping the next generation, the work being done across Indian Country ensures that we have the food, fiber, and fuel we need to sustain not just our communities, but our sovereign nations.

This first edition of Faces of Native Agriculture is our opportunity to celebrate those individuals: the people behind the programs, production, and innovation. Through their commitment, we see the embodiment of resilience, vision, and leadership. Their work is building rural economies, strengthening communities, and carrying forward traditions that have been nurtured for generations.

The Native American Agriculture Fund exists because of the historic settlement of *Keepseagle v. Vilsack*. That settlement addressed the injustices that generations of Native farmers and ranchers endured. While the claimants' experiences remind us of the harms of the past, the programs we fund today are rooted in hope

and action, creating opportunities, providing support, and ensuring that the next generation of Native agriculturalists have the tools and resources to thrive.

In this publication, you'll meet NAAF grantees, program participants, and producers who are shaping the future of agriculture in powerful ways. You'll read about their hands-on work, innovative approaches, and commitment to their communities. These stories are reminders that lasting change comes from the dedication of people who are committed to ensuring Native agriculture remains strong, sustainable, and culturally grounded.

NAAF is a draw-down trust fund bound by a 20-year term outlined in our trust agreement.

This underscores the urgency and importance of our work. Every investment we make in Native producers, youth, and community-driven programs is designed to leave a lasting legacy. We are proud to highlight these individuals and their achievements, and we hope that their stories inspire you as much as they inspire us.

Thank you for your continued partnership and support of agriculture. Together, we are building a stronger, more resilient future.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Toni Stanger-McLaughlin".

Toni Stanger-McLaughlin  
Chief Executive Officer  
Native American Agriculture Fund



The quotes and perspectives shared in the publication reflect the experiences and views of the individuals featured and do not necessarily reflect the views of NAAF.



# RIGHTING THE ROWS

How a Landmark Case Replanted the Future of Native Agriculture

By NAAF Staff

Lead plaintiffs Marillyn Keepseagle, Claryca Mandan, and Porter Holder celebrate the court's decision in *Keepseagle v. Vilsack*. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

**T**hey arrived in Washington, D.C., from every corner of Indian Country: ranchers, farmers, lenders, advocates, elders, and youth. Some showed up at the courthouse carrying stacks of papers and decades of frustration. For many, it was about more than a legal case. It was about safeguarding generations of family and Tribal legacy. Others came simply to be heard. Denied access to credit and U.S. Department

of Agriculture (USDA) programs, Native American farmers and producers across the country witnessed their land shrink, their operations stall, and their communities lose faith in a system that was meant to sustain them. Change began taking shape when Native producers started speaking out, connecting with one another, and taking legal action. What began in North Dakota eventually spread nationwide.

## ***Keepseagle v. Vilsack***

The Keepseagle case originated with Marilyn and George Keepseagle, ranchers from the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe who filed a lawsuit against the USDA in 1999. The lawsuit alleged the USDA had denied Native American farmers and ranchers equal access to farm loans and loan servicing, resulting in significant economic losses.

Plaintiffs contended that the USDA's discriminatory practices placed Native producers at a severe disadvantage compared to their non-Native counterparts.

According to lead plaintiff, rancher, and former board member of the Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF), Claryca Mandan, "We started to see Native American producers who were losing their land on the

courthouse steps in the respective counties that they lived in."

For Mandan, cattle production has always been an integral part of life on the Fort Berthold Reservation. At the age of 18, Mandan leveraged capital through a youth loan to purchase registered Hereford cattle and equipment alongside her siblings. In 1979 and 1980, Mandan and her husband utilized the USDA to leverage

a farm operating loan to set off on their own. Not long after, the country experienced a farm crisis, and poor producing conditions made withstanding agriculture's swings even more difficult.

"We weren't able to survive the drought and the financial hardships," Mandan said. "We thought it was just in our local office ... but as we started talking to other Native producers across



Left, Claryca Mandan and right, Porter Holder. (Photos provided)



South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming, we realized there was a pattern.”

During this time, the government created additional support and programs to offset the agricultural economic downturn. However, access for Native Americans was limited, and as a result, thousands upon thousands of acres of Trust land were foreclosed on.

### Turning Point

Porter Holder, a rancher and citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and former board member for NAAF, has spent decades building his operation

while advocating for regenerative grazing practices and stronger ranchers faced.

“I probably got a call every week from somebody [impacted],”

## WE STARTED TO SEE NATIVE AMERICAN PRODUCERS WHO WERE LOSING THEIR LAND ON THE COURTHOUSE STEPS IN THE RESPECTIVE COUNTIES THAT THEY LIVED IN.

Claryca Mandan

support for Native producers. As one of the lead plaintiffs in the Keepseagle lawsuit, Holder and other claimants took the time to hear directly from those who had been denied access to USDA programs, listening to stories of lost opportunities, and in some cases, entire farms taken, despite assurances that support was being provided. These conversations gave them a firsthand understanding of the widespread challenges Native farmers and

Holder explained. From one producer to another, the stories began to build momentum. Testimonies were shared, records were gathered, and voices long ignored began to be heard. The progress made through Keepseagle stands as a testament to those who spoke up, many of whom fought not only for themselves, but for producers they would never meet.

After years of litigation and negotiation, the case was settled in 2011 under the Obama administration. The settlement included a financial compensation fund of approximately \$680 million to provide relief to eligible Native American farmers and ranchers who had experienced discrimination, beginning as far back as 1979.

