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TRIBAL GOVERNANCE INNOVATION SPOTLIGHT



Food Sovereignty

OSAGE NATION



WHAT'S INSIDE

Living in a food desert with limited access to fresh and healthy foods – a problem exacerbated in 2020 by the coronavirus pandemic – and facing a myriad of costly health problems related to poor diet, the Osage Nation has prioritized food self-sufficiency and begun developing the various components needed for local, healthy food production, processing, and distribution within its own reservation. To maximize its effectiveness, the Osage Nation is gathering data on the health and financial impacts of its efforts every step of the way, and is using that data to drive future decision-making.



An NCAI Case Study

“ Everything we do [at Osage] revolves around food. You can't heal the community unless you heal the food system. — Assistant Chief Raymond Red Corn¹ ”



Prior to 1800 and the intrusion of white settlers into their territory, the Osage people controlled more than 100 million acres in what is now known as Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma.² During this period, the Osage people deftly relied on a combination of hunting, gathering, and farming to feed themselves. They did so in balance with the environment, with each year consisting of two major bison hunts, as well as precisely timed planting, foraging, and harvesting activities.³ Everyone had a role to play in the Osage food system, and many of their cultural ceremonies revolved around their subsistence practices.⁴ As one tribal leader put it, traditionally, “we didn't depend on anyone else for food, we depended on ourselves.”⁵

Today, the Osage Nation today is located in Osage County, Oklahoma.⁶ About half of Osage's nearly 20,000 enrolled tribal members live in Oklahoma, with about 20 percent living on the reservation itself.⁷ Due to severe “checkerboarding” caused by the federal allotment policy, most of the reservation's land is owned not by the Nation or its members but non-Natives, who constitute 85 percent of the reservation's population.⁸ The Osage operate a three-branch government formed under its 2006 constitution, which also gave every enrolled Osage member over the age of 18 the right to vote.⁹ The Nation's primary source of revenue comes from its seven casinos, but it also brings in financial resources through taxation, investment income, federal funding, and grant awards.¹⁰

Relocation, Encroachment Foster a Food Desert

Beginning in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase, the Osage people were repeatedly forced to relocate westward, relinquishing tens of millions of acres of their territory to the United States in the process. In 1872, Osage ceded the last of its reservation lands and relocated to northeastern Oklahoma, where it purchased 1.5 million acres of land that “you absolutely, positively could not plow” from the Cherokee in hopes that the poor soil would prevent future

encroachments by white settlers.¹¹ However, soon after arriving in Oklahoma, an enormous oil reservoir was discovered on Osage land, bringing money and outsiders into the Osage community. By 1920, the Osage reservation was among the wealthiest places in the U.S. and home to 36,000 people – most of them white.¹² This population explosion resulted in Osage children attending public and private schools where white children outnumbered them; meanwhile, many Osage families discouraged their children from learning the Osage language so they could instead adapt to the white world around them.¹³

The discovery of oil also prompted Congress to pass the Osage Allotment Act of 1906, which imposed a new system of government on the Osage people, disenfranchised 75 percent of their population, and broke the reservation into thousands of allotments.¹⁴ In 1921, Congress also passed legislation dictating how Osage mineral (i.e., oil) rights were to be held and transferred and requiring many Osages to have “guardians” for their money, a policy that produced the loss of Osage land, mineral rights, and wealth, and in dozens of cases, the murder of Osage people to steal their fortunes.¹⁵ A century after these destructive federal policies were implemented, Osage was operating with a Tribal Council that could only sign lease agreements, pass nonbinding resolutions, and fill Council vacancies – all subject to federal approval – and it retained ownership of less than five percent of its reservation lands.¹⁶

