FALL 2026

VOL. 02

FACES of NATIVE AGRICULTURE



FEATURING THE WOMEN BEHIND THE WORK IN NATIVE AGRICULTURE

"A PLACE THAT FEELS LIKE HOME"
JENNA DUPREE

"SHE THOUGHT AGRICULTURE WOULD BE THE CAREER SHE WOULD NOT CHOOSE"
CHANEL FORD

"OYSTER GIRL"
JULIANNA SULLIVAN

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ABOUT FACES OF NATIVE AGRICULTURE

Faces of Native Agriculture builds on the rich history and culture of storytelling, highlighting the people behind the work happening across Tribal communities to grow agricultural opportunities. Launched in spring 2026, the magazine is published by the Native American Agriculture Fund twice a year, in spring and fall.

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Cover Photo by Karleigh Gomez (Provided by Julianna Sullivan)

ON THE COVER

Julianna Sullivan - Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

ABOUT THIS EDITION

The United Nations declared 2026 the International Year of the Woman Farmer to recognize the women who sustain food systems around the world. This special edition of Faces of Native Agriculture celebrates five Native women doing that work in their own communities: farmers, ranchers, fishers, harvesters, and leaders who are carrying agriculture forward and building a bright future.

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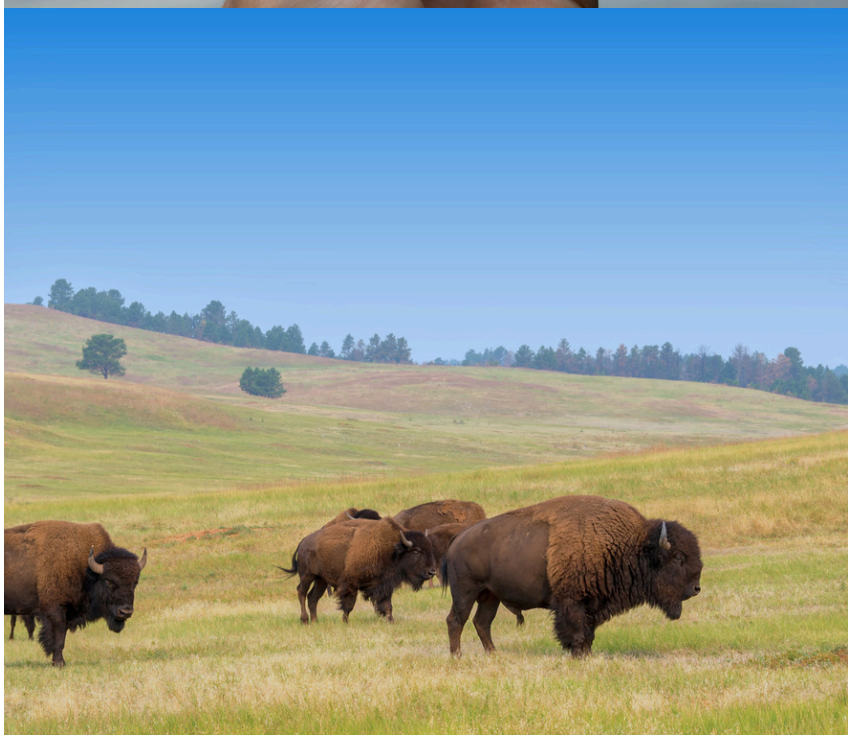
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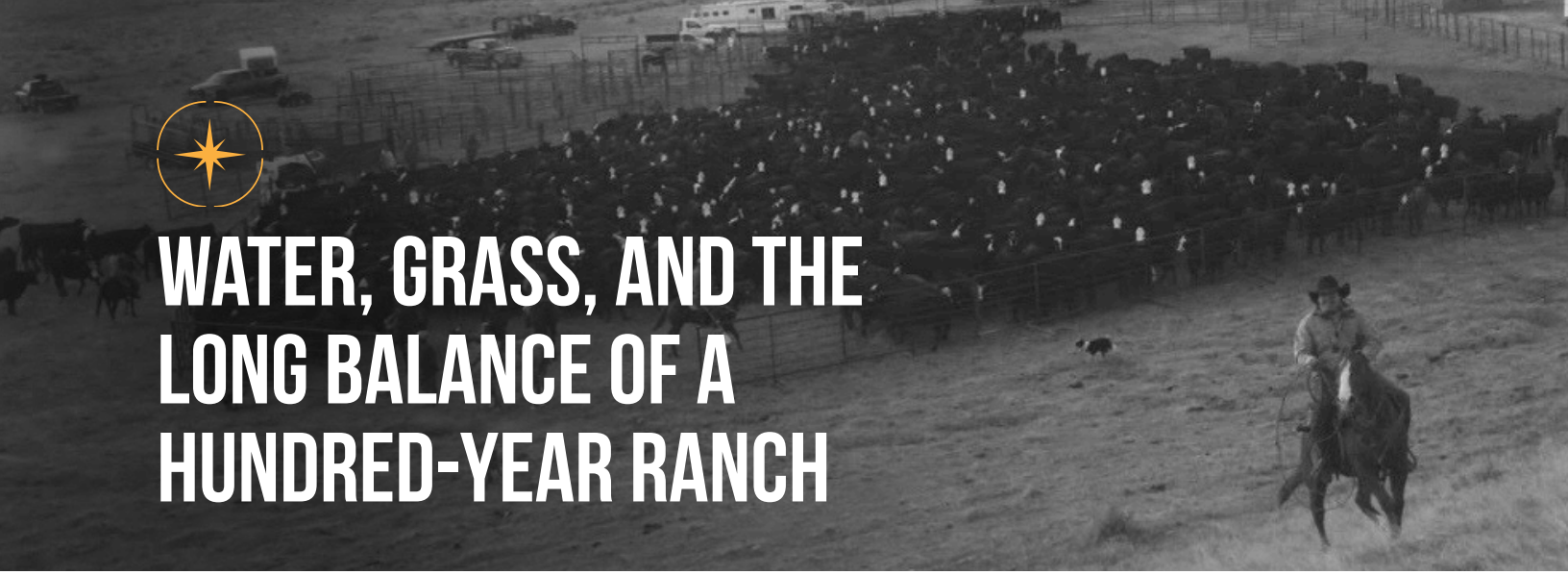
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The Weight They Carry

Whitney Sawney (Cherokee Nation)
Director of Communications and Policy – NAAF

Juanita Cole-Crasco, an enrolled member of the Gros Ventre Tribe, helps operate her family's Black Angus cow-calf ranch on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, where the operation has been in her husband's family since 1921.