“Don’t forget where we come from. Don’t forget this money has got blood, sweat, and tears on it,” Holder reminded.

When the settlement was

finalized, rather than allowing unclaimed funds to be diverted away from their intended purpose, a court-approved *cy-près* distribution created an opportunity for the

## DON'T FORGET WHERE WE COME FROM. DON'T FORGET THIS MONEY HAS GOT BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS ON IT.

Porter Holder

unclaimed funds to serve the same underlying intent of the settlement: addressing the systemic barriers and harms experienced by Native producers. This ultimately led to the Native American Agriculture Fund’s creation.

“From a courtroom remedy came a movement to rebuild what had been denied: access and opportunity,” said Toni Stanger-McLaughlin, NAAF CEO. “The Native American Agriculture Fund was created not only to honor the Keepseagle settlement, but to actively address the harms experienced by Native producers. We recognize our responsibility to the farmers and ranchers who

were denied opportunities, and our mission is to ensure their voices, their work, and their communities are supported and strengthened. Through every grant, partnership, and program, we strive to create pathways that expand opportunity, build resilience, and sustain a thriving future for Native agriculture.”

### Future

Today, Holder and Mandan encourage producers to explore the resources available through USDA, which is a striking shift. Just decades prior, both Holder and Mandan faced systemic barriers and discrimination from the very agencies they now encourage producers to work with.

What was once a landscape of exclusion and frustration has gradually transformed, and while challenges remain, Native producers today have more access, support, and opportunity than ever before.

### KEEPSEAGLE CASE TIMELINE

1997 - 1999  
Native producers begin voicing USDA discrimination; Keepseagle case filed.

2010  
Settlement reached for \$760 million ~3,600 claimants compensated.

2016 - 2018  
Settlement remaining funds (\$266 million) directed to create the Native American Agriculture Fund.

2019  
NAAF launches grantmaking to strengthen Native food and agriculture economies.

2020 - 2025  
NAAF funding across 590 programs directly impacts more than 100,000 individuals.



Toni Stanger-McLaughlin serves as CEO of the Native American Agriculture Fund.

These individual experiences illustrate a larger story: across Indian Country, Native producers are driving a transformation in

has injected more than \$86 million across 590 grants, with grantees supporting more than 105,000 Tribal farmers, ranchers,

**THANKS TO THE HARD WORK OF OUR GRANTEES AND OTHERS, ROWS OF OPPORTUNITY ARE BEING REPLANTED — GROWING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES, THRIVING FARMS, AND A STRONGER FUTURE FOR AMERICAN AGRICULTURE.**

Toni Stanger-McLaughlin

agriculture. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, American Indian and Alaska Native producers now contribute more than \$6.2 billion in economic value, a 75% increase from the \$3.5 billion reported in 2017.

Since its creation in 2019, NAAF

gatherers, students, and youth. These investments help grantees expand operations, strengthen local food systems, and create lasting opportunities.

Because of NAAF's investment, "we're producing more young people than ever before pursuing

Native agricultural careers, and more educated producers who enter the business with stronger skills and credit knowledge than previous generations," Mandan explained. In fact, the 2022 Census of Agriculture data revealed that Native farmers and ranchers are younger than the national average, signaling a new generation investing in the land and the future of agriculture.

"We are incredibly proud of the work our grantees are doing every day to ensure that Native communities, and all of us, have the food, fuel, and fiber we need to thrive," Stanger-McLaughlin said. "Their dedication is not just sustaining agriculture today; it's building a brighter, stronger tomorrow for generations to come."

"The ripples of the Keepseagle settlement grow stronger every day. The progress made is a testament to what can be achieved when resources and determination come together."

"Thanks to the hard work of our grantees and others, rows of opportunity are being replanted — growing resilient communities, thriving farms, and a stronger future for American agriculture."

# CULTIVATING LEADERS

Akiptan's Commitment to Native Youth in Agriculture

By Mary Belle Zook (Citizen Potawatomi Nation)



Elijah Brewer represents one of many inspiring youth carrying agriculture forward. (Photo provided)

Elijah Brewer steps out across the rolling prairies near Dupree, South Dakota, where cattle graze and the horizon stretches wide. As a young Native rancher, working with the land is more than a family tradition.

Tribe, Brewer grew up in the Red Scaffold area and graduated from Dupree High School before beginning studies at South Dakota State University, where he currently majors in

Animal Science with a minor in Agricultural Business. It is a calling that connects him to his Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe, his community, and the generations who came before him.

"I became interested in agriculture as I have grown up around it with friends and family all being involved within the agricultural setting," Brewer said.

An enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux

Animal Science with a minor in Agricultural Business.

Through programs supported in part by NAAF, Brewer has received both financial assistance and professional experience designed to nurture young leaders in agriculture. He is a recipient of the Okhíchanye Scholarship and a participant in the Akiptan Summer Internship, initiatives that reflect Akiptan's name, drawn from the Lakota word meaning to work together, to share. Initiatives like Akiptan's are helping Brewer and other youth turn their education into a lifelong commitment to strengthening their community through agriculture.

**Planting Seeds: Scholarships, Internships, and Youth Programs**

The Okhíchanye Scholarship — whose name means "cultivation" in Lakota — was designed to support the next generation of agriculturalists. For Brewer, it provided more than just financial

assistance. "It served as a notice that my community believed in me and wanted to help me pursue my education and goals in life," he said.