Due to these policies and intrusions, the Osage people rapidly grew disconnected from the traditional Osage food system that had long sustained them physically and culturally.¹⁷ Today, the sprawling Osage reservation sits in the middle of a food desert where a “nearly non-existent public transportation system, [and] only four grocery stores... often lacking fresh fruit and vegetables” combine to foster “very poor nutritional decisions made by [its] residents.”¹⁸ Unable to hunt, fish, and grow food on their land, coupled with nearly one-quarter of tribal members living in poverty,



Children from Daposka Ahnkodapi Elementary School learn about Osage culture, foods, and the land they live on while visiting Harvest Land. (Photo: *Osage News*)

to more than 11,000 previously-disenfranchised Osages, and recreated a tri-partite government with culturally relevant departments, procedures, and checks and balances to get things done more fairly and efficiently than before.²⁸

Equipped with a government designed by its own people, Osage embarked upon an intensive strategic planning process to ensure its decisions reflected the Osage people's – and not the federal government's – will.²⁹ The Osage Nation Strategic Planning Task Force (ONSPTF) utilized a “citizen driven” model that, while more time-consuming, enabled Osages to chart the Nation's future course.³⁰ The ONSPTF held extensive community meetings where Osages could express their concerns, share ideas, and identify common goals. Its work culminated in a 25-year strategic plan with six major priority areas, as well as strategies, priorities, and initiatives to turn the plan into action.³¹ “Once we went to a one-man, one-vote government, the whole priorities changed,” recalls Chief Gray, “Language, culture became very important...Education became incredibly important. Healthcare became very important.”³²

In recent years, Osage's leaders have recognized the nexus between food sovereignty and health, taking steps towards food independence to create a healthier community.³³ To heal the food system and restore the people's connection to the land, their traditions, and a healthier lifestyle, Osage needed to secure land suitable to turn their vision into reality. Osage decided to audit its own resources to assess what it had, in the process uncovering a donated parcel of land on the books that had been forgotten.³⁴ Today, this land is known as Harvest Land, and includes an ecological park and farm – Osage's first attempt at growing produce for its people. The long-term goal of Harvest Land is “to empower Osage communities to engage and learn about their food systems,” “to understand food at all points along the production and distribution process,” and then to “act on that knowledge...by modifying” personal behaviors towards a healthier lifestyle.³⁵

The Nation understood that farming – especially in Oklahoma – would be difficult work, and decided to start out small, expecting to make mistakes, learn from those experiences, and gradually grow the operation each year. In doing so, Osage has sought the expertise of other tribal nations, universities, and federal agencies to get its farming operation off the ground. Over the past five years, Harvest Land has gone from laying dormant to having a few acres of community gardens, to growing more than 6,000 pounds of produce in a single harvest season, to only growing one-third of that amount the following year due to local flooding. With each step, Osage has learned more about how to: prepare the ground, choose appropriate crops, fertilize crops, utilize aquaponics to raise fish and grow lettuces, employ hoop houses to protect crops from the elements and extend the growing season, deal with invasive plants

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Our children can operate an iPad, but they can't grow a potato. We want to change that.

— Patrick Martin, Superintendent, Daposka Ahnkodapi Elementary School³⁶

”



and animals, study the ways drainage and waterways affect the land, and scale up its operations accordingly. In short, according to Osage, “we've learned the hard way about our mistakes – it is just day-in, day-out, hard work.”³⁷ The benefits of this hard work can be seen already – after just a few years of operation, Harvest Land now delivers fresh produce to Osage's Daposka Ahnkodapi Elementary School and the Elder Nutrition Program with plans to provide more and more each year.

