



## THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

### HONORING NATIONS: 2006 HONOREE

#### **Bad River Recycling/Solid Waste Department Bad River Band of Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians**

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*Generations ago, a prophecy told the Anishinabe people to move west to where food grew on water. Migrating from the eastern shores of North America, the Anishinabe people settled throughout the Great Lakes region where wild rice fields grew out of fresh water lakes. For hundreds of years, the Bad River Band lived in present day Wisconsin, harvesting wild rice, hunting, and fishing. Sadly, pollution began to threaten this sensitive ecosystem and the Anishinabe identity. Waste was hazardous and abundant on their lands, despite cultural creation and migration stories stressing environmental stewardship. The Bad River Recycling/Solid Waste Department set about creating environmentally sound practices of managing and disposing waste generated on the reservation, ending cycles of harm caused by poor disposal practices. Now, through community-wide education, incentives, and new waste management systems, the Bad River Band citizens boast a clean, safe, and green reservation environment.*

For years, Bad River was plagued by poor waste management. Residents burned or buried their trash. An unofficial, unregulated landfill existed from the 1960s to the 1980s, creating hazards. Junk cars, furniture, and old appliances were often abandoned, creating eyesores and health threats from chemical leakages. Because the Band's lands are primarily sensitive wetlands, such pollution can lead to permanent damage. Litter on the reservation was also a problem, as is true for many other nations. In Indian Country, household waste pickup is not always uniformly available and, when it is, services are often carried out by non-Native companies with no connections to the community. Public education and individualized customer service are virtually non-existent, leaving little hope that tribal citizens will change their waste management habits.

A growing recognition of pollution hazards led the Bad River tribal government to conceptualize the watershed approach. Following a state announcement to mandate recycling, the Band enacted an ordinance in 1989 to regulate and govern waste management on the reservation and the Recycling/Solid Waste (R/SW) Department was established. The Department opened a transfer station and began to provide curbside pickup of waste and recyclables for the entire reservation. Every household on the reservation is now required to either participate in the curbside pickup or haul its household waste to a nearby town off-reservation. The Band handles everything from glass, tin, and plastics to motor oil, solvents, and appliances. Five tribal citizens are employed to provide approximately 670 households, 2,100 citizens and non-citizens with curbside pickup. In addition, the R/SW Department

provides solid waste management services to tribal programs and enterprises located on the reservation, and for special events and public areas, such as the powwow grounds, beaches, and boat launches. Through tribal ordinances, culturally based education methods, and excellent customer service, the Bad River Band is strengthening the nation's commitment to protecting the environment and maintaining a pristine reservation.

An important aspect of the R/SW Department is the Band's environmental policy and tribal ordinance. Environmental consciousness is part of the Bad River culture. Ninety percent of the tribal lands are kept in their natural state and the Band works hard to ensure this continues. To reinforce its culture of land stewardship, the Band has enacted an environmental policy that states, "Looking forward seven generations, the Tribe is committed to ensuring a clean and healthy environment within the reservation ..." The recycling/solid waste ordinance provides them necessary legal infrastructure to enforce procedures. Supporting and strengthening tribal sovereignty, tribal game wardens work closely with the Department to issue citations for noncompliance or illegal dumping. All cases are handled by the tribal court system. These two elements help the Department uphold its mission to minimize the environmental impact of waste generated by residents and to maintain a clean and safe reservation.

From the outset, education has played a major role in the R/SW Department, with a focus on keeping families healthy and protecting resources for future generations. Pamphlets and fliers are published and distributed regularly. Customized education is provided to raise community awareness on proper disposal, particularly regarding hazardous and medical waste. For example, diabetes is a common health problem on the reservation, and the resulting used hypodermic needles are hazards. The Department educates residents on the importance of proper disposal methods for items such as insulin needles, teaching them to collect used needles in sealable plastic containers. The Department also hires tribal youth during the summer for on-the-job training and makes regular presentations to youth groups, further reinforcing the environmental culture of the Bad River people. The youth bolster recycling and waste management procedures at home and support the community's commitment to becoming cleaner and safer.

Another contributing factor to the Band's high recycling rate and a clean reservation is the Department's first rate customer service. The staff takes pride in their mission and demonstrates dedication by picking up waste at the door if a resident is elderly or infirm. Other noteworthy programs have been created, such as an initiative to deal with abandoned cars which removed 162 junk cars from the reservation. In 2005, a burn barrel buy-back program was started and approximately 40 barrels were turned in and 40 households pledged to no longer burn waste. Recognizing that citizens were reluctant to give up their barrels, staff inquired and learned that people were burning their waste, and particularly their mail, to prevent identity theft and maintain privacy. When the Department repeated the program in 2006, they provided an industrial shredder at the transfer station for community use. The Band has reduced the number of burn barrels on the reservation by another 20%, and citizens that have burning permits have barrel screens and comply with burning ordinances. Today, the Band bears witness to a significant response by its community. Bad River has achieved an average solid waste recycling rate of about 30% one of the highest recycling rates in the region. Over the past eight years, R/SW has exceeded its recycling goal of 82 lbs per capita. In 2006, they reached the rate of 87 lbs per capita, plus over 100 lbs per capita in extras such as appliances. The illegal open dump on the reservation has not only been cleaned up, but also is no longer used. The appearance of the entire reservation has greatly improved. Yards are free of junk cars and old appliances. Roadways and public areas are free of litter. Illegal dumping in the woods and ravines is almost completely eliminated.

The habits and attitudes of the residents have dramatically changed.

Many communities can establish independent, tailored solid waste management and recycling programs. The Bad River program provides an example of how a program can be successful by implementing a sound legislative foundation to enforce policies, increase recycling rates by infusing educational materials with cultural values and beliefs, and foster excellence within a workforce. These simple steps all pay enormous dividends in Bad River's mission to keep its lands, animals, harbors, and people safe and healthy, and most importantly, honor its cultural philosophy by being good stewards the environment.

Lessons:

- By putting in place ordinances in support of a clean environment and an effective enforcement infrastructure, a tribal government simultaneously improves its self-governance capacity and community quality of life.
- Culturally based educational materials can be vital to establishing community buy-in and sustainable programs.
- Thoughtful hiring and intentional staff training are one route to excellent customer service and more valuable, community-focused programs.

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