Program Officer, said the scholarship is about broadening students' understanding of what Native agriculture can be.

"Investing in youth is investing in our communities," said Skya Ducheneaux, Akiptan's Executive Director. "Someone took a chance on me as a young person, and

now it's my responsibility to create those same

Brewer first learned about the scholarship through

## IT SERVED AS A NOTICE THAT MY COMMUNITY BELIEVED IN ME AND WANTED TO HELP ME PURSUE MY EDUCATION AND GOALS IN LIFE.

Elijah Brewer

Akiptan's outreach at a local career fair. He joined Akiptan's 2024 Summer Internship Program, where he focused on leading social media and marketing content for Akiptan's Programs team. During the internship, he expanded his knowledge of finance and succession planning within agriculture, gaining hands-on experience that complements his academic studies.

Dawn LeBeau, Akiptan's Senior

"You don't have to be on the ranch to be part of this," LeBeau said.

"We want students to understand that agriculture includes finance, advocacy, education, and entrepreneurship — all of it is connected."

By giving students hands-on experience in agriculture and financial systems, Akiptan creates opportunities for young people to gain practical skills while staying rooted in community values.

opportunities for others."

Brewer agreed, noting that young people in his community are eager to contribute to the future of agriculture.

"Being in rural South Dakota, your friends and family are all in the industry, and everyone helps each other out," he explained. "That's how it was for me, and I think neighbors helping neighbors is a great way for the youth to engage

within agriculture."

LeBeau added that programs like the Okhíchanye Scholarship and the internship are only two examples of Akiptan's broader commitment to youth development. Through a variety of initiatives, the organization provides mentorship, access to networks, and the skills needed to grow and sustain projects that strengthen agriculture and expand opportunities.

### Looking Ahead: Carrying Forward the Work

As Brewer advances his studies at South Dakota State University, he is already thinking about how to apply what he is learning to benefit his community.

"With my degree, I plan on being

able to come back and use my knowledge of the industry to help out the local ranchers and anyone else in the agricultural field," he said.

He also recognizes the balance between tradition and technology that defines modern Native agriculture.

"New innovations that make things quicker and easier take away from the values and life lessons that agriculture and this way of life can teach that technology couldn't. On the other hand, I still see the youth getting out there and being willing to go to brandings, fall shots, and others," Brewer said.

Ducheneaux sees students like Brewer as essential to Akiptan's vision of long-term growth.

"It's all about the future generations," she said. "We need to invest in youth now, so they can lead Native agriculture tomorrow."

With support from NAAF, programs such as the Okhíchanye Scholarship and Akiptan internships are equipping youth with the knowledge, mentorship, and practical experience they need to succeed.

By fostering skills, confidence, and a sense of community, these initiatives help ensure that agriculture continues to thrive, preserving a legacy of working together, sharing knowledge, and strengthening communities for generations to come.



South Dakota's thriving prairie grasslands play a vital role in sustaining agriculture, supporting producers like Elijah Brewer and the cattle operation that depends on healthy land and grazing systems.





Eddie Moore, citizen of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, once thought being a Native farmer was the anchor holding him down, but instead, it serves as the wind under his wings. (Photo provided).

# THE ANCHOR OR THE WIND

The Moore Family Redefines What It Means to be a Native Producer

By Keona Mason (Kickapoo Tribe of Oklahoma)

**E**ddie Moore still remembers the day the USDA officer leaned back in his chair, snuffed out his cigarette on the ashtray and bluntly said, “You ain’t gettin’ no money from here.” The words left a scar on his family’s farm but have since been turned into a testament of resilience, renewal, and determination to carry the Moore family legacy forward.

Unfortunately, his experience was far from unique. Across the country, countless Native producers faced the same barriers and dismissals, stories that together laid the groundwork for the Keepseagle case.

Filed in 1999, the case revealed the systemic harms Native farmers and ranchers had endured for generations in trying to access USDA farm loan programs.

## Cultivating a Family Tradition

The Moore family got their start in agricultural pursuits in the late 1800s with great grandpa, William Luther, also known as W.L., Moore, who served as a preacher and sold Bibles. W.L. Moore, a Waccamaw Siouan from Columbus County, North Carolina, later moved to Robeson County, North Carolina, where he purchased land and married a Lumbee woman. Eddie’s grandfather and father continued the work, and by the late 20th century, Eddie and his brother Luther joined their mother in the fields raising tobacco, starting Moore Brothers AG.

“Tobacco business was pretty good,” Eddie Moore said. “Everybody had a few hogs, but tobacco was king.”

Tobacco was still a staple crop for the state in the 20th century,

with production of swine, sweet potatoes, turkeys, and dry beans soon to follow.

Eddie Moore’s passion for agriculture trickled down to his children. Beginning with his first son, Lee Moore, who raises corn, soybeans, wheat, and beef cattle. “I’ve been farming for approximately 20 years, or 20 plus years, and I’m 28 years old,” Lee Moore said. “There haven’t been many years of life that I wasn’t farming. I’m thankful to be able to do it.”

For the Moore family, agriculture is the “golden bond” they get to be a part of, Lee Moore said.

“Farming is very demanding,” Eddie Moore said. “You might miss a ball game, or a trip to Carowinds, or something else because you need to be on the farm.”