Not satisfied with simply increasing the Nation's food production capacity, Osage leadership is also developing mechanisms to change individuals' eating habits. This process began with an analysis of the limited data available locally, which unearthed a 12-year-old health survey that alarmingly found that Osage members living on-reservation had, on average, a decade shorter life expectancy than members living 50 miles away in Tulsa.³⁸ Eager to gain a more detailed and current picture, Osage leadership then partnered with experts to help the Nation collect more comprehensive community health data, design a strategy for improving community eating habits, and produce measurable data over time that Osage could use to determine whether and how their efforts were having discernable, positive impacts on the community.³⁹

Today, Osage partners with the Oklahoma State University (OSU) Center for Health Sciences – led by Dr. Valarie Blue Bird Jernigan – to analyze a range of Osage health-related needs. Together, they spent one year engaging the community about what types of health initiatives had support and were likely to succeed; according to Jernigan, this was invaluable because this kind of research “isn't just about proving your hypothesis,” but is “about improving people's lives.”⁴⁰ After engaging the community, this partnership focused its initial work on tribal youth – developing a curriculum, menus, and activities to encourage children ages 3-7 at the



Osage Nation youth prepare foods to be enjoyed at Osage's In-Lon-Schka ceremonial dances. The sacred dances take place over three weekends each June, with community meals served daily. (Photo: Osage News)

Osage-run Headstart programs and Daposka Ahnkodapi Elementary School to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables.⁴¹ The intervention included web-based weekly workshops, monthly in-person meetings, and resources such as meal kits and recipes designed to support parents from the more than 250 families across the community that took part in the initial study.⁴²

Despite Osage's progress towards food independence, there is still much work to be done – which became readily apparent when the coronavirus pandemic caused severe disruptions to food supply chains and food access at Osage and elsewhere in 2020. Already living in a food desert, Osage Nation's food insecurity issues became more pronounced after the U.S. declared a national emergency. For example, the price of meat skyrocketed, leaving many Osages only able to purchase it in limited quantities – and laying bare a critical gap in the Nation's ability to become food independent. “When we wanted to re-open, it was extremely difficult to get meat for all our school-age kids,” recalls Casey Johnson, Osage Director of Operations, “[even though] we had this huge herd of cattle and buffalo right down the street.”⁴³ This situation arose after several area meat processing facilities shut down to suppress the virus's spread, and those that remained open quickly reached their processing capacity. According to Jann Hayman, Director of the Osage Department of Natural Resources, “I called one local facility in August [2020], and they told me the next available day for cattle was in October 2021.”⁴⁴

In response, Osage quickly created a task force to determine what steps it could take now to prevent becoming as food

insecure again in the future.⁴⁵ Considering the Nation's strategic plan and the central role food independence plays in executing that plan, Osage spent nearly half of the funding it received through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to build greenhouses and a larger aquaponics bay with a food processing facility, make upgrades to Osage Ranch (the Nation's commercial cattle and bison ranch), and, notably, a brand new meat-processing facility.⁴⁶ As with its other projects, Osage has enlisted top-notch expertise in these fields, including learning from the neighboring Quapaw Tribe and its award-winning meat-processing facility.⁴⁷

Today, the Osage Nation is producing more food than it ever has since relocating to Oklahoma. Osage Ranch runs 3,000 cattle, and the Nation has recently used money from the Cobell Land Buy-Back Program to prioritize land purchases that are either over aquifers to expand water resources and/or near the Osage Ranch for its future expansion.⁴⁸ In addition, Osage's farming efforts have continued to expand and currently feature 40,000 square feet of hydroponics greenhouses, an aquaponics center capable of producing more than 80,000 heads of lettuce and 6,000 pounds of fish each year, bee hives that can produce honey and pollinate plants, and the development of a five-acre orchard housing traditional plants. From day one, Osage has provided the fresh food it's grown to its elders and youth, and those initiatives will expand as production increases. According to Chief Standing Bear, it's just another way the Osage Nation is “following the path for self-sufficiency. We've got to eat, and if we are producing our own food, [we can ensure] that it is healthy, safe, and tasty.”⁴⁹