WATER, GRASS, AND THE LONG BALANCE OF A HUNDRED-YEAR RANCH

Juanita Cole-Crasco, an enrolled member of the Gros Ventre Tribe, helps run a Black Angus cow-calf operation on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation that has been in her husband's family since 1921. (Photo provided)

The little ones come through the door at the ranch on the southeast corner of the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, and they want to start riding a horse before anyone has finished their coffee. They are the fifth generation to work these cows, and not one of them needs convincing.

"They just can't wait to get on a horse when they get here," said Tribal producer Juanita Cole-Crasco. "They just can't wait to get out there and work cows. And that's what's very, very important to us."

For Juanita, an enrolled member of the Gros Ventre Tribe, that passion is the whole point. For more than a century, she and her husband's family have held onto this land through drought, grasshoppers, bounced checks, and federal paperwork. She has spent decades keeping the operation's books, fighting its appeals, and teaching younger producers to do the same. What her grandchildren inherit will be more than cattle and grass. It will be proof of what it takes to keep a Native ranch in Native hands.

She knows what that is worth, because she knows what it has cost.

A HUNDRED YEARS OF GRASS

The land came to her husband's family in 1921, under the allotment era, when Native families across the northern plains were placed on parcels and told to make a living from them. In 2021, the ranch marked a century in the family name.

> "I JUST BELIEVE THAT WOMEN HAVE SO MUCH RESPONSIBILITY. YOU GOTTA BE TOUGH. THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT. BECAUSE SOME JOBS THAT WOMEN HAVE ARE UNDERVALUED."
> — JUANITA COLE-CRASCO

Juanita's husband Orville "Jake" Crasco is an enrolled member of the Assiniboine Tribe. Both are third-generation ranchers. She grew up on her family's place in the southwest corner of the same reservation, where her parents are still ranching today, with their own fifth and sixth generations coming up behind them.

At the end of the day, they can no longer count on grass or hay to help sustain their operation. In 2021, all that remained was water, and then that started going too.

WATER FOR THE COWS

The water in the range units was simply going to run out, Juanita explained.

A fellow rancher let Juanita and her husband know that there was an emergency program through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) and FSA and told them they had better go apply. So, they applied. They did what they were told to do. There were specifications to meet: a certain kind of tank, a certain gauge of wire, posts a certain distance apart, and they met them. They took two old wells that had been sitting in the range units, cleaned them out, and brought them back. They ran a line from a third well to a new tank out in the pasture. "That saved us," she said. "Otherwise, we'd probably be out of business, because we had no water out there."

Here is how these programs work: the producer pays for everything up front. That includes labor, fuel, equipment, and the well drillers. Farmers do not always have capital flow necessary to cover all of these expenses, so they may seek a loan from the bank, as was the case for Juanita's operation. After the project is complete, the farmer gets a percentage reimbursed from USDA. However, four months after the work was done, NRCS and FSA denied Juanita's projects. The reason was an environmental review that had lapsed on wells that had been sitting unused for decades. While it was a real requirement, it was also one nobody mentioned. The USDA staff member assigned to help them was new, and the question never came up.

"Of course, we should have specifically asked the question," she said. "But was that on our mind? No. All that was on our mind at that time was getting water for our cows."

Helping producers understand those requirements is supposed to be the job of the agency staff assigned to them. But in an emergency, Juanita and her husband were focused on one thing: keeping water in front of their cattle. The money they borrowed to save the herd stayed borrowed. They appealed USDA's denial at the committee level, the county level, the state level, and now the national level. Five years on, reviewers at the national level are finally hearing their case, and she has good feelings about it, even though she is carrying the debt while she waits.





Alongside ranching and a 40-year career in education, Juanita Cole-Crasco has run a star quilt business since 1987. (Photo provided)



“We don't do things wrong,” she said. “We try to do everything right. We try to follow all the rules.”

FAIR MARKET VALUE

That was one agency. Tribal ranching often means answering to several federal entities that do not always coordinate. “We have additional regulations,” she said. “We have additional financial situations.”

Start with credit. Some lenders simply will not work with reservation land held in trust, which means a producer can own ground and still be turned away from accessing financial lending due to land tenure considerations. Juanita and her husband each started with a single calf, worked their way into FSA, and from there into a banking relationship they have now held for decades. She is clear that the relationship, not just the land, is an asset. “If we had to go to a different bank and work with a different banker, things might be totally different,” she said.

While Juanita waits for her case to be heard, the cattle still need access to adequate forage. For Juanita, this means having to navigate working with another federal agency: the BIA, whose office is 25 to 35 miles away from the ranch. “We have to go in and see them,” she said. “And hope that they're in. Hope that they're in a good mood.”

The agency sets the grazing rate. It is supposed to be a fair market value, a midpoint between the lowest comparable rate available and the highest. In practice, Juanita said, the low end never makes it into the math. The Tribal rate sits around $12 a head per month. The high end runs around $35. The number they pay lands high. “That may not sound like a lot per cow,” she said, “but when you're running a lot of cows, it's a lot.”

The agency also sets the season. Six months, paid in advance, and to the tune of thousands of dollars. If the grass fails and the cattle come off early, the money does not come back.

And one year, they lost a range unit entirely, outbid by a non-Native operator who had run out of grass off the reservation and came looking for some on it. To stay, they would have had to beat his rate. Their cattle left the reservation for a few months.

Juanita Cole-Crasco and her husband, Orville “Jake” Crasco, an enrolled member of the Assiniboine Tribe, are both third-generation ranchers. (Photo provided)



According to Juanita, the frustration is not that the agencies exist. It is the shape of the help. “It's just sometimes the way they do things makes it real, real hard on us,” she explained.

WHAT IT COSTS

The most difficult years were not always about weather or paperwork. One year, an entire load of calves went to a buyer in Sioux Falls, and the check bounced. It took years to recover the face value, with no interest and nothing for the time. FSA did not sell them out, but it rolled their payments. That sounds like mercy, but it works like compound interest.

They kept their records through all of it. Juanita's brother-in-law was one of the claimants in Keepseagle v. Vilsack, a class action lawsuit that highlighted Native producers' documented experiences of unfair access to credit.

While the case settled in 2011, its effects are not history here. For families like Juanita's, the long-term impacts of those barriers are still being felt today, and the cost has never been counted only in dollars.

“It causes stress, it causes health problems, causes heart attacks, and causes lots of gray hair,” she said. “It's really hard on your health. Very hard on your health.”

