

Quapaw Nation Agricultural Programs

Quapaw Nation

Like many Native nations, the Quapaw Nation relies on gaming income to fund government operations and to create employment opportunities for tribal citizens. But tribal leaders are also committed to diversifying the economy and limiting dependence on casino revenues. Drawing on its people's farming heritage, the Nation has built an array of businesses that reduce reliance on external food sources and provide tribal citizens and their neighbors with healthy, locally raised food—a win for Quapaw economic development and for Indigenous food sovereignty.

A DISAPPEARING AGRICULTURAL HERITAGE

Prior to their removal in the 19th century, the ancestors of today's Quapaw Nation lived in agricultural settlements near the Mississippi River in what is now Arkansas. Today, more than half of the Nation's 5,289 citizens live within a 57,000-acre jurisdictional area in northeastern Oklahoma. Although the territory includes large areas of fertile grasslands, the Nation had reached a point in the early 2000s where few of its citizens were engaged in agriculture and farming traditions were being lost.

At the same time, the Quapaw Nation had developed two successful casinos that brought jobs and wealth to the area. These facilities were an important economic engine for the Nation, but citizens had few employment opportunities outside of the gaming industry—generating concern that the local economy was becoming overly dependent on casino revenue.

As Quapaw tribal leaders considered the question of how to diversify their economy, the idea of tapping into and reviving the Nation's agricultural heritage began to take hold. In the absence of local agriculture, Quapaw families had difficulty buying fresh, affordable food. They no longer prepared traditional dishes because ingredients were hard to find. The loss of ancestral knowledge about nutrition contributed to chronic health problems, and limited food choices led to increasingly unhealthy diets. Since the food that Quapaw families ate came from elsewhere, the Nation had no control over its quality. Similarly, it was impossible to know whether farming methods used to produce "imported" foods supported tribal values such as the protection of the environment and animal welfare. Reflecting on all these concerns, tribal leaders wondered—what if the Nation worked toward the dual goal of developing profitable agricultural enterprises and increasing food sovereignty?

HONORING NATIONS

THE QUAPAW FARM-TO-TABLE INITIATIVE

The Nation launched the Quapaw Agricultural Programs in 2010 with a modest purchase of eight American Bison. Since then, the Agricultural Programs have become a thriving farm-to-table initiative. Following its bison purchase, the Nation launched the Quapaw Horticultural Program and built five large commercial greenhouses to grow fruit, vegetables, herbs, and flowers. The Program also acquired 75 beehives to produce honey and pollinate the Nation's greenhouse plants. The Quapaw Cattle Company began a breeding program to expand the bison herd and added Black Angus cattle and goats to its operations. To reduce dependence on commercial feed for its animals, the Nation began farming corn, soybeans, wheat, canola, and hay to use as fodder. The Nation subsequently built its own silage pits, commodity barns, and hay barns for crop storage.

Over the next few years, the Agricultural Programs began to pursue additional commercial opportunities. Since 2016, the Quapaw Mercantile Store has sold agricultural products to tribal citizens, local residents, and visitors. The Nation also operates a 2,500-square-foot coffee roasting facility which imports beans from a variety of foreign countries to create blends for its O-Gah-Pah coffee brand. The Nation's most recent business initiative is the launch of the Downstream Craft Brewing Company, which produces several types of beer brewed in 250-gallon tanks located in one of the Quapaw casino restaurants.

In 2017, building on the success of its cattle operation, the Quapaw Nation invested a total of \$5 million in tribal and grant funds to open a meat processing plant. The Quapaw





Cattle Company's facility is the first tribally owned US Department of Agriculture certified meat processing plant. It also employs the first federal meat grade inspector of Native heritage. The facility slaughters, packages, and labels meat from beef, lamb, bison, elk, pork, and goat. Products from the plant meet national standards and can be shipped to customers anywhere in the country. With its state-of-the-art technology and full-service approach, the plant has quickly gained a reputation as the state's leading artisanal meat packing operation.

Today, the Nation's agricultural operations are governed by the Quapaw Nation's Department of Agriculture, Food, and Nutrition, which employs more than 80 community members, approximately half of

which are Quapaw citizens. The Quapaw herd has grown to number over 200 bison and 1,200 Black Angus cattle. The Nation's crop operation oversees almost 3,000 acres of tribally owned and leased land. The Agricultural Programs supply food at low cost to various community initiatives, including school lunches and Title VI nutritional programs for seniors. Rekindling ancestral practices, each family attending the annual Quapaw Powwow receives a ration of fresh produce and bison cuts to honor their participation in the event. One tribal citizen notes, "It has taken hard work and dedication to make what was once a dream a reality for our Quapaw people—we have made tremendous progress."

