



Tribes Are Building Food Sovereignty With Help From the Nation's Largest Hunger-Relief Group

Five tribal nations are working with Feeding America to improve their ability to produce more food and respond to disasters. If it works, the pilot could inform a larger shift in how the massive organization works with Indigenous communities.

BY KATE NELSON OCTOBER 31, 2023



Cheyenne Majenty of Helping Hands for Hualapai hopes a new program through Feeding America will help the tribe develop greater food sovereignty through community gardens. (Photo credit: Joel Gonzalez)

Like so many Indigenous communities, the Hualapai experienced outsized food insecurity during the pandemic. The northwestern Arizona tribe received sporadic food donations through a local church but wanted to take matters into its own hands. In 2021, tribal council member and emergency manager Cheyenne Majenty started Helping Hands

for Hualapai, a volunteer effort to facilitate food donations on a regular basis. The group soon joined forces with the Hualapai food security committee and realized they needed to start producing their own food to address this ongoing challenge.

When Feeding America announced its multi-year Natives Prepared program in 2022, Majenty knew the group needed to apply for the pilot cohort. The national hunger-relief nonprofit has long supported Indigenous groups through its network of more than 200 national food banks but in recent years has endeavored to solidify its partnerships with tribal nations. Leading this effort is Mark Ford (Chiricahua Apache Tewa/Tiwa), who became Feeding America's first director of Native partnerships in 2021 after spending years working in tribal relations.

The overarching aim of Natives Prepared is twofold: to empower Indigenous groups to produce and/or source their own food and to ensure they have integrated disaster resources. To kick off the program, Feeding America is working with a pilot cohort of five tribal nations: the Hualapai, the Onondaga Nation in New York, the United Houma Nation in Louisiana, the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate in South Dakota, and the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community in Washington.

Each community partners with a local food bank tasked with providing fiduciary and technical support. They're currently in the process of developing individualized project proposals that will be implemented over the next two years with a maximum budget of \$450,000 per participant. From there, Ford foresees this as the first cohort of many.

For the Hualapai, whose emergency operations program launched this summer, the focus is on developing greater food sovereignty through community gardens. "Because we're in an extremely rural location, we rely heavily on transportation to get our groceries from the next town over, which is 50 miles away," Majenty says. "We want to teach our community to be more self-sustaining so that we're ready if the semi-truck drivers boycott or if the highways or nearby farms shut down."

With assistance from Partnership With Native Americans (PWNA)—an Indigenous-led nonprofit tapped by Feeding America to liaise with tribal nations—the Hualapai committee created a detailed outline of its goals and needs in transforming a dozen empty lots into gardens to grow squash, beans, corn, turnips, onions, and other traditional plants. Majenty hopes that these gardens will eventually cover more of the 1-million-acre reservation to help feed its approximately 1,400 residents.

For inspiration, Majenty looks to the New York-based Onondaga Nation, which has enough food reserves from its farm to feed its tribal members for four years. Since they're both in the pilot cohort, the Hualapai and Onondaga people can learn from one another and share best practices, which is by design. Angela Ferguson, who oversees the Onondaga Nation Farm, explains that their revered food sovereignty program started small, too.

"We began with just a few workers who were willing to dedicate themselves to traditional agriculture," she says. "Part of our responsibility is putting food away for the people, which is what we do with half our harvests each year." During the pandemic, the Onondaga Nation had ample reserves of traditional foods like bison, venison, fish, corn, beans, and squash to feed its citizens.

Although Natives Prepared project proposals are still in the works, each cohort participant has a unique strategy in mind. The Onondaga Nation wants to develop a command center for distributing its extensive reserves and providing other emergency support. The Louisiana-based United Houma Nation needs warehouse space to store food and supplies, since it's deeply involved with the volunteer Cajun Navy, which delivers essentials to people by boat during storms and floods. South Dakota's Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate hopes to build a meat-processing plant to handle their own harvests of elk, deer, and other wild game.

