

In Partnership with American University School of
International Service, National Family Farm
Coalition, and Rural Coalition

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To: XXXX
From: Kelley Cressman
CC: XXXX
Date: May 6, 2014
Re: Traditional and Local Foods Demonstration
Project

Food Security Memo

Dear XXXX,

The 2014 Farm Bill introduced a demonstration project aimed at facilitating the production and distribution of “**nutritious and traditional foods**” on Indian reservations by Indian tribes. Pending appropriation, the *Traditional and Local Foods Demonstration Project* would become part of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) under the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008. Reservations could apply for non-competitive grants to facilitate the administration and implementation of the demonstration project. The program’s stated objectives include purchasing “when practicable, **foods produced locally by Indian producers**.”¹ The Demonstration Project would also provide outreach and training assistance to Indian farmers, ranchers and producers in order to meet requirements necessary to achieve adequate production.

Background

The Need for More Food

American Indian (AI) and Alaska Native (AN) children are 50% more likely to be food insecure, obese, or have Type II diabetes than the average U.S. child of comparable age. In 2010, almost one-quarter of AI/AN households fell below the poverty line. “High levels of poverty and unemployment, low education levels, and the relative isolation of many reservations make AI/ANs particularly **vulnerable**” to food insecurity.² Food access on reservations can be limited given relative isolation and low socioeconomics.

The Need for Healthy Food

Rates of obesity and overweight have also increased tremendously amongst American Indian children. Approximately one-third to one-half of American Indian and Alaska Native children are obese or overweight. Historically, the diet of American Indians was based on subsistence growing, incorporated complex carbohydrates and less fat than current diets that feature processed foods. According to the USDA, there has been a **drastic change in which traditional American Indian foods have been replaced by commercially prepared foods** resulting in declining health.³

Supporting American Indian Farmers

¹ U.S. House. 113th Congress, 2nd Session. H.R. 2642, *Agricultural Act of 2014*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 2014.

² “Addressing Child Hunger and Obesity in Indian Country: Report to Congress Summary.” *Food and Nutrition Service, USDA*. January 2012. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/IndianCountrySum.pdf>

³ “Addressing Child Hunger and Obesity in Indian Country: Report to Congress Summary.”

According to the 2007 USDA agricultural census there were about 80,000 American Indian farmers. American Indian farms average 1,431 acres in size compared to the U.S. average of 431 acres, yet average sales for AI farmers amounted to only \$40,331 compared to the U.S. average of \$134,807. **American Indian Farmers produce a much greater percentage of meat and produce** than their average American counterpart who produces primarily grains, oilseeds and non-food crops. 36% of American Indian Farmers produce cattle, 13% produce sheep and goats, and 8% produce vegetables.⁴ These farmers are an incredible resource of nutritious food produced locally on or near reservations.

Problem

FDPIR Provides Food Sovereignty for American Indians

The Traditional and Local Foods Demonstration Project could be a small step toward greater food security for American Indians following \$8 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); a program that serves over 500,000 food insecure citizens who identify as “American Indian/Alaska Native.”⁵ According to an Indian Country Media Network Today article published soon after the new Farm Bill was approved, “It’s a smaller cut than the \$40 billion House Republicans passed last September, but still big enough to have Indian food and nutrition specialists worried about the net result.”⁶ FDPIR exists within SNAP as an alternative to the standard electronic payment system providing households in need with food instead of funds, which can be especially significant for American Indians with limited access to grocery stores or SNAP offices. **As of March 2014, FDPIR served 82,600 American Indians per month in 276 tribes.**⁷ American Indians can only receive benefits from one or the other; the decision of which program to utilize is at the discretion of the individual or family.

Under FDPIR, the acquisition of nutritious, traditional, and local foods could help ensure better nutrition and cultural preservation on Indian reservations. Currently, FDPIR provides a selection of over 70 food products from which participants can choose. These products include frozen and canned meats, canned fruits and vegetables, grains and beans, cheese, juice, dried fruit, peanuts and peanut butter, flour and on some reservations fresh fruits and vegetables.⁸

Fresh fruits and vegetables are not available on all American Indians reservations and fresh meat is not currently available through FDPIR. Obtaining local foods can reduce transportation distances and costs while providing fresh meat and produce for AI reservations. Purchasing local foods will also increase tribal autonomy by reducing dependence on external food producers. In order for the Traditional and Local Foods Demonstration Project to be implemented effectively, the unique cultures of each tribe must be considered and respected.