In agriculture, there is no pause button. “Not for an appeal, not for a diagnosis, not for weather. You have to go outside and feed your cows in a blizzard,” she said.

BALANCING AS SUPERWOMAN

At the center of Juanita's world is her family and this work, and right beside her, accomplished in his own right, is her husband. But the teamwork she is grateful for also means she carries her own weight.

“I just believe that women have so much responsibility,” she said. “You gotta be tough. That's all there is to it. Because some jobs that women have are undervalued.”

For Juanita, that meant coordinating with two different babysitters, getting the kids to two different sports, and putting hundreds of miles on the family car each week. Coming home was no break from the grind, either. Farm chores and household duties were waiting. She carried all of it at once for years, and the reckoning, when it came, came through her health.

“I had to sit back and think — I can't be Superwoman no more,” she said. What balance looks like now is smaller and more deliberate. They added onto the house and built a good deck, and that is their peaceful space at the end of the day.

STILL HERE

She wants the land to stay a ranch, whole, and in Native hands.

“We were put on these reservations to make a living and we were told to be farmers and ranchers. We'll give you a horse and a cow, or a tractor, and we're told to make a living,” she said. “Some people weren't as fortunate. We have grass here. Some people were put on straight dirt. Unable to grow anything.”

She spends her time now teaching younger producers what took her decades to learn: setting up the books, building tally sheets, showing someone how to graft a calf onto a cow who lost hers, because saving one good young cow keeps a ranch in business another 10 years. The way to keep going, she said, is to build relationships with the bank and federal agencies, attend trainings, and stay educated.

“Know what's happening, how it's done, and why it's done,” she said. “Be involved.”

The drought is not over, and the appeal is not finished. They are slowing down, she said, because of age and health.

None of that is the same as leaving.

“We've gone through so much hardship, so much good, but we're still here, and we're gonna continue to be here,” she said.

Outside, the grandchildren are waiting on a horse.

The Crasco grandchildren, the fifth generation on the family ranch, can’t wait to get on a horse and work cows when they visit. (Photos provided)













Serving as the FFA advisor at Sequoyah High School provides Jenna Dupree a chance to share her excitement for agriculture with students from across the country. (Photo provided)

A Place That Feels Like Home

Mary Belle Zook (Citizen Potawatomi Nation)
Communications Officer - NAAF

At Sequoyah High School on the Cherokee Nation Reservation, Jenna Dupree is building the first FFA program at a Bureau of Indian Education school and showing Native students from across the country that they have a place and purpose in agriculture.

Walk into Jenna Dupree's classroom at Sequoyah High School (SHS) in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, on an ordinary afternoon and you will find what she lovingly calls organized chaos: students arranging flowers at one table, wiring a circuit at another, and possibly judging cuts of meat at a third. Two years ago, this room sat empty. Today it is one of the most in-demand spaces in the school, so full that SHS is working to add more agricultural education courses to keep up with student demand.

Jenna, a Cherokee Nation citizen, is the first FFA advisor and agriculture education instructor at SHS. The school is part of the Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) system, and her chapter is the first FFA program at any BIE school in the country. With support from the Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF), which helped fund the program's inception, Jenna built the first-in-the-nation chapter from an empty room.

“It's pretty big,” she said. “My kids don't understand that."

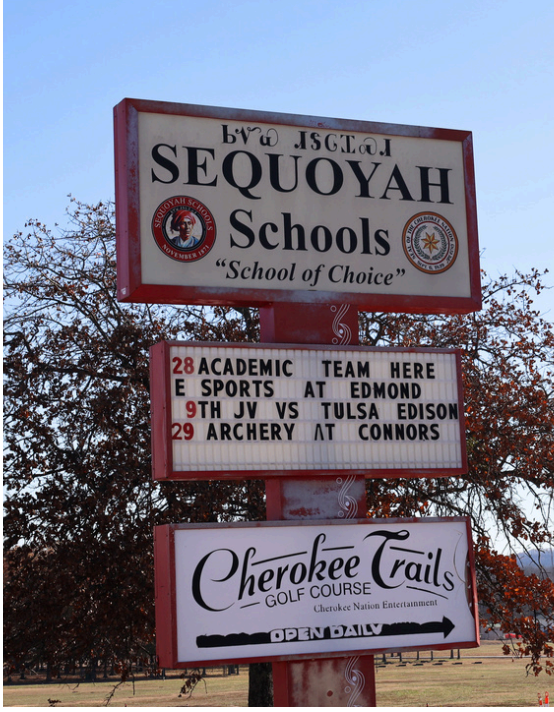
Jenna said she knows that one day her students will look back and see the legacy they are creating for Native agriculture.

A DIFFERENT PATH

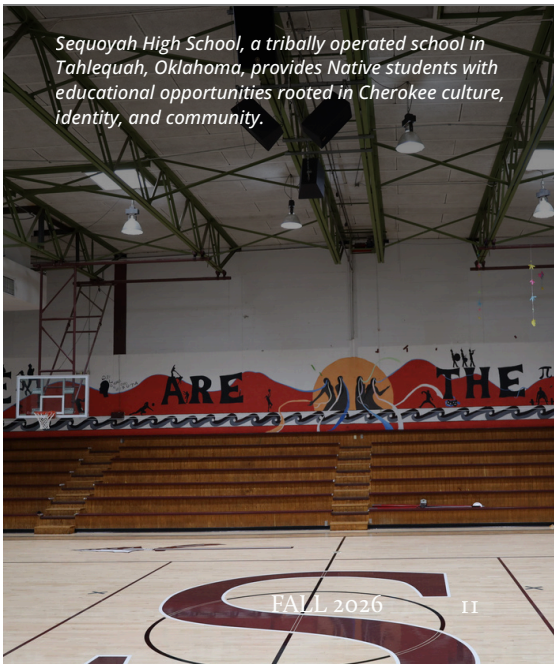
Jenna took what she called “a different path to becoming an ag teacher than most.” She grew up in Porter, Oklahoma, not far from Tahlequah and SHS, and studied at Oklahoma State University. While agricultural education was her original intent, she switched degree paths to agricultural leadership in the hopes it would open more career opportunities.

“Back then, there weren't very many women as ag teachers,” Jenna said. “Thinking about getting married, having a family, those types of things, I didn't feel like [ag education] was the right path.”

Fresh out of college, she took a job with State Farm Insurance and later spent about five years in Oklahoma's child welfare system, investigating families and placing children in her home county of Wagoner. While neither role was in agriculture, Jenna never forgot her roots in the industry.