Left: Brothers Eddie (left) and Luther Moore began their life of agriculture in growing tobacco with their mother, a task that has since turned into a generational passion for agriculture. Right: While the family no longer grows tobacco, beef cattle marketing through Moore Brothers Natural has become a key pillar to the family's farming operation. (Photo provided)

Lee's sister, Lenora, also grew up in the same agriculturally involved environment; however, did not jump into agriculture the same way as her brother.

"I grew up on the farm just like Lee, but I did not get hit with the farming bug," Lenora Moore laughed.

After realizing spending endless hours on the farm was not the ideal, Lenora Moore sought out another avenue to agriculture, she said. She found her way to agriculture through NAAF.

"It really was just perfect. The stars aligned," she said of her role as grants compliance officer.

The opportunity to work at NAAF has given Lenora Moore a chance to use her skills and background

in a way to support Native farmers and ranchers, she said.

"I would like to leave a legacy as someone who was conscientious of the land and of their community and family," Lenora Moore said. "I heard that people will forget what you said, they'll

forget what you do, but they'll never forget how you made them feel. I always want to leave someone with the impression that I made them feel good."

However, the Moore agricultural legacy does not stop there. Belton Moore, Eddie's

second-oldest son, has devoted his career and education to expanding access to capital for Native producers. Karli Moore, Eddie's oldest daughter, is carrying the family vision forward with a focus on sustainability.

Her doctoral program's research

## I WOULD LIKE TO LEAVE A LEGACY AS SOMEONE WHO WAS CONSCIENTIOUS OF THE LAND AND OF THEIR COMMUNITY AND FAMILY

### Lenora Moore



Eddie (second from the left back row) and his wife Tyra's love for agriculture continues through their children: Lenora Moore (left back row), daughter; Lee Moore (far right back row), son; Belton Moore (front left); not pictured Kamryn Moore, daughter-in-law; Karli Moore, daughter; and Carissa Moore, daughter-in-law. (Photo provided)

focuses on the environmental, economic and political dimensions of Tribal agriculture. Even as the next generation carries the Moore agricultural heritage into new areas of leadership and innovation, their journey has not been without roadblocks.

### The Anchor

In 1987, Eddie and Luther Moore, who are citizens of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina, traveled to their local USDA office to meet with a staff member about obtaining two loans to split a farm they were renting, Eddie Moore said.

Eddie Moore still remembers

the smoked-filled office, the employee's cigarette burning out just before he dismissed them, he said. "Ain't gettin' no money from here," Eddie Moore impersonated. "We didn't even fill out an application. We basically didn't do anything but say, 'Okay, I reckon that's that.'"

Decades later, the *Keepseagle v. Vilsack* settlement, a class-action lawsuit addressing USDA discrimination against Native farmers, offered a chance for restitution. Luther's claim was accepted. Eddie's was denied.

"A second denial for me, seemed like all the other boats was lifted, and my anchor was holding me down deep in the water," Eddie

Moore said. Although the denials Eddie Moore experienced felt powerful at the moment, the Moore family stuck together, and each found their way to support agriculture where they hope they can leave a lasting impact.

### The Wind

The family wants people to look back at them and see that they were good farmers and future generations can carry the things they started, Lee Moore said.

"If you think about it, it's all about the dollar," Eddie Moore said. "That's not our primary goal. Our strongest vision is tending to the land; try to leave it as good or better than we found it.



Three generations: Eddie, his son Lee, and grandson Weston, work side by side on their family farm, cultivating both the land and their shared legacy. (Photo provided)

so like it, and agriculture is broad,” he said.

Agriculture is only important to people who eat food and wear clothes, Eddie Moore said. Many people only think of production agriculture, but sharing the role of

them, they need us.” We need to work together.”

Lee Moore emphasized that agricultural producers, especially Native producers, are vital to the country, even if they employ

Carolina, are Native Americans,” Lee Moore said. “If the Native Americans aren’t supported, that doesn’t leave many people to do the production.”

It is critical to ensure producers

**OUR STRONGEST VISION IS TENDING TO THE LAND; TRY TO LEAVE IT AS GOOD OR BETTER THAN WE FOUND IT.**

Eddie Moore

the consumer is important too, he added.

“Going forward, especially as Native producers, we need to lean into sharing that with the rest of the world,” Eddie Moore said. “They’re the consumers. We need

methods that differ from the status quo. That is more reason to support Native producers, he added.

“A large portion of the producers in Robeson County, North

are supported to be viable for years to come, he said.

Lenora Moore echoed that sentiment, noting the stewardship Native farmers bring.

“Some communities are majority made up of Native producers,” she said. “What I’ve seen from Native producers is that they hold a lot of respect, love, and care for the land they work.”

Through the years, Eddie Moore

Lee Moore can attest to these positive changes: “We’re turning the corner, and maybe being a Native producer is a positive thing.”

Eddie Moore is also optimistic about the future of Native

In the next 20 years, he envisions Native producers feeding the consumers directly, he added.

“I know that the land has the opportunity to meet the needs of the people if we treat that land right,” he said. “I’m excited

**I’M EXCITED THAT THERE’S GOING TO BE NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND TO BE A NATIVE PRODUCER IS NOT GOING TO BE AN ANCHOR AROUND OUR NECK, BUT MAYBE SOME WIND UNDER OUR WINGS.**

Eddie Moore

agriculture, he said.

