

AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Written Testimony by Lexie Holden, 27th Class of Emerson National Hunger Fellows July 22, 2021

Good morning everyone and thank you to Representative McGovern, the Congressional Hunger Center, and all of our distinguished guests for joining us today. It is an honor to have been asked to speak about the state of hunger in Indian Country, and to be able to propose a solution.

My name is Lexie Holden and I am a member of the 27th class of Emerson National Hunger Fellows and a citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Today, I will be sharing with you the findings of my hunger-free community report, which I produced during my time at the Native American Agriculture Fund in Fayetteville, AR.

Prior to the pandemic, the rate of food insecurity among Native Americans was 1 in 4 or 25%, double that of non-Natives. For some Tribal communities, this number can be upwards of 80%. Taking into consideration the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, these numbers are most certainly low estimates.

One of the most promising ways to help eradicate hunger in Tribal communities and to improve Native Americans' economic outcomes, is through investments in agriculture.

Typically located in rural regions with over 50 million acres of farmland, there is so much potential for growth and prosperity across Indian Country.

One of the best ways to improve agricultural systems, generally, and to help our producers, is through research and education. I'm sure that you are familiar with the Cooperative Extension System (CES), but for those who are not, here is a small overview. The CES is a system of 15000+ extension agents who operate out of the nation's land grant universities, offering access to agricultural knowledge, technical assistance, and the latest research, all available to anyone living in the United States. At least, that was how it was intended to operate.

Though access to extension has been promised to Tribes in treaties for centuries, Native producers have historically been barred from using the CES' services due to discrimination and the devaluation in

traditional Tribal methods of agriculture. In 1990, advocates across Indian Country came together to demand parity, equity, and the upholding of the federal government's trust responsibility to provide extension to Tribes. Thus, the Federally-Recognized Tribes Extension Program (FRTEP) was built, and it serves as an extension system dedicated to serving only Tribes and their producers.

During my time as a fellow, I interviewed and surveyed the FRTEP agents serving our Native producers. They are instrumental in the communities they serve, not only helping to mentor the next generation of farmers through 4-H programs, but by teaching range management, supporting the production of traditional foods, and addressing the effects of climate of change on agricultural production. During the pandemic, these agents went above and beyond by providing personal protective equipment (PPE) to the Tribes they work in and by directing the food grown through their programs to Tribal Elders and Youth.

The FRTEP agents wear many hats. They have to. After all, there are only 34 agents to serve 574 federally recognized tribes and over 80,000 Native producers. That means that each FRTEP agent is tasked with serving an approximated 2,200 producers each, whereas CES agents serve around 220 producers each.

The FRTEP's funding is extremely limited and the program has consistently been appropriated for only \$3 million a year because people do not understand the impact that the agents have on those in their communities. Additionally, the funding is awarded on a competitive basis, stripping communities of expertise and trust which can take decades to build up. Even the USDA, the department which houses the FRTEP, acknowledges that "FRTEP funding levels are "not sufficient" and that the competitive grant cycle perpetuates "instability and inconsistency in marginalized, impoverished and underrepresented communities."

Even if the FRTEP were funded at its initially authorized 1990 levels, the program should currently be receiving over \$12 million a year after adjusting for inflation. With 15,000 CES agents and an agent every US county, what message are we sending to Indian Country when we refuse to even provide a FRTEP agent in every state where Tribes are located?

With the proper investments, the agricultural industry in Indian Country could become a sector worth over \$85.4 billion annually, completely blowing past the Indian gaming industry. Not only does this put money into the pockets of Native producers, but it helps to reduce food insecurity by shortening the food supply chain and creating jobs in rural economies.

While the funding levels and lack of staffing were the concerns shared with me by the FRTEP agents, what they love about being FRTEP agents are the communities they serve, the lives they touch, and the people they help feed.

Representative McGovern, I know that you want to see the end of hunger as much I do. I implore you, and the rest of our guests here today, to see how the proper investment in agricultural extension in Indian Country, specifically through the FRTEP, could accomplish that.

Thank you, I would like to use the remainder of my time to answer questions.

Additional Resources

Link to the Hunger-Free Community Report on the FRTEP:

<https://www.hungercenter.org/publications/advocating-for-the-federally-recognized-tribes-extension-program/>

Link to extended presentation on the FRTEP:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6APFwu3HwD8>

Link to more information about each of the FRTEP agent locations:

<https://tribalextension.org/projects/>

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