HONORING NATIONS

FINDING STRENGTH BY FEEDING A NATION

To diversify its economy, the Quapaw Nation took advantage of the markets created by existing tribal enterprises. Because the Nation's casino operations had been using outside vendors to supply food products, the profits from these purchases were flowing out of the community. The Nation's agricultural operation managers identified opportunities to capture more of this supply chain. Their businesses expanded incrementally by building on each success and developing expertise within the community. The Quapaw Nation Agricultural Programs now provide all of the flowers, beef, and coffee for the Nation's hotel resort guest rooms and casino restaurants.

The Nation's emphasis on retaining economic benefits within the community extends to all aspects of agricultural production. For example, rather than simply grazing cattle to sell to outsiders who then add value, the Quapaw Cattle Company breeds, raises, and processes livestock and then sells the end products itself. In this way, the funds used to purchase supplies stay within the community and the enterprises create a diverse range of desirable jobs, from seasonal work on tribal lands to highly specialized production and marketing positions. The Nation's Agriculture Director explains, "We strive to find the absolute best employees and give them high quality training to help our Nation's agricultural endeavors continue to prosper."

The Quapaw Nation is also reinforcing its self-determination and tribal authority as it renews its traditions of farming expertise.

Tribal land holdings in the area have grown by over 5,000 acres, driven by the need for more space to graze livestock and grow crops. By running its own Agricultural Programs, the Nation independently controls the quality of the food available to its citizens and to visitors. All Quapaw meats are hormone free. The greenhouses produce fresh produce, giving families access to healthy food that previously had been unavailable in the area. The fact that the Nation creates its own agricultural products means that it supervises exactly how these items are developed. The agricultural operations emphasize land management and farming techniques that protect the environment, animal well-being, and public health.



For example, since intensive agriculture can have a damaging effect on ground and surface water, the Nation only uses rainwater for their crops and invests in efficient automatic livestock watering systems. The Nation's holding and feeding facilities are designed to minimize stress for animals before they are led to slaughter. The Quapaw Cattle Company coordinates with the Nation's food service operations to plan slaughter dates that will match demand for products so that its cuts are as fresh as possible and there is minimal waste of unused meat. The Nation has also chosen to produce foods that are culturally important for its citizens, including Native corn and tobacco for use

in ceremonies. With the reintroduction of bison meat, community members can once again prepare the traditional dishes that are part of the Nation's heritage. In the words of Chairman John Berrey, the mission of the Programs is "to enhance our Nation's sovereignty by creating renewable and sustainable natural food sources."

As a result of the success of the Quapaw Nation Agricultural Programs, the Nation's economic and social influence is growing and taking an increased leadership role in the region. The Agricultural Programs lease hundreds of acres from non-tribal landowners, contributing much-needed revenue to the area's economy. Area farmers benefit from the Nation's investment in the Quapaw Cattle Company Feeding Facility and meat processing plant since they can process their animals locally rather than bearing the cost of transport to more distant facilities. The Nation provides food donations to social service programs throughout the area, regardless of whether the recipients have a tribal affiliation. Tribal program managers share expertise on agricultural research and training with Oklahoma State University, Northeastern Oklahoma University, Missouri State University, and the University of Arkansas. The Quapaw Cattle Company actively participates in state environmental and conservation stewardship initiatives. These positive interactions help counteract the enduring prejudices that exist in a state with a long history of hostility towards tribal sovereignty.



HONORING NATIONS



LESSONS

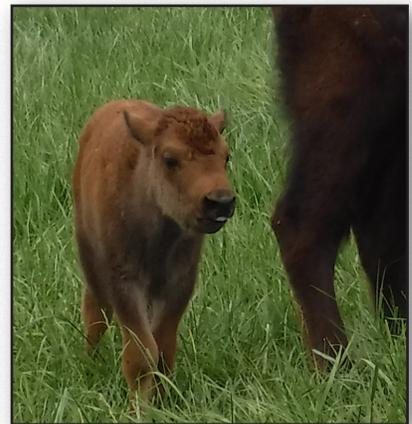
The Quapaw Nation's Agricultural Programs retain dollars in the local economy through the creative use of tribal land and human resources. By focusing on humane and sustainable farming methods, the Programs help the Nation reclaim agricultural traditions, create new jobs for community members, and make high quality, healthy food products newly available to tribal citizens and their neighbors.



Tribal business diversification benefits both Native and non-Native economies through job creation and the expansion of regional economic opportunities.



Strategic investments in vertical integration and sustainable food sources have the potential to increase tribal authority over both food production and food quality standards.



Economic development ventures that simultaneously strengthen a Native nation's culture and meet citizens' contemporary needs also strengthen tribal sovereignty.