THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

When Native agriculture grows, all of Arizona grows | Opinion

Native farms support jobs and economic activity throughout Arizona. Removing barriers to capital and markets would help more of that prosperity stay in-state.

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One of us lives in Flagstaff, the other in Winslow. Drive the 60 miles of Interstate 40 between our towns on a Saturday, and you will see tribal agriculture all around: Navajo and Hopi families in pickups with water tanks in the bed, pulling trailers stacked with hay. Many have already driven more than an hour just to buy feed, fuel and groceries.

Few drivers realize they are passing through the heart of Arizona agriculture. American Indians operate 62 percent of Arizona's farms and manage 20 million acres, about 4 in every 5 acres of farm and ranch land. This year, a University of Arizona Cooperative Extension study, funded in part by the Native American Agriculture Fund, where we both serve, found that tribal agriculture supported $753 million in economic output and 3,820 jobs across Arizona in 2022.

Those numbers come despite real obstacles. About a third of homes on the Navajo Nation have no running water, so ranchers haul it long distances for their families and their livestock. The nearest large-animal veterinarian can be hours away. Meat processing plants are rare, so many ranchers sell calves at a discount to buyers who truck them out of state. The profits and processing jobs leave with them.

Two-thirds of Native farms in Arizona are under 10 acres, and much of what they grow feeds families and neighbors directly; the study valued that food at $116 million at grocery store prices. Federal help lags, too. In 2022, Native farms that received federal farm payments got an average of about $3,800, compared with $63,600 for other farms receiving payments.

The Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF) has invested almost $100 million in Native agriculture nationwide since 2019 and nearly $5.5 million in Arizona.

Our Arizona grantees are making every dollar count. Tolani Lake Enterprises near Winslow helps producers with drip irrigation, water catchment and irrigation systems. San Xavier Cooperative Farm and the Diné Community Development Corporation are helping producers start businesses and reach buyers. Schools across the state are showing young Native people they can build a future in agriculture.

The benefits do not stop at the reservation line. When a Navajo rancher gets a fair price for her calves, she buys feed in Winslow, tires in Flagstaff and equipment from a supplier in Phoenix. The study found that 85 percent of the ripple effects from Native agriculture reach beyond tribal lands: $297 million in sales and nearly 1,700 jobs elsewhere in Arizona. Maricopa County alone gained $203 million, followed by Yuma County at $31 million and Pima County at $18 million.

Grants like ours can only go so far. Native producers need loans they can get on trust land, which can be difficult to use as collateral. They need meat processing closer than a day's drive. A state loan guarantee program for producers on trust land, plus funding for mobile meat processing units, would keep more calves and more dollars, in Arizona. The rest of us can help, too. Buy lamb raised by Navajo ranchers and tepary beans grown by Tohono O'odham farmers. Shop at businesses owned by Native people and ask your grocery store to carry food from Native growers. When tribal agriculture grows, all of Arizona grows.

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