



# Minnesota FOOD CHARTER

For Our Healthy Future

## Tribal Summary Report

---

The original food system of the Upper Midwest encompassed Great Plains and Woodlands contexts and sustained the health and vitality of Anishinaabe and Dakota people for thousands of years. From wild game to fish to wild rice (manoomin) to wild fruits and cultivated crops, indigenous people cared for a diverse food system that was intimately intertwined with spiritual and cultural traditions. Despite centuries of oppression and resulting historical trauma, tribal communities have maintained strong links to traditional foods and the cultural practices that accompany these foods.

The result of this long and complex legacy of structural racism has also profoundly impacted the health and well-being of American Indians across the state, making it very challenging to sustain these traditions. Healthy food access is a pressing issue that impacts tribal communities across Minnesota, particularly consistent access to traditional foods. Rates of food insecurity, poverty, and diet-related disease disproportionately affect Native people, compared to Minnesota's general population. In looking ahead to preserving and reclaiming native food systems and foodways as key means to improve the health of tribal communities, it's important to understand the central roles of sovereignty, native nation-building, culturally-based approaches to strengthening community food practices, and intergenerational strategies for transmitting traditional knowledge.

### Context

This report has been synthesized from the feedback generated through multiple events, including structured Food Charter Events, background research conducted by native-serving non-profit organizations, listening sessions, talking circles, and individual interviews. In many of these cases, representatives of tribally-serving organizations gathered much of this information and shared written findings and check-in conversations with Minnesota Food Charter staff. This report aggregates and summarizes all of this feedback, providing a synthesis of tribally-focused challenges and proposed strategies.

## Native American Engagement in the Minnesota Food Charter

The Minnesota Food Charter will ensure we have healthy, affordable and safe food, building a legacy of health for future generations. During 2013, over 2000 residents of Minnesota participated in a public engagement process to describe the barriers and solutions to healthy food access. Many Native Americans residing in reservation, rural, and metropolitan communities across the state participated in the public input phase, with numerous leaders from tribal communities and tribally-serving organizations hosting and facilitating Food Charter Events, as well as conducting listening sessions, key informant interviews, and background research. This effort was guided by native leadership from tribal agencies, tribal-serving non-profit organizations, and traditional foods advocates.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota provided supplemental funding in 2013 to the Minnesota Food Charter in order to solicit engagement and input from native communities across the state. This report integrates the findings of multiple efforts focused on Native American participation in the Minnesota Food Charter public input process funded by Blue Cross, including:

1. American Indian Cancer Foundation convened 4 tribally focused Food Charter Events and educational immersion trips for urban native community members, recording discussion results
2. Indigenous Environmental Network conducted key informant interviews with a wide range of experts on food security and sovereignty within tribal communities and on Indian reservations. Eleven of those interviewed were tribal members, and the two non-native interviewees lived or worked in tribal communities, all in Northern Minnesota
3. The Intertribal Agricultural Council conducted interviews and content expertise focused on the linkages between economic development, traditional food systems renewal, and community health
4. Food Charter Events were hosted by and/or involved tribal community members, including reservation residents, tribal elders and their caregivers, and community leaders working on traditional foodways and healthy food access in reservation communities

## Context

---

Historically, tribal communities in this region had healthy, active lifestyles and sustainable, community-based food systems. A legacy of historical trauma from genocidal policies, including land theft, forced relocation, federal forced assimilation, the boarding school system, and other intentional, institutional disruptions to the native societal infrastructure

has left tribal nations and communities with some of the highest rates of diet-related illness and chronic disease in the state. The decline of native food systems is a result of this complex, systematic campaign, which separated tribal people from the land and reduced families' opportunities to produce their own food. While many of the challenges facing the state's native peoples mirror those facing other minority communities throughout the state, other challenges are unique to American Indians, and many differ even among the state's 11 tribes and many non-tribal, native communities.

### The Problem with "Policy"

Words themselves carry weight and history. An overarching challenge facing the Minnesota Food Charter is the negative connotation in Indian country of the word "policy." For many native people, this term evokes historical and contemporary memories and impacts of genocidal and colonial policies created and carried out by state and federal governments, resulting for many in resulting cultural trauma, not to mention loss of land base and tradition. Instead, it may be more culturally appropriate for the Food Charter to promote values – and community-based accountability and ties to tradition – as a path to lasting and systemic changes in access to healthy food, rather than policy. Furthermore, even otherwise, very tribal-friendly policies - like allowing tribal employees to take time off to participate in seasonal food gathering activities - are open to abuse (*i.e.*, taking time off for another reason) in the absence of supporting education and cultural accountability. Those providing input cited both this semantic aversion to "policy" and the great extent to which policy is ineffective without underlying cultural supports as overarching barriers to food systems change in Indian Country.

Despite the challenges, much indigenous food systems knowledge remains intact among both elders and young people in native communities. There is great interest in leveraging this rich food history into a healthy, sovereign, and secure food system that ensures food sovereignty for all tribal and native peoples in the state. This paper will summarize some of the unique challenges and culturally specific strategies to addressing the food-related health crises facing many of the state's indigenous communities, gleaned from the research efforts described above.