Sequoyah High School, a tribally operated school in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, provides Native students with educational opportunities rooted in Cherokee culture, identity, and community.

“When I took jobs outside of the ag world, I still found ways to integrate into the ag world,” she said, “because it is a culture, it's a family.”

The years in child welfare left a mark and influence her classroom approach today. “I check everything at the door," Jenna said, "and no matter what happened yesterday, today's a new day.”

> **“MY VILLAGE OF MY KIDS AND MY FAMILY REALLY KEEP ME GOING.”**
> **— JENNA DUPREE**

Most of her students arrive at Sequoyah as freshmen from across the country, strangers to one another on the first day. Jenna set out to change that.

“I really try to create a culture of we are an FFA family,” she said. “You don't have to have any preconceived view, or any knowledge of agriculture, to come and be in our class. We learn everything you need to know here.”

The change shows up in the students themselves. “Now they have a place that really is more like home to them. They found their group of people,” she said.

Inside the classroom, Jenna leans into the full range of agriculture, helping students explore their passions and interests.

“I want them to be informed consumers,” she said. “I want them to at least understand a wide variety of things that are agricultural-based that they can also find a career in someday.”





Through the support of the Cherokee Nation, Bureau of Indian Education, and the Native American Agriculture Fund, Sequoyah High School's agriculture education program is growing and thriving.

THE CHEROKEE NATION BEHIND THEM

When the chance came to start a program at Sequoyah, Jenna took it. She found the work leading her somewhere she did not expect. Many of her students come from backgrounds much like her own.

"I didn't grow up traditional Cherokee, so coming here, I've learned a lot about myself, and a lot about my own heritage," she said. "Getting to learn how important agriculture and our daily lives are connected to our culture and our heritage has been really eye-opening."

The support around Jenna's program reaches well beyond her classroom walls. Last November, the class spent a day at the Cherokee Nation's cattle ranch, where students learned to wean, vaccinate, tag, and sort calves, many for the first time. The SHS principal came along, too.

"It was probably one of my favorite days last year," Jenna said. "It seems so simple, but it was a huge life lesson for them. They'll never forget it. They still talk about going to work cattle."

In February, the Cherokee Nation recognized her students as the first-ever FFA members from SHS at the Cherokee Nation Ag Summit, where they networked with Tribal leaders and agriculture-industry partners. Capitalizing on every opportunity afforded to them is a point Jenna drives home often.

"I tell my students all the time, you have no idea how lucky you are to be in this FFA chapter, at this school, within the Cherokee Nation, with all the support that you have," she said.

"Starting this Ag Program at Sequoyah and having Jenna's experience and passion to lead these students will change the trajectory of many of these teenagers' lives and careers and open doors they have not been otherwise exposed to," said Cherokee Nation Deputy Chief Bryan Warner. "The Cherokee Nation fully supports new opportunities for all students, including Native students and more women in this field."

A PLACE FOR WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

For Jenna, championing women in agriculture is personal. Half of SHS' first-ever FFA officer team members are girls, and her 12-year-old daughter, Farrah, shows pigs and competes in many of the same contest areas as her students.

"Growing up, I knew that I always wanted to be involved in agriculture," Jenna said. "I didn't want to not be in ag."

Her message to young women thinking about the field is one she returns to often.

"Just keep going," she said. "Make your connections, find your voice, find where you fit in. Agriculture is so broad — there's a place for everybody, especially women in agriculture.

"Maybe you're a photographer in the ag industry. Maybe you're a farmer, and you want to own 150 head of cattle. There are so many different opportunities within agriculture that you can find your place, and a girl definitely has one."

WHAT KEEPS HER GOING

The days are long. Jenna drives about 45 minutes each way to SHS, but her answer for what carries her through comes quickly.

"My kids keep me going," she said. "They're a ball of energy, constantly, every single day. They come in here every day and give it their all."

The rest of her strength comes from home: her husband, Warren; her daughter, Farrah; and other family members who live close by and help hold the long days together.

"My village of my kids and my family really keep me going," Jenna said.



DOING WHAT SHE CAN, WHERE SHE IS

For now, the program lives in a single classroom. There is no barn, no shop, and no dedicated ag building, but that does not hold Jenna and her program back.

"We're gonna do what we can with what we have and where we are, and that's really my motto," she said.

"Patience is a virtue," Jenna added. "Our students and the FFA program are going to get what we need."

The momentum is already building. Additional NAAF funding is helping the school expand the program.

Wherever it goes, Jenna wants her students to know they belong there, and that they are helping move Native agriculture forward.

"It is very exciting to watch our students get back to their roots in agriculture here at Sequoyah High School. It is our responsibility to raise the next generation of farmers and ranchers to go forward and work as stewards of the land as our ancestors did over 150 years ago when Sequoyah was started," said Sequoyah High School Superintendent Terry Heustis. "For most of its beginning as a boarding school, Sequoyah was self-sustaining. They raised the food they ate in the cafeteria. Our teacher Jenna Dupree is doing a wonderful job working with our students."

"I really think that with the support we have, our program is going to just take off," Jenna said.

Learn more about the National FFA at ffa.org.







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‘Oyster Girl’ of Port Gamble Bay

Joe Graham, PhD (Pueblo of Laguna)
Senior Program Officer – NAAF

Julianna Sullivan on stewarding the waters, lands, and foodways of the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe

Native agriculture is broad, and so are the definitions of a "Native agriculturalist." For the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe, one person who embodies the term is Julianna Sullivan. She serves as the Tribe's enhancement program manager in Kingston, Washington, overseeing the conservation and stewardship of the Tribe's land, water, and traditional foodways. Dr. Joe Graham, senior program officer at the Native American Agriculture Fund (NAAF), sat down with Sullivan to learn more about her role and life mission. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

Give a brief description of your people's story.

The S'Klallam are known as the 'strong and clever people.' The story passed down tells of a large potlatch (traditional gathering and giveaway) for the Tribes of the Pacific Northwest. There was a competition to lift a gigantic log. S'Klallam ancestors knew the log would float, so the people rolled it into the sea. They then positioned themselves beneath the log and carried it out. The other nations were so impressed by the strength and cleverness of the S'Klallam people that they were thereafter known as 'the strong and clever people.'

Describe the ecosystem of your territory.

Our traditional territory is part of the Salish Sea, which includes the Hood Canal, Admiralty Inlet, and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. It's an incredibly beautiful and productive ecosystem. It's made up of forests, rivers, streams, estuaries, beaches, and marine waters … and everything is connected. These habitats support salmon, shellfish, forage fish, marine mammals (like orcas), birds, seabirds, and all the other species that have sustained us since time immemorial.