“I think in my lifetime, I felt that being a Native producer went from a burden to boost,” Eddie Moore said.

that there’s going to be new opportunities and to be a Native producer is not going to be an anchor around our neck, but maybe some wind under our wings.”

has watched the transition of the perception of being a Native producer. With generations before him, including his father, being a Native farmer limited opportunities, he said. Within North Carolina, Native people were oftentimes limited to only serving as sharecroppers, but he sees a future where Native producers are seen as leaders, he said.

Although the number of producers nationwide continues to decline and the average age of the farmer rises, Native agriculture is moving in the opposite direction.

According to the 2017 and 2022 Censuses of Agriculture, Native American and Alaska Native producers nearly doubled their economic impact, with sales climbing from \$3.5 billion to more than \$6 billion. This reflects significant growth across both crop and livestock sectors. The ranks of young and beginning Native farmers are also on the rise, signaling a new generation stepping into the industry.



The Moore family sees a bright future for Native agriculture, working with farmers and consumers to create long-term, sustainable solutions. (Photo provided)



As the director of agriculture at the Lower Sioux Indian Community, Joey Goodthunder leads the Tribe's agricultural endeavors.

# FROM THE SOIL UP:

Joey Goodthunder and the Future of Agriculture at Lower Sioux Indian Community

By Mary Belle Zook (Citizen Potawatomi Nation)

**T**he soil near the Lower Sioux Indian Community is almost black: dark, rich, and alive with potential. On a warm fall day, Joey Goodthunder kneels in a field of soybeans, the plants crisp and golden in the sun. With a grin, he plucks a soybean from the pod and pops it into his mouth, crunching it with the kind of satisfaction that comes from knowing the land intimately.

For Goodthunder, farming represents more than an occupation. It is a source of purpose, strengthening his connection to his Tribe and the land while reflecting his vision for the Lower Sioux Indian Community's future.

"I came back and forth to my grandfather's farm right here on the Lower Sioux, and that's what got me the bug for farming, and it never left," Goodthunder said. "When you get into [agriculture] it's hard to get it out of your blood."

## Sowing New Opportunities

When the Tribe hired Goodthunder a few years ago to become its director of agriculture, the goal was twofold: to reestablish a relationship with the land and to diversify the Tribe's economic portfolio. Today, the Tribe manages just under 1,000 acres of farmland, producing soybeans and corn on some of the most fertile ground in Minnesota.

Farming at Lower Sioux, like much of Indian Country, is not without its challenges. Surrounding land is mostly owned and operated by non-Native producers, and high land prices make expansion difficult. Rising equipment and implement costs add another challenge to achieving sustainable growth.

Despite these barriers, the Tribe's agricultural operation continues to thrive. From spring planting to fall harvest, Goodthunder balances productivity with



Even in difficult years, whether due to markets or growing conditions, Joey Goodthunder finds agriculture rewarding and inspiring.

stewardship, including managing soil health, monitoring crop conditions, and making difficult decisions when challenges arise. In the fall of 2025, a fungal disease affecting corn posed a serious threat. The treatments were costly and ultimately not feasible, prompting the Tribe to weigh short-term yields against long-term sustainability. Instead, Goodthunder emphasized preventive measures, including crop rotation, soil management, and careful field monitoring, to protect the land and strengthen future harvests.

Commodity farming can be unpredictable, but Goodthunder

approaches it with precision, optimism, and a deep respect for the land. “Farming is an addiction, and it’s gambling in a way,” Goodthunder said with a

**I CAME BACK AND FORTH TO MY GRANDFATHER’S FARM RIGHT HERE ON THE LOWER SIOUX, AND THAT’S WHAT GOT ME THE BUG FOR FARMING, AND IT NEVER LEFT.**

Joey Goodthunder

laugh. “We gamble every year, but I just can’t get the love for ag to go away.”

**Teaching by Example**

Goodthunder’s work extends far beyond the fields. A former FFA member and active participant in the Minnesota Farm Bureau, he sees agriculture as a tool for

leadership and opportunity, particularly for Native youth. Each season, he invites young people to help in the fields, from picking up rocks and clearing debris to seeing firsthand how crops grow.

“I like talking to adults about hemp and everything, but kids are just so much more fun,” Goodthunder said.

“They have the wildest questions. They’re just hilarious.”

At home, his children are already following in his footsteps, raising livestock and learning the rhythms of farm life. Their excitement is a reminder of why his work matters and why Native representation in production agriculture is so important.



Through the work and dedication of Danny Desjarlais (right) and Joey Goodthunder (left), the Lower Sioux Indian Community builds opportunity through agriculture for Tribal members.

**Building a Broader Vision**

The Tribe’s agricultural reach extends beyond row crops. In addition to corn and soybeans, Lower Sioux has ventured into hemp production, led by program manager Danny Desjarlais, who oversees operations, processing, and broader community-based development. Goodthunder works closely alongside Danny Desjarlais, ensuring the fields produce high-quality crops for processing.

Together, they represent two sides of a shared vision: Goodthunder bringing hands-on expertise from the soil up, and Desjarlais guiding strategy, product development, and innovation. The Tribe is transforming hemp into materials such as housing



The Lower Sioux Indian Community employs a variety of conservation methods throughout their row crop production.

components, blending tradition, self-sufficiency, and sustainability.

Planning for this effort was supported by a feasibility study funded by a NAAF grant, helping the Tribe assess how hemp could strengthen its agricultural base and diversify local opportunities.