The initiative was born out of this stark reality: After a long history of colonialism, oppression, and harmful federal policies, Native Americans face disproportionately high food insecurity, estimated at nearly 24 percent. Those challenges are exacerbated by emergencies, since Indigenous peoples are among the hardest hit by disasters and the last to receive aid. Ford witnessed this firsthand during his time with the Louisiana Governor's Office of Indian Affairs, when he helped area tribes in the aftermath of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike.

"With so many tribal nations, there's an inability to respond to our own disasters, especially when it comes to food," says Ford. As a more recent example, he points to last December's Winter Storm Diaz, which pelted South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation with 30 inches of snow and stranded residents in their homes with limited supplies of food, medicine, propane, and other essentials for

Oglala Sioux tribal members called Ford and pleaded for help. Together with Feeding America Director of Disaster Services Vince Davis, he engaged Feeding South Dakota, the state and U.S. agriculture departments, and Partnership With Native Americans to bring in relief. "It reaffirmed just how important it is for to immediately respond to disasters on their own, since they best know what their needs are," says Ford.

To that end, the Natives Prepared program is driven by self-determination, letting tribal nations dictate what will meaningfully support their self-sufficiency then pulling in adequate funding to execute their highly customized plans. Just as each community's needs are unique, so too are their policies. For instance, the Onondaga Nation doesn't accept any government funding, so Feeding America must secure appropriate private donors and partners to bring their project to fruition. Partnership With Native Americans has been instrumental in navigating unique circumstances like this.

"We were brought in to act as an intermediary, provide a safe space, and bring people together to have honest dialogues," explains PWNA President and CEO Joshua Arce (Prairie Band Potawatomi). "Feeding America can feel like a big corporate entity, and they just don't have the relationships we have with these communities. We're here to make sure their voices are heard."

Natives Prepared is one of the first major joint initiatives between PWNA and Feeding America, and thus far, Arce is encouraged by the efforts. "The financial and personnel investment Feeding America is putting into this is staggering," he says. "It's really important that this isn't just some plan that sits on a shelf. There are tangible action steps that will have positive outcomes and create once-in-a-lifetime opportunities for these tribal nations."

Arce emphasizes the need for corporations and government agencies to provide meaningful support to Native communities yet acknowledges the lack of trust many Indigenous peoples have for these large entities. He thinks this program could be transformational not only in bolstering tribal sovereignty but also in setting the bar for how a big player like Feeding America can make a big difference.

Feeding America's Ford is not naïve efforts it will take to repair these relationships, which is why he is personally involved with the pilot cohort in addition to a dedicated team. He also recognizes that Feeding America's investment in tribal sovereignty might seem counterintuitive.

After all, Feeding America is no stranger to scrutiny. As the nation's largest charity, it brings in more than \$4 billion in private donations. The nonprofit—and the hunger-relief industry at large—has been criticized for its high-salaried executives and reliance on donations from large corporations, such as Walmart, which in turn receive generous tax breaks.

But Ford sees supporting food sovereignty as part of the nonprofit's three-pronged approach. "We're addressing hunger by feeding the line—meaning our food banks supply food to people in need—but also by shortening and eventually ending the line through support for the farm bill and initiatives like this," he says. "No one knows how to end hunger better than the people who experience it, which is why we want to elevate their voices and solutions."

For the Hualapai, it took some convincing to get tribal leadership on board with the Natives Prepared program. Majenty believes they'll come around when they see the positive impact on the community but also understands the skepticism. "For so long, we have had entities coming in with this attitude of 'I'm going to save you,'" she explains. "Now the conversation has shifted to, 'What can we do to help you be successful?' We need to know these resources are here to actually help us and not extort or abuse us. So far with Feeding America, we've had that kind of support."

Although there's still much work to be done, the pilot cohort has begun down a path toward healing and reconciliation.

"I look at food as a form of a reparation," says Ferguson of the Onondaga Nation. "We had a lot of our land taken from us and a lot of our foods destroyed. Even though this happened generations ago, we're still carrying the historical trauma of our ancestors. Food is the one common unifier that brings all human beings together and lets us start a dialogue about how we can work together to fix these issues."



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