The climate is generally cool and wet, but we are seeing noticeable changes: warmer water temperatures, ocean acidification, changing rainfall patterns, harmful algal blooms, development, and pollution. Those factors are all affecting the health of our waters and the resources that we depend on. These aren't just environmental concerns for us. They directly affect our food, our culture, our economies and our ability to exercise our treaty rights.

Currently, our area is experiencing widespread red tides, a common term for harmful algal blooms that produce marine biotoxins. Shellfish accumulate these toxins as they filter the water, making them unsafe for people to eat.



Julianna Sullivan's work serves her community, the land, waters, and the memory of her uncle and former Tribal leader, Jeromy Sullivan. (Photo provided – Credit Karleigh Gomez)



One of the most rewarding parts of Julianna Sullivan's job is the chance to get out in the water, completely immersed with nature and traditional foods. (Photo provided - Credit Karleigh Gomez)

"FOR OUR PEOPLE TO THRIVE, OUR LANDS, WATERS, PLANTS, ANIMALS, FOODS, AND COMMUNITIES MUST THRIVE AS WELL. EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED."
— JULIANNA SULLIVAN

What do you feel contributed to your pursuit of a career in aquaculture?

Growing up S'Klallam, I always wanted a career that would allow me to work on the water. Even before I knew what a marine biologist was, I wanted to be a geoduck diver. I also wanted to protect the resources that people depend on and to give back to my Tribe in some way. In 2010, I began working for the Tribe's Natural Resources Department as an intern, then as a field technician focused on salmon recovery. I earned a bachelor's degree from Evergreen State College and was promoted to be the Tribe's marine biologist. During the COVID lockdown in 2020, I was going stir crazy, so I enrolled in a law program at the University of Oklahoma to deepen my understanding of Tribal sovereignty and treaty rights. I graduated in 2022 with a master's degree in Indigenous Peoples Law.

Homeland security expansion contributed to my pursuit of this career. Our reservation is located near Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor, a nuclear submarine base. Its operation expanded in 2016, and our Tribe lost access to harvesting oysters and clams at Devil's Hole Beach. It affected our ability to exercise our treaty rights and gather traditional foods from a place of significance for us. That really had me questioning how treaties are the supreme law of the land but are being outweighed by security concerns.

My Uncle Jeromy had a huge influence on my career. He joined our Tribal Council in 2005 and served as our Tribal Chairman from 2009 until his passing in 2023. He cared deeply about protecting our sovereignty, our treaty rights, the environment, and our way of life.

His passing was a devastating loss to our community. My Uncle Jeromy, the Natural Resources Department, and the Tribe's legal team fought hard to ensure that the loss of that beach that we traditionally harvested from was acknowledged and mitigated.

As part of that mitigation, the U.S. Navy purchased us a FLUPSY (floating upweller system). FLUPSY is a shellfish nursery that moves a flow of nutrient rich seawater through containers that hold tiny shellfish seed, helping them grow quickly until they're ready to be planted out on a beach or on an oyster farm.

About the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe:
There are three federally recognized S'Klallam Tribes: the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, and the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe. A sawmill central to the Tribe's history opened in 1853. In 1854–55, the United States negotiated treaties with the Tribes of the Pacific Northwest. Each treaty guaranteed Tribal rights to harvest from the sea, and the S'Klallam treaty also barred the people from trading at British-held Vancouver Island, as the U.S. was still asserting control over the disputed region. A reservation was formally established in 1938 under the Indian Reorganization Act. Today, the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe has about 1,400 enrolled members and roughly 1,700 acres of trust land. The mill employed the community for generations, but its industrial activity severely damaged the bay. The mill closed in 1995 after 142 years of operation without any remediation. For decades since, the Tribe has worked to clean and restore the bay to support healthy shellfish, salmon, and herring populations.

When we tried to use the FLUPSY, we discovered that the winds and the currents in Port Gamble Bay were too strong for it to operate safely. Our sister Tribe, the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, already had a FLUPSY operation of their own, so they paid for permitting and moorage and allowed us to share their site.

I typically call it a floating shellfish nursery. In 2018, no one on our staff knew how to grow oysters in a FLUPSY. I learned in real time through a lot of trial, error, troubleshooting, and hands-on experience. I'm known as 'Oyster Girl' in Jamestown. It's about an hour away, and I go up there at least once a week.

My Uncle Jer passed in the summer of 2023. He had just turned 50. Being there at the end and knowing what was happening didn't make it feel any less sudden. It was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. Since then, working in the FLUPSY has been healing for me. I do it to supply oysters and shellfish to my people, but I also do it because I really loved my uncle.

How did the community come to realize that your projects were necessary to advancing community well-being?

In my uncle's time, we lost a lot of clams and oysters every year because we weren't able to harvest from certain beaches anymore. His thought was, 'How can we make that up somewhere else?' His plan was to run our own FLUPSY and sell seed, just like Jamestown. But we didn't have the staff or the knowledge of how to do that.

That's when I came in and learned how to grow oysters. I developed a plan of growing baby oysters. Once we grew them out, we put them onto the beaches. It's been amazing because we're putting them not only on the reservation beach but on public tide land. It's great PR for the Tribe for sharing with the non-Native public in a significant way. I grow 1.8 million oysters every year. From the 1.8 million I'll be able to grow 12,000 in our farm and the rest get put onto the beaches, Tribal, and public.

In 1974, the case United States v. Washington was decided. Known as the Boldt decision, it affirmed that the 1854-55 treaties guaranteeing the Tribes of the Pacific Northwest the right to harvest up to 50% of the harvestable catch of salmon and steelhead and established that Tribes were co-managers of the fisheries alongside the state of Washington were still in effect. Before that decision, Tribal members were getting arrested because the state claimed that they were supposed to have state licenses to harvest from the sea.

These arrests led to civil unrest among Tribal members and counter-protests from the non-Native fishing community.

Also, people were harvesting right under the old creosote pier before we knew how toxic creosote was to shellfish and to human health. And with all the timber operations that had happened at the mill, it made everything in Port Gamble Bay so unhealthy.

Oysters are filter feeders, they constantly clean the water. They're a net positive organism. The more oysters you have, the cleaner the water will be because they remove toxicity from the sea water.

At Port Gamble, we have our own internal monitoring systems. We wait for cooler, cleaner water to flush all that out and recirculate it out. We continuously test and hope for the best, but shellfish closest to the surface are the most negatively affected.

