



# Native food systems impacted by COVID

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Accepted: 25 April 2020 / Published online: 11 May 2020  
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Even prior to the strain put on the food economy by the COVID-19 pandemic, Native American communities have been fighting food insecurity. One quarter of American Indian/Alaska Native households receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, 276 tribal nations administer the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), 68% of AI/AN children qualify for free lunches, and AI/ANs make up more than 12% of the participants in the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program<sup>1</sup>. The sudden loss of jobs, shutdown of programs, and empty grocery store shelves have placed into stark relief the importance of many food sovereignty projects that tribes have been working to implement, as well as the creative ways that Native people have been working to utilize federal programs, and have resulted in a doubling down of efforts on the part of many grassroots programs devoted to traditional foods.

FDPIR was created to provide food for low-income Native American households that do not have easy access to grocery stores. This program has seen an increase in use since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the numbers are expected to continue to rise as people lose employment. 80% of the sites have also reported increases in clients taking the full amount of food offered, at the same time that challenges with food supply chains have made stocking facilities more difficult<sup>2</sup>. The third bill of the CARES Act (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) designates \$100 million for FDPIR for additional food purchases and facility improvements. But what the Native Farm Bill Coalition has been lobbying for is for the ability of tribes to exercise self-governance authority, including around the sourcing of foods, to improve responsiveness to the crisis<sup>3</sup>.

NAFDPIR's past National President and current Midwest Region President Joe Van Alstine, from the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawak in Michigan, has been pushing for years for tribes to be able to locally source foods for FDPIR packages. Van Alstine also chairs Ziibimijwang Inc., a tribally chartered cooperation that oversees Ziibimijwang farm, a 100 acre farm owned by the Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawak that is about to start its sixth growing season. The farm was getting ready to expand sales when the markets all closed. So while in one job Van Alstine is struggling to source fresh produce for the 200 families he serves through the local FDPIR office, in his other position he's struggling to find a market for the produce from the tribe's farm. What would make the most sense, he argues, is to connect the FDPIR food distribution site and the farm, using USDA funds to help keep this and other local farms going, rather than trucking food across the country<sup>4</sup>. Overall tribal advocates are lobbying for greater amount of local control over the programs that feed their communities.

Native community members are also working on the grassroots level to step in to fill the void left by canceled feeding programs, which have most heavily impacted elders and youth. In Minneapolis, chef Brian Yazzie has partnered with the American Indian Center's Gatherings Café to provide daily meals to over a hundred elders who found

<sup>1</sup> National Congress American Indians Policy Update. 2019 Annual Convention, Albuquerque NM. "Agriculture and Nutrition" page 3. Available at [https://www.ncai.org/attachments/PolicyPaper\\_zuufQisBiFmwncntutmICsEJXHWPRReKwjpbpYsxALTXBECBsNDS\\_2019%20NCAI%20Annual%20Convention%20Policy%20Update.pdf](https://www.ncai.org/attachments/PolicyPaper_zuufQisBiFmwncntutmICsEJXHWPRReKwjpbpYsxALTXBECBsNDS_2019%20NCAI%20Annual%20Convention%20Policy%20Update.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Erin Parker, speaking during slide 17, "COVID-19 Update and Impacts: Administrative and Legislative actions." Native Farm Bill Coalition (NFBC) and Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative (IFAI) Webinar and Listening Session April 1 2020. [https://indigenousfoodandag.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/IFAI-NFBC-COVID19-UpdatesAndImpacts-04012020-Final.pdf?utm\\_source=Native+Farm+Bill+Coalition+Webinar+Registrants&utm\\_campaign=153d43387f-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2019\\_05\\_06\\_02\\_23\\_COPY\\_02&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_d314a8114e-153d43387f-598582834](https://indigenousfoodandag.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/IFAI-NFBC-COVID19-UpdatesAndImpacts-04012020-Final.pdf?utm_source=Native+Farm+Bill+Coalition+Webinar+Registrants&utm_campaign=153d43387f-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_05_06_02_23_COPY_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d314a8114e-153d43387f-598582834).

<sup>3</sup> Colby Duren, presenting slide 21, "Covid-19 update and Impacts".

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Joe VanAlstine, April 2 2020.

This article is part of the Topical Collection: Agriculture, Food & Covid-19.

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themselves cut off from meal programs. In South Dakota, the Cheyenne River Youth Project has been serving dinner to youth who no longer have school meals to sustain them. According to program director Julie Garreau, “I hear a lot of people saying they can’t wait for things to go back to normal. We don’t want normal...I hope to hell nothing goes back to the way it was before, we need better.” Her hope is that the tribal leadership comes out of this experience thinking hard about food systems on the reservation and how to better support projects like gardens that will help to make families more food secure. Julie also recommends that in funding recovery efforts, funders look not only to the short term, but also the long term to build more resilient systems<sup>5</sup>.

One way people responded to concerns about disruptions to a global food chain was to rush out to buy seeds to plant this generation’s version of the victory garden. “Resilience gardens” as Rowen White, director of the Indigenous Seedkeepers Network calls them. Rowen put an offer out on Facebook to send seeds to Native families who needed them. She received over 700 responses, and has been working long hours with her children to create the “three sisters and friends” seed packages to mail out. Rowen is also developing and collating educational materials and a series of webinars. The hope is that some of the recipients of these bundles will be awakened to the importance of growing their own food, and stewarding their own seed collections. Other seed keepers have similarly being inundated with requests for seeds<sup>6</sup>. This sudden explosion of need, and the fact that seed companies haven’t been able to keep up with demand, highlights the importance of ISKN’s work; while it took a pandemic to finally pique people’s interests in growing their own food, members of ISKN are grateful that their message is finally taking hold. Their short term vision is to get as many seeds as possible out to interested gardeners and get as much food as possible planted. The long term vision is to support more community based seed keepers, create new seed keepers who aren’t reliant on seed companies for their seed stock, and to create regional seed hubs to coordinate these efforts on a more local scale.

Community-based food organizations are also continuing their work by taking their programming online. For example, the Great Lakes Intertribal Food Summit has been shifted from an in-person hands-on event to a virtual gathering comprised of video demonstrations of food procurement and preparation. The culinary mentorship program run by the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance (NAFSA) that usually accompanies these summits has been shifted to a series of webinars and online meetings. The hope is to help chefs, many of whom have suddenly found themselves without employment, to find purpose while they’re working in a different capacity.

Indigenous communities have been continuously working to try to provide sustenance to a largely food insecure population, work made more pressing by the COVID-19 pandemic. To contend with these challenges, and to push for a more resilient sustainable future, tribal communities are drawing on nation-wide resources to continue educational programming and create new meal programs, but are also pushing for the ability to better support local food systems, through tailoring federal feeding programs to their local context, and working to localize seed networks.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Julie Garreau April 4.2.20.

<sup>6</sup> ISKN zoom meeting, April 1 2020.