### A Different Kind of Native Agriculture

Across Indian Country, livestock production dominates nearly 40 percent of Native agricultural activity. At Lower Sioux, the focus on row crops sets the Tribe apart. On around 1,000 acres, Goodthunder manages a complex, high-yield operation that showcases both technical skill and stewardship. His work demonstrates what is possible when Native producers are empowered to lead, blending modern production methods with

a commitment to community and sustainability.

### Looking Ahead

The road ahead is not without obstacles. Land prices remain high, access to credit is limited, and commodity markets are unpredictable. But Goodthunder and the Lower Sioux Indian Community approach each new season with determination and gratitude.

“We’re slowly trying to win and buy back our land,” Goodthunder said.

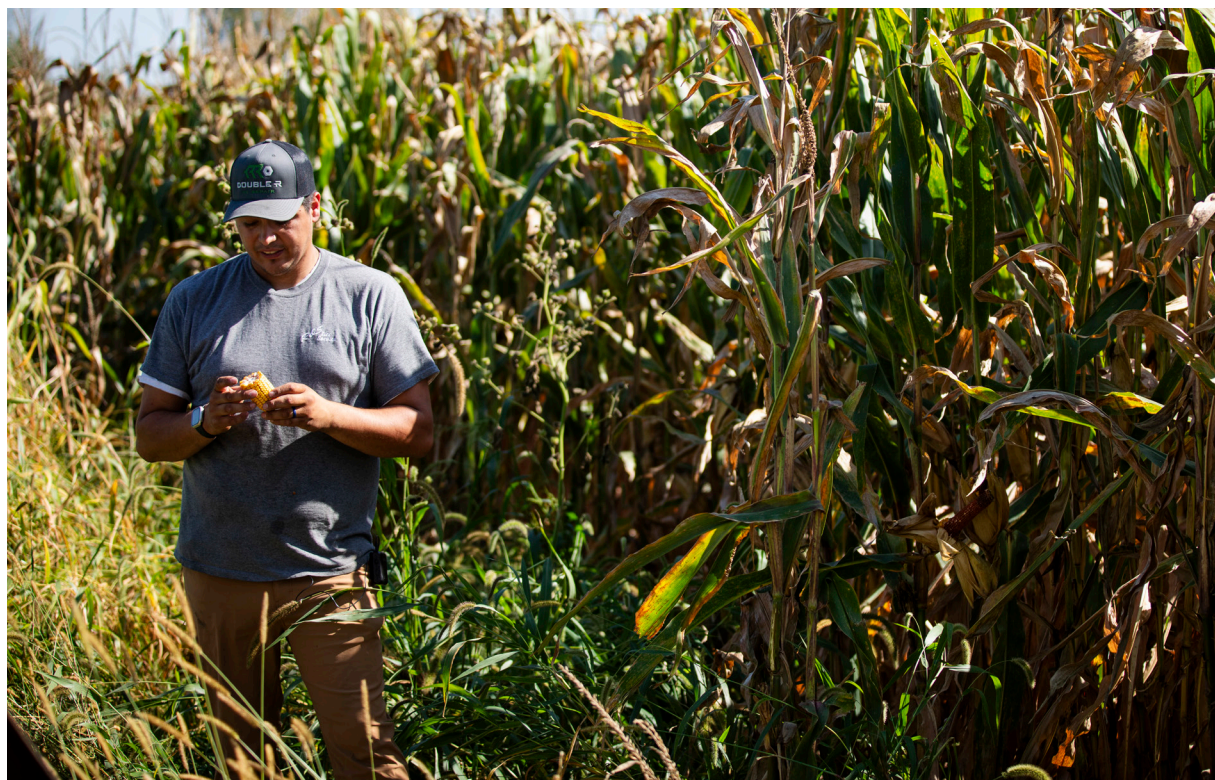
Tamara Desjarlais, Lower Sioux Indian Community Assistant Secretary/Treasurer, stands at the forefront of her Tribe’s journey to reclaim sovereignty and shape a self-sustaining future.

“We were people that lived off the

land. The more we get back to that relationship with our land, the more we are intertwined with our culture,” said Tamara Desjarlais, Lower Sioux Indian Community Assistant Secretary/Treasurer.

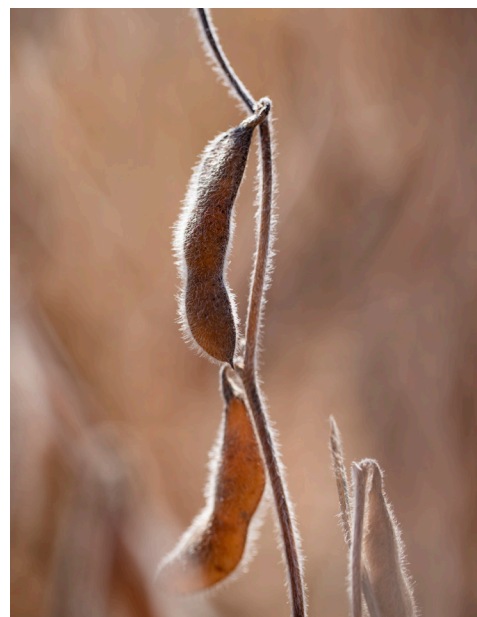
From her years in social services to her work as an elected official, Tamara Desjarlais sees agriculture as more than an economic driver — it is a path to healing and self-sufficiency for her community. Inspired by the efforts of her brother, Danny Desjarlais, and Goodthunder, she envisions agriculture as the foundation for new jobs, housing, and supportive spaces for women and children in crisis.