Gravel is helpful because it aerates the clam beds and keeps things significantly cooler. I consider the work that I do at the shellfish nursery and at our hatcheries aquaculture. These enhancements are human activities to boost the natural processes to benefit species that we're trying to increase.



Do you feel that your efforts are supported? How does the community demonstrate their support?

I've received tremendous support from our Tribal Council, co-workers, funding agencies, and partner organizations. The Jamestown partnership has been a great example of us being able to pool our resources and knowledge together so we can have stronger operations going.

NAAF funding has allowed us to move into the production and infrastructure phase. It's helped us to expand the farm so we can increase our growing capacity on the reservation. With NAAF funding, we are having a wet storage system manufactured to circulate cool, clean water. It will have a UV light in it to kill toxic bacteria, so we'll be able to hold live shellfish for a longer period. NAAF funding has also helped us obtain a backup generator because we get a lot of power outages in our area.

What have you encountered in your career that has really surprised you?

I didn't think I'd be doing this. I thought I was going to be a typical scientist for the rest of my life, just figuring out what is happening in the world. This job is not that. I'm still a scientist because I learn new ideas from the oysters every year. I'm inspired by the oysters. I think what's amazed me is how I'm not bored of this species. They're beautiful. They fascinate me. The different shapes of the oysters I grow are gorgeous. Just like the oysters, the shellfish-growing community has been incredible. I found my type of people. I love it. I like that aquaculturalists are a scrappy bunch. We can find some random tool and adapt it for so many different uses.

What is your vision of a satisfying future for your people?

My vision is for our people to have healthy lands and waters and to have abundant fish and shellfish and to be able to exercise fully our treaty rights without being limited by the environmental decline.



"I AM S'KLALLAM OF THE STRONG & CLEVER PEOPLE FROM THE LAND OF THE NOONDAY SUN."

— JULIANNA SULLIVAN





But mostly, I want our children to not only know what foods we traditionally ate and where they come from but to be actively engaged in harvesting them, learning from them, and to understand that they have both the right and responsibility to harvest and care for them and to keep that relationship strong.

But my more profound comment is this: I am S'Klallam of The Strong & Clever People from the land of the noonday sun. My ancestors understood that our strength depends on the health of everything around us. For our people to thrive, our lands, waters, plants, animals, foods, and communities must thrive as well. Everything is connected, and my vision for us is to continue building a future rooted in that understanding. One where our people are healthy, our resources are abundant, our knowledge is carried forward, and that future generations have the opportunity to fully live as S'Klallam people.

Learn more about the Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe and Sullivan's work at pgst.nsn.us/.

Julianna Sullivan is leading her Tribe's efforts to restore habitats and combat weather changes impacting seafood quality and availability. (Photo provided – Credit Karleigh Gomez)



She Thought Agriculture Was the One Career She Would Not Choose

By Samantha Belote (Spokane Tribe)
NAAF Communications Manager

Chanel Ford never planned on a career in agriculture. Her cousin Samantha Belote, who grew up alongside her on the Spokane Indian Reservation, shares how she found her place in the industry.



Chanel Ford celebrates her recognition as a 2026 member of the AISES Sequoyah Fellowship with fellow NAAF staff.


Chanel Ford and her father, Monty Ford Sr., enjoy spending time on their land on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Washington.



Chanel Ford began working for the Native American Agriculture Fund in 2022. She currently serves as the Director of Programs.

Chanel Ford grew up around bison, alfalfa, and Appaloosa horses on her family's operation on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. On the Ford Ranch, Chanel and her three brothers watched their dad, Monty Ford Sr., work long days and nights. They often lent a hand with chores before school or after basketball practice, which he also coached. Some evenings Chanel came home to find her dad bottle-feeding a bison calf after putting in an eight-hour workday at his "day job." Growing up, this way of life was simply normal to her. Looking back, she said it taught her and her brothers responsibility, a strong work ethic, and the importance of carrying themselves with the right spirit and energy.

Her father often reminded them, "Cn Yo-Yot," meaning "You are strong" in Spokane Salish. But she felt sometimes his message was even more direct: don't you dare give up.

"Not a lot of people in the neighborhood had ever seen a newborn livestock animal, let alone a bison calf," Chanel said. "For us it was normal. So that was pretty neat."



Chanel feeding the horses with her dad on Ford Ranch in Wellpinit, Washington.

It is one thing to tell someone's story, but it is another to have known them long before that story took shape. Chanel is my cousin. Our grandparents were brother and sister, and the best part of writing this piece is that I have known her my entire life. We grew up together on the rez, spending nights and weekends traveling to basketball tournaments where her dad, Monty, coached us. Our team name, fittingly, was the Buffalo Gals. Agriculture was always part of the backdrop: I knew about the bison, the horses, and how hard her dad worked. What I did not fully understand then was how deeply those experiences were shaping the person she would become. Today, she serves as the Director of Programs at the NAAF, where her work supports advancing Tribal agriculture and food systems across the nation.

FINDING HER WAY BACK TO AGRICULTURE

Agriculture was not exactly part of the career plan Chanel imagined for herself growing up. She pictured doing something entirely different, maybe becoming a lawyer, working in television, or finding her way into sports and entertainment.

“Nothing in relation to agriculture!” she said. “I would have called you a liar if I knew this would be my career. But I love it.”

Chanel attended Eastern Washington University, where she earned her bachelor’s degree in communications and public relations and later a Master of Education.

After graduation, Chanel worked for the Spokane Tribal Network before joining Kauffman & Associates, where much of her work focused on suicide prevention. Growing up on the reservation and working alongside Tribal communities shaped how she thinks about mental health, access to resources, and community well-being.

“Growing up on the reservation and being surrounded by other Tribes working in this space is a little too familiar, unfortunately,” she said. “Some people have experienced hurt at such young ages that you grow up more aware than, say, some kids who haven’t had those experiences.”





Chanel grew up around bison, alfalfa, and Appaloosa horses on her family's operation on the Spokane Indian Reservation.

When she moved into agriculture, she began to see the same challenges in new places.

"Working in agriculture with that background has given me a different perspective. I've seen the impact that ideation and suicide have on Tribal communities in general. In my prior work, I didn't really seek out the disparities in farming and ranching communities. Now that I'm in this agriculture space, I can see those disparities, and it gives me hope that I can continue to create change within this space," she explained.

Having the perspective of both a cousin and coworker, I get to see the person behind the work. I know how much Chanel cares about others and how genuinely she wants to make a difference in the lives of the people she serves.