Outreach for Farmers

Historical marginalization through discrimination and geographical confinement has limited resources to American Indians and negatively impacted agricultural development on reservations. The demonstration project aims to “**consult with Indian tribes and provide outreach to Indian farmers, ranchers, and producers regarding the training and capacity to participate in the demonstration project.**”⁹ With the budget for Outreach and Technical Assistance for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers (OASDFR) Competitive Grants Program (also known as the 2501 Program) **cut in half**

⁴ “2007 Census of Agriculture: American Indian Farmers Factsheet.” *United States Department of Agriculture and National Agriculture Statistics Service*.

http://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2007/Online_Highlights/Fact_Sheets/Demographics/american_indian.pdf

⁵ Rob Capriccioso. “How Will Farm Bill & Food Stamp Cuts Impact Indian Country?” *Indian Country Today Media Network*. February 5, 2014. <https://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/02/05/how-will-farm-bill-food-stamp-cuts-impact-indian-country-153422?page=0%2C1>

⁶ Rob Capriccioso. “How Will Farm Bill & Food Stamp Cuts Impact Indian Country?”

⁷ Wheelock, Leslie. “USDA Continues Reaching Indian Country through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR).” *United States Department of Agriculture Blog*. March 26 2014. <http://blogs.usda.gov/2014/03/26/usda-continues-reaching-indian-country-through-the-food-distribution-program-on-indian-reservations-fdpir/> <http://blogs.usda.gov/?s=indian+food+insecurity&x=0&y=0&commit=Search#sthash.1QXjolJ0.dpuf>

⁸ “Nutrition Program Fact Sheet September 2013.” *Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations*. <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/pfs-fdpir.pdf>

⁹ U.S. House. 113th Congress, 2nd Session. H.R. 2642, *Agricultural Act of 2014*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 2014.

from \$20 million to \$10 million per year,¹⁰ American Indian farmers will require additional alternative resources. The outreach and technical assistance program provides a range of support including farm management, financial management, and marketing assistance.¹¹ The demonstration project could complement the OASFDR program in the future by providing outreach and training for production and distribution within American Indian communities.

Recommendations

1. Funding for the Traditional and Local Foods Demonstration Project **needs to be appropriated** to ensure increased food security and autonomy for American Indian Tribes. Funding for this project is authorized at \$2 million per year for fiscal years 2014 through 2018.
2. The demonstration project must **emphasize local producers**, not just traditional foods. Inclusion of local producers, farmers, and ranchers will increase autonomy across reservations. Having greater control over production will reduce dependency on government assistance in the future. Consuming locally produced, traditional, and nutritious foods will enable tribes to internalize the multitude of benefits from a local food system more readily and contribute to food security.
3. Outreach, training, and education assistance needs to be offered **in line with already existing tribal knowledge and expertise**. Consultation with the Indian Tribes must be thorough to determine the unique needs, capabilities, and skills on each reservation interested in participating in the demonstration project. A forum for communication should be established to facilitate both consultation and program implementation.
4. A space needs to be carved out to **encourage community subsistence** within the agricultural communities of the Indian Reservations. For many tribes, traditional agricultural production, still in practice on many reservations, is based on the idea of communal subsistence. Food is not grown for profit, but to feed fellow members of each respective tribe. Surplus harvest is shared with neighbors, community groups, and tribal organizations facilitating food security and tribal customs. Policies in support of this mode of production and distribution can help reduce dependence on federal food assistance.

¹⁰ “What is in the 2014 Farm Bill For Sustainable Farms and Food Systems?” *National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition*. January 31, 2014. <http://sustainableagriculture.net/blog/2014-farm-bill-outcomes/#BFR>

¹¹ National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. “Outreach for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers.” National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition. <http://sustainableagriculture.net/publications/grassrootsguide/farming-opportunities/socially-disadvantaged-farmers-program/>