That vision takes shape in the fields, where producers like Goodthunder see every acre planted as an act of both resilience and renewal.



Joey Goodthunder examines the Tribe’s corn crop ahead of the fall 2025 harvest.

As the sun dips below the horizon, he stands in the fading light, soil dark and full of promise. For the Lower Sioux Indian Community, the future of agriculture is already taking root: one field, one harvest, and one farmer at a time.



Upper left: The Tribe’s hempcrete production creates strong, fire resistant materials; Upper right: The rich, dark soil of southwestern Minnesota provides fertile ground for crop production, such as soybeans; Middle left: Danny Desjarlais serves as a leading voice in hemp production and processing, regularly educating other communities about the crop’s potential and the Lower Sioux’s innovative operation; Middle right: On-site processing facilities allow the Tribe to take its harvests and transform into sustainable building materials and byproducts; Lower left: Row crops like these soybeans are part of the Lower Sioux Indian Community’s expanding agricultural operations; Bottom right: Joey Goodthunder’s work seeks to expand opportunities and ensure sustainable land management for future generations.

# NOURISHING THE NATIONS:

Meagen Baldy's Vision for Food and Sovereignty

By Mary Belle Zook (Citizen Potawatomi Nation)

From her small hog farm and community garden on the Hoopa Valley Reservation in Northern California to the national stage of U.S. agriculture policy, Meagen Baldy (Hupa) carries a simple truth: food security begins with nurturing the land and its people.

Baldy serves as one of the first members to the USDA's Tribal Advisory Committee, on numerous conservation advisory councils, and more. But for a good part of her life, how she fit into agriculture was unknown, she said.

"I never thought I would get into food," she said. "I just grew up cooking for my family because we lived in poverty, and I wanted to make sure everyone had something to eat." It wasn't until later, while working with the Klamath Trinity Conservation District that she realized how deeply food was tied to her identity.

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Meagen Baldy

"I thought ag was corn, cows, and tractors, and I didn't have any of that," she said. "Then I got thrown into the community garden."

## Holistic Approach

Leading the Hoopa Valley Tribe's community garden became a Baldy family affair

"They were my labor

force," she said and laughed. Her husband Guy helped till the soil, and her children and family helped plant and harvest. Their classmates would visit the garden on field trips, proud that their mom was "the garden lady."

"The first kindergartners I worked with are seniors now," she said. "That's how I know this work matters."

One day, a young girl visiting on a field trip told Baldy she was going to take some of the garden vegetables home because her family had no food.

"It broke my heart," Baldy explained. "It reminded me of who I was and that I had been that little girl once." That moment, and moments like it, help fuel Baldy's dedication to food sovereignty.

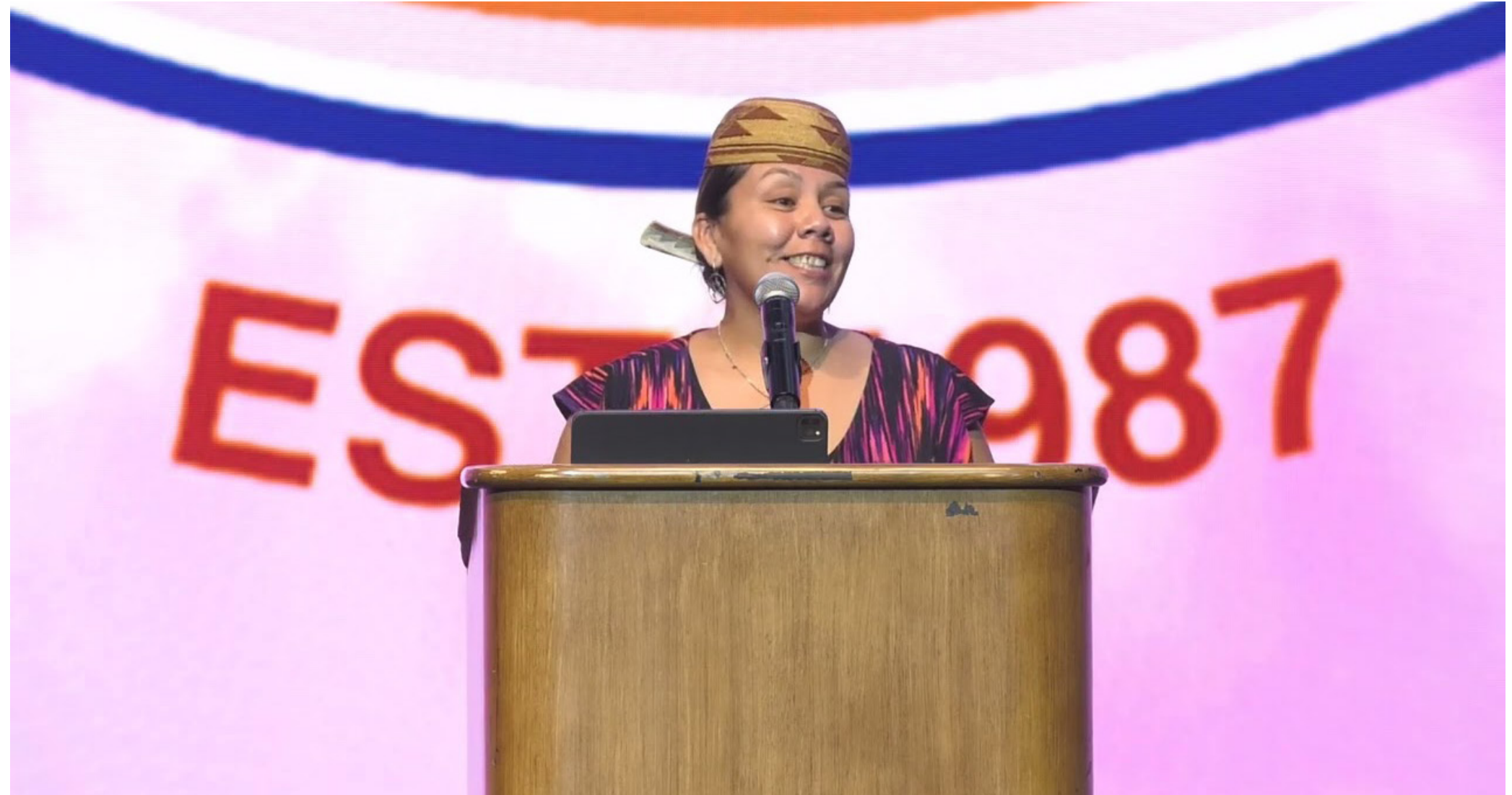
"Feeding each other isn't just something we do as part of life. It's part of our culture and identity," she said. "Nobody in our villages used to go hungry. But today, we have people on our reservations who are starving. I wanted to be someone who, if you were around me, you'd be fed."