"I'm passionate about mental health, the well-being of others, and access to resources that aren't always readily available to the people who need them," she said.

Today, that background in mental health and suicide prevention informs her work to support Native producers and agricultural communities.

Across agriculture, more organizations are recognizing the toll that farming and ranching can take on mental health. The American Farm Bureau Federation's State of Mind campaign connects producers with mental health resources, Farm Aid runs a hotline for farmers in crisis, and USDA's Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network funds regional programs to support agricultural communities.

Central to Chanel's work is her passion for bringing people together to improve outcomes for Native Americans, including farmers and producers.

CN YO-YOT

Growing up in the same community, we have seen firsthand how people, programs, and opportunities can make a difference. That shared perspective continues to shape how we approach our work together today, giving us a deeper understanding of the impact local efforts can have and the role they play in strengthening communities.

“I have really learned about different challenges and all of the types of agriculture in different regions we serve across the country,” Chanel said. “I’ve also seen firsthand just how resourceful people in agriculture are. It blows you away to see how [producers] can make a lot from a little and sustain operations despite the barriers thrown their way because their will to continue the work is higher than giving up.”

That resourcefulness is one of the things Chanel said she wishes more people understood about Native agriculture. She pointed to the misconception that the latest trending agricultural practices are new, when in reality, many of the 'innovative' approaches of today have foundations in traditional practices that Native producers have employed since time immemorial.

“Native agriculture is rooted in tradition,” she added. On a recent trip to visit producers, Chanel met with roughly 50 farmers and ranchers from a community where agriculture has been passed down through generations. They spoke about drought, water access, and other challenges, but what stayed with her was how proud they were of what they continued to produce.

“They found ways to make it work,” Chanel said. “Native people have always and will always be resilient. That visit definitely reminded me that even though times may be tough, we can do hard things. ‘Cn Yo-Yot,’ as my dad would say.”

Chanel’s dad, Monty Ford Sr., earned the nickname “q̓ʷeyq̓ʷay man” (pronounced qwi quay), which means "buffalo" or "bison" in Salish Spokane.





Those moments reinforce why Chanel believes in NAAF's work.

"We are so busy with day-to-day life that when we get to see firsthand the impact NAAF makes, even in the slightest way, it makes you forever grateful for the importance of this work," she said.

She sees that impact continuing to grow as NAAF builds relationships both within and outside Native communities and as more young people find their place in agriculture.

"We have been invited to sit in spaces where collectively in the past that seat may not have been available to us," Chanel said. "That makes me proud of not only the work supporting producers, but the other trailblazers in Native agriculture as well."

Back when we were Buffalo Gals, neither of us could have imagined where she would be today. But if you know Chanel, you know that whatever she takes on, she gives it her full passion, energy, and focus. Knowing that her work will make a difference for Native communities, rural communities, and Indigenous peoples everywhere makes it that much more meaningful. For someone who once insisted agriculture was the one career she would never pursue, Chanel has found herself right where she belongs, helping shape the future of Native agriculture.

Find mental health information and resources by calling 988, visiting 988lifeline.org, reaching out to Farm Aid at 800-FARM-AID, and exploring Farm Bureau's State of Mind initiative at www.fb.org/initiative/farm-state-of-mind.





Paving the Road: Katherine Minthorn Opens Doors for Native Producers

Mary Belle Zook (Citizen Potawatomi Nation)
Communications Officer - NAAF

From the first class of girls in her FFA chapter to the farm advocates of the Intertribal Agriculture Council, Katherine Minthorn has spent five decades stepping into rooms where Native women had not stood before while holding the door open behind her.

In 1972, Pendleton High School in Oregon opened its FFA chapter to girls for the first time. Until then, the only girls in the chapter were sweethearts, and Katherine Minthorn is proud to have been part of the first class of girls at her high school.

It was through the FFA that she learned how to weld and judge livestock. More importantly, it also provided a platform for her to learn how to stand up and speak. “For Indian kids, early on in our lives, we are not trained to be speaking publicly like that,” she said. “That is where I learned how to conduct a board meeting, through the FFA.”

That lesson set a pattern for the rest of her career. Today, Katherine is the Associate Director of Technical Assistance for the Intertribal Agriculture Council (IAC) and a founding board member of Rez Chicks Fresh Eggs Cooperative. An enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, she has served on more boards and committees than she can easily count, often as the first Native woman in the role.

ROOTED IN WHEAT COUNTRY

Agriculture on the Umatilla Reservation, near Pendleton, looks "hot and dusty," Katherine said, and drought is a constant companion. Her grandfather was the last Native production farmer on the reservation, raising wheat with his own implements. Her father drove truck for him, and the women of the family fed the harvest crews.

By the time Katherine was old enough to remember, her grandfather had begun leasing out the land. Her family kept horses, and in her twenties, she drove wheat trucks during harvest. FFA gave her the education to go along with the life she was raised in. "It was really an amazing experience," she said. "FFA is a huge part of what shaped me to do what I do."

PUSHED OUT OF THE NEST

When Katherine talks about the people who paved the way for her, she names men who saw something in her before she saw it in herself.

The first was Louie Dick, a Tribal leader, religious and cultural leader, Forest Service retiree, and chair of the Natural Resource Commission. He sent the young Katherine to meetings she felt unqualified to attend, including the National Congress of American Indians in San Francisco and IAC. "I always consider him like that mother bird that pushes their little chick out of the nest," she said. "He pushed me out of the nest and made me do things, made me step up there."

At IAC, Greg Smitman and Ross Racine kept giving her opportunities. So did Gordon Campbell, a former chief of the Tribal police and Washington state trooper.

"When someone gives you an assignment, you do not realize at the time the experience that you are gaining by doing every one of those things," she said. "I always thought they were doing something to me, not realizing it was an opportunity from these mentors."

Her story is a reminder that advancing Native women in agriculture takes all of us, including the men who make room at the table.

> **"WHEN I GET TO BE OUT IN THE FIELD, BACK OUT THERE WITH THE TRIBES, BACK OUT THERE WITH THE PRODUCERS, ONE-ON-ONE LIKE THAT, THAT IS THE BEST PART OF THIS JOB."**
> **— KATHERINE MINTHORN**

LEADERSHIP THAT STARTS AT HOME

Katherine's dive into leadership started close to home. In the early 1990s, she joined her Tribe's newly formed Natural Resource Commission, which oversaw everything from agriculture and range to zoning. She eventually became its chair, leading public hearings at a time when the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation were among the first Tribes in the nation to secure exclusive zoning jurisdiction on a checkerboard reservation, where Tribal as well as individually owned Native and non-Native land exist side by side.