TRANSFERRABLE LESSONS AND STRATEGIES

1. Nimble Governance: Osage's reclamation and overhaul of its government, including the development of tribal laws, codes, and institutions, has empowered its food independence priorities. It is what enabled Osage – when presented a “once-in-a-generation” opportunity to purchase 43,000 acres of rangeland adjacent to the reservation – to quickly secure funding and seal the deal. Now called Osage Ranch, it provides space for grazing and hunting, and gives the Nation another food production mechanism. Similarly, Osage's new governance system has also enabled it to: strategically adapt to changing needs (e.g., moving Harvest Land under the Natural Resources Department so its operation is coordinated with other land-use efforts); pass legislation necessary to achieve desired outcomes (e.g., food safety, community gardening, and health and nutrition laws)⁵⁰; and remove procedural barriers to change (e.g., modifying Osage's budgeting procedures, which enabled it to promptly deploy CARES Act funding to improve food security).⁵¹

2. Assessing Food Security Gaps: Food insecurity poses a severe challenge for many Osage people, which is why Osage leaders systematically work to identify where those food security gaps exist and then design targeted remedies to address them. These remedies include: (1) food production (going from producing no food as of 2015 to investing in a farm, ranch, and aquaponics facility to produce a diverse array of local, healthy foods); (2) food safety (going from no food safety regulations to passing an extensive code adapted from the Model Tribal Food and Agriculture Code)⁵²; and (3) food processing (going from no processing capability to operating a meat-processing plant and an aquaponics food processing center).⁵³

3. Generating Useful Data for Strategic Decision-Making: The Osage-OSU partnership has already tested one promising intervention that showed a modest increase in Osages' consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, and, in turn, a decrease in food insecurity.⁵⁴ This finding is being used to refine curricular efforts with Osage youth, and has illuminated how Osage can address food insecurity more broadly. For example, Osage and OSU are developing a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program to reduce health disparities in which Osages “can purchase a weekly share of farm produce at prices below retail market value.”⁵⁵ This collaboration will track the CSA's impact

on diet, blood pressure, blood lipids, BMI, hemoglobin levels, food security, and health status among Osage adults, and use the data collected to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine if investing in a CSA results in substantial long-term healthcare cost savings and/or supports beneficial health outcomes for the Nation.⁵⁶

4. Securing the Right Expertise: Osage has learned – through trial and error – how valuable individuals with “directly-applicable experience and success” are to achieving positive outcomes.⁵⁷ Sometimes this expertise can be found within the community. For example, when it was purchased, Osage Ranch already had the necessary physical infrastructure to be economically viable. Osage leadership recognized this and structured the Ranch's board of directors so it could make day-to-day operational decisions without political interference, and then filled that board with experts – every individual who has served as a director has been an Osage member and a lifelong rancher, which “has been the secret to the Ranch's success; they actually know what they're doing.”⁵⁸ In other areas, Osage leaders have not been afraid to look outside Osage's boundaries to learn from the federal government (e.g., USDA's guidance with hoop houses); educational institutions (e.g., University of Missouri for creating an orchard producing traditional foods, University of Arkansas for food codes, and University of Kansas for raising bees); and other tribal nations (e.g., Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation on agriculture economics).

5. Citizen Buy-In Takes Time: In forging its new constitution and strategic plan, Osage spent months holding town halls and weekly meetings, distributing educational mailings and surveys, and convening workshops to inform and listen.⁵⁹ Before doing any health research, Osage and OSU spent two years talking with Osage members to assess what types of projects could work. And before purchasing Osage Ranch, Osage held multiple community meetings, and after its purchase, Osage spent more time listening to and planning with the community before any actual action was taken to develop the land. After living under an imposed government where most Osage people had no voice in their own government, the Osage government understands that comprehensive, ongoing engagement of its members is the only way to ensure that initiatives secure, hold, and advance the will of the people.



CONNECT:

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COVER PHOTO

Osage Ranch raises cattle and bison, offers opportunities to hunt and fish, and provides meat to youth, elders, and cultural events. (Photo: *Osage News*)

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To learn more about
the Osage Nation's
multifaceted approach to
achieving food self-sufficiency,
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