From that seed grew a vision that connected food, policy, and sovereignty. "Cooking led me to ask where my food comes from, what policies shape it, and who controls it. It became this holistic view of how food works within our community," Baldy said.

Over time, she began advocating at local, state, and national levels to ensure that agricultural policy is inclusive of Indigenous food systems and priorities.

"When I started learning about agriculture, I realized our ways, gathering acorns, fishing, burning, harvesting medicines, that's all agriculture," she said. "But our people didn't see themselves reflected in those federal definitions."

## Growing Capacity Across Indian Country



Meagen Baldy carries a vision in which food, community, and culture grow together. (Photo provided)

Baldy's leadership across the Hoopa Valley Reservation naturally led to larger opportunities to serve. She became Director of the Klamath Trinity Resource Conservation District, where she expanded conservation and agriculture programs to support Tribal producers across Northern California.

In that role, Baldy also focused on investing in the next generation. She found creative ways to engage local youth in agriculture and traditional food systems, ensuring they could see themselves reflected in this work.

Through grant support from NAAF, she developed programs that taught youth traditional skills such as making fishing nets, a practice that connected them to their cultural roots while reinforcing food sovereignty. She also leveraged funding to help young people pursue their own agricultural projects, offering small grants and start-up support to turn their ideas into action.

"If our kids don't eat our traditional foods, they won't love them," she explained. "And if they don't love them, they won't protect them."

For Baldy, investing in youth is not just about education; it is about empowerment. By helping them see that agriculture could be both a livelihood and a way to serve their communities, it plants

seeds that continue growing into the future.

Her commitment to community-based agriculture next took her to the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative (IFAI),

where she served as a Food Safety Specialist. There, Baldy traveled throughout Indian Country leading hands-on trainings that empowered Tribal producers and food entrepreneurs. From teaching food preservation techniques to developing short courses on starting farmers' markets, she helped build the foundation for stronger, safer, and more resilient Tribal food economies.

Baldy's expertise and on-the-ground experience made her a natural fit for the Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC), where she joined the American Indian Foods program. In that role, Baldy worked to connect

Native producers with broader markets through IAC's Made/Produced by American Indians trademark, supporting Tribes and entrepreneurs in selling their products across the U.S. and abroad. Before becoming a staff member, she served for years on IAC's Board of Trustees.

### Food is Love

Today, as the Director of the Hoopa Valley Tribe's Self-Governance and Department of Commerce, Baldy continues to expand the reach of

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Meagen Baldy



Meagen Baldy's voice helps shape policies that support Indigenous food systems. (Photo provided)



Under the guidance and support of Meagen Baldy, students learn to make traditional fishing nets and carry forward cultural knowledge. (Photo provided)

Tribal sovereignty and self-determination.

"We can't be truly sovereign without control of our food," she said.

In addition to this role, she assists with her family's small farming operation, volunteers across the community, and ensures Tribal voices are heard in policy and decision-making, locally, regionally, and nationally.

"Learning the USDA web, all those programs and how they trickle down to the local level, that was important to me," she said.

Baldy's leadership style is defined by balance. She is as comfortable in a policy meeting as she is behind a farm stand or in a classroom. She leads with the compassion of an auntie and the determination of a seasoned champion for Indian Country.

while creating new economic opportunities.

Her story is a reminder that feeding people is not just about agriculture: it's about sovereignty, community, health, and hope.

"Love your people and love your food," she said. "When you love your people, you

won't want to see them hungry. When you love your food, you'll protect it."

**WHEN YOU LOVE YOUR PEOPLE, YOU WON'T WANT TO SEE THEM HUNGRY. WHEN YOU LOVE YOUR FOOD, YOU'LL PROTECT IT.**

Meagen Baldy

Within every chapter of her work, Baldy has emphasized the same vision: food as connection, empowerment, and culture. She has helped communities reclaim the knowledge to grow and prepare their own food, and she advocates for programs that protect Native foodways