The appointments kept coming. Katherine has served four terms on the Farm Service Agency (FSA) State Committee for Oregon. She was first appointed during the Clinton administration, served again during the Bush administration,



Katherine Minthorn's career combines her passion for service and love for agriculture. (Photos provided - IAC and Katherine Minthorn).

and most recently as chair during the Biden administration. She believes she was the first Native American woman to chair the committee. Today she chairs her Tribe's Tribal Farm Enterprise Board and serves as vice chair of the local conservation district. Those roles have spanned several presidential administrations and both political parties. Katherine said her loyalty has never been to politics. "I do it for Native producers," she said. "When you sit on those state committees, it is for everybody."

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

Katherine first came to IAC through committee work, when her mentor Louie Dick sent her as the Umatilla Tribe's alternate delegate. In the mid-1990s, IAC's first executive director, Greg Smitman, hired her as one of its first farm advocates. The Farmers Legal Action Group trained her to help Native landowners and operators who were facing foreclosure or already in it, back when the Farm Service Agency was still the Farmers Home Administration.

She did that work part time while working full time for her Tribe's police department, where she spent 16 and a half years as the department's administrative officer.

Years later, she helped Native producers navigate the complicated and time-sensitive process for submitting claims in the Keepseagle settlement, which was a class action lawsuit by Native farmers and ranchers. In the final months of the claims period, Katherine worked with producers nationwide to fill out their applications. She knew the challenges firsthand. Years earlier, she had applied for a loan to buy a 40-acre alfalfa parcel near her family's land, only to be told she could not make the payments and that she should go to the Bureau of Indian Affairs instead. She filed her own Keepseagle claim and was successful, but only after working with counsel to appeal a denial caused by a software error that stripped her Tribal ID from her application.

"Had I not worked closely with Cohen Milstein during the Keepseagle claimant application process, I would not have known that my application met all the criteria. When the denial letter came in the mail, I contacted the 800 number, and learned it was denied for not providing proof that I was a member of a federally recognized Tribe," she said.

Today, Katherine helps lead the IAC technical assistance network, the staff across Indian

Country who meet one-on-one with Native producers and Tribes to help them access resources and move their operations forward.

The administrative side is part of the job, but the on-the-ground work keeps her motivated. “When I get to be out in the field, back out there with the Tribes, back out there with the producers, one-on-one like that,” she said, “that is the best part of this job.”

TWO FRIENDS, 40 CHICKS, AND A COOPERATIVE

After decades of helping other producers build their operations, Katherine got the chance to build one of her own as a solution to improving food access during the coronavirus pandemic.

Katherine still remembers the Tribe's weekly food distributions. “There would be a line of cars over 2 miles long,” she said. “If you had money, it did not matter. There was nothing on the shelves in the stores.”

When families across Katherine's community were struggling to put food on the table, she and her best friend, Rachelle “Shelly” Morrison, did what Native women have always done: they found a way. They decided to raise chickens for eggs, establishing Rez Chicks, a woman-run egg cooperative on the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

Neither knew anything about chickens, but that did not stop them. Shelly ordered 30 chicks online, and while they waited, the two bought 10 more from the local feed store to practice on.

“The 10 we practiced on, they all survived. Next 30 that came, they all survived,” Katherine said. “Before we knew it, there we were with 40 chickens.”

What began as 40 chicks has grown into Rez Chicks Fresh Eggs Cooperative, with four producers and four coops on the Umatilla Indian Reservation. (Photo provided - IAC).



A neighbor and fellow Native producer had about 40 more. With more eggs than any of their households could consume, the women started talking about selling eggs on the reservation. The idea quickly became a business. In two meetings, they formed a legal cooperative.

Today, Rez Chicks includes four producers and four chicken coops. Their eggs sell at Mission Market on the reservation and in a restaurant at the Tribe's casino, where one cook told Katherine the eggs are bigger, with a consistency and color that set them apart from commercial eggs.

“It makes me proud to hear feedback like that from others,” she said.

The members learned as they grew. After dogs killed two flocks, they invested in electric poultry netting and have not lost a bird since. Funding came from places they never expected. Their first grant, $5,000 from the Oregon Food Bank, bought treadle feeders, clean watering systems, and nest boxes. A U.S. Department of Agriculture Value-Added Producer Grant followed. A disaster resilience grant paid for generators that kick on automatically during windstorm power outages. A Native American food business grant bought a refrigerated van so the cooperative can sell to Tribal nutrition programs across Oregon, including senior programs, schools, and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).

“Some producers struggle to find markets, but we are struggling to keep up with the demand,” she said. “FDPIR has been a key way to increase community members’ access to locally produced eggs.”

Her advice for young producers chasing grants is to cast a wide net. “Do not look just at Indian funding,” she said. “There is lots of funding out there. These organizations are earmarking funding for Tribes and Tribal producers.”

FEEDING OUR PEOPLE

For Katherine, agriculture has always been about more than the bottom line. Her Tribe's Tribal Farm Enterprise, created in 1965, has grown from about 400 acres to more than 10,000, mostly in cereal grains. Despite the increased acreage, the pandemic food lines stayed with her. “We are farming 10,000 acres, and we cannot feed our people,” she said. “There is more to agriculture than the dollar.”

She sees progress. A new flour mill that opened this fall provides a market for locally grown wheat, rewarding both Tribal and non-Tribal farmers in Umatilla County for good stewardship.

She also sees where the next generation of producers begins: in daycares, preschools, and elementary classrooms. She wants agriculture curriculum for the youngest learners, even those who do not come from farming families.

“Those kids have got to know where their food comes from," she said. ”In agriculture, we are missing that opportunity by not educating those children.”

After five decades of opening doors, Katherine is not slowing down. She is still growing Rez Chicks and tells every Tribe and Native producer she meets about the resources available to them. Most of all, she still wants to be in the field with farmers, helping them find their way forward, the same way her mentors once did for her.



SHARE WITH US







Across the nation, there are inspiring folks building food and agriculture opportunities in their fields, on their waters, and in their communities. They tend herds and gardens, restore traditional foods, start businesses, and teach the next generation. We can't fit every story into one magazine, but we want to hear them. If you know someone whose work deserves a spotlight, or you'd like to share what's happening on your farm, ranch, reservation, or in your community, email us at media@nativeamericanagriculturefund.org.

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