### Land Resources

---

**Barriers** - Native communities' access to healthy and traditional food is compromised by the degradation of natural resources, including forest mismanagement by non-native entities, sulfide mining and its threat to waterways and aquatic flora and fauna, dams, agricultural chemicals and their effects on pollinators, and erosion and pollution caused by industrial agriculture. Wild foods such as game, whitefish and wild rice have been disproportionately threatened by these activities, meaning that tribal and native communities in general have

been disproportionately affected. Furthermore, the widespread presence of tickborne disease vectors have also greatly impacted the health of native people engaging in traditional food-gathering activities.

Geography also greatly informs the challenges faced by and opportunities available to native communities – Plains tribes (Prairie Island, Shakopee, Upper Sioux, and Lower Sioux) are generally surrounded by rich farmland (little of which is under tribal control), and Woodlands tribal members (Red Lake, Leech Lake, Nett Lake, White Earth, Fond du Lac, Mille Lacs, and Grand Portage) have a culture intertwined with the widely available wild rice, fish, small and large game, and maple syrup. Another land use consideration is that with the exception of Red Lake, all tribal land was long ago allotted to individual members, eventually leading to vast property transfers to nonmembers. The result of this is that little of the state’s richest farmland or strategic land resources are owned or controlled by tribes.

**Strategies** - Historically, most communities had traditions guiding how land could be accessed and managed, which fit imperfectly with Western conceptions of land ownership. Sugar camps provide insight into the problem – although many tribal members continue to tap maples on tribally managed lands, it is only on private property that significant investments in collection and processing infrastructure have been made. Developing land access strategies to encourage and safeguard infrastructure investments for maple syrup production is therefore essential (establishing maple sugar producer cooperatives is one example shared by participants).

While many native food traditions, such as wild ricing, are not conducive to advances like mechanical harvesting, there remain opportunities to blend best agricultural practices into traditional food production practices. Incubator or community farms, five to ten acre parcels of land containing smaller plots, enable the sharing of resources like equipment and water, reducing barriers to entry for small-scale commercial production.

Providing funding to gather stories and experiences of traditional food gatherers affected by tickborne diseases may also yield insights and identify needs associated with approaches to address this epidemic in Indian Country and its impact on public health and traditional foodways.

## **Governance and Leadership**

---

**Barriers** - Tribes have a number of benefits in instituting food systems changes that other groups do not – they are sovereign political and social institutions, and tribal communities have much in common with one another, enabling inter-tribal coordination like that exemplified by the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. However, like other relatively small and insular groups, they face internal struggles that can complicate long-term decision-making

and continuity. Calls for strong leadership are ubiquitous, whether referring to elected leaders (tribal, state and federal) or community leadership (nonprofits, community groups, and elders and mentors).

**Strategies** - Food systems planning can encourage a shared vision and coordinated decision-making and is perhaps the most important strategy in rebuilding resilient tribal food systems. Broader land management plans, such as the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) Integrated Resource Management Plans (IRMP), hold promise but have not to date shown great effectiveness, due in part to a lack of understanding about traditional foodstuffs like berries, herbs and even maple trees. At the least, future planning efforts should advance upon current plans developed by BIA and, to a limited degree, tribal government staff, and truly engage the community in order to create a better and longer lasting vision for the management of resources.

It is also critical that tribal members have an understanding of their treaty and other legal rights, to ensure they can access the natural resources to which they are entitled. One suggestion offered by a hereditary tribal leader who also holds a key position in one reservation's tribal government is to develop and regularly offer trainings to elected officials and staff of contemporary tribal governments on governance, inherent and acquired sovereignty, and related legal issues.

## Access to Capital

---

**Barriers** - Reservations have historically been “credit deserts,” where banks and even government loan programs have operated sparingly. When banks did offer loans, it was often at exorbitant interest rates, pushing people to bankruptcy.

**Strategies** - The recent \$760 million *Keepseagle* legal settlement for discrimination in USDA farm loan disbursement and administration has led to heightened internal efforts and training, a Council on Native American Farming and Ranching that advises the secretary, and a formal third party technical assistance program run by the Intertribal Agricultural Council. A decision on what to do with substantial unspent funds is forthcoming and presents additional opportunities in terms of access to capital.

## Knowledge and Skills

---

**Barriers** - Traditional knowledge of food systems, as well as food production and gathering skills, remains intact among the minds of elders, but it has largely not been passed down to the middle-aged segments of society (with many notable exceptions), who hold most of the government and leadership positions.

**Strategies** - Connecting elders to youth is imperative if food systems knowledge is to be retained. These connections are typically made at the family level, but community-based efforts are essential as well, which might include informal traditional activities, teachings and ceremonies as well as formal culture camps.

Having the proper equipment is just as important to accessing traditional foods. For example, gathering wild rice requires a boat, rice knockers, a pole to move the boat through the rice and a set up on one's vehicle to get the boat to the lake or river. Maple sugaring requires containers for collecting and gathering sap, taps, large kettles or other receptacles for boiling down the sap, and saws or axes for cutting firewood. Fishing in the summer can require a boat, and both ice fishing and summer fishing require spears or poles and bait. Every traditional food gathering or harvesting endeavor has its own necessary paraphernalia, and not having these items poses a significant barrier to accessing traditional foods.

## Food Production and Distribution

---

**Barriers** - Commercial food production is limited among Minnesota's tribes – only four of the seven Ojibwe tribes are engaged in commercial wild rice sales, and only two of the 11 tribes are engaged in other commercial food production and sales. Tribes who engage in commercial wild rice production have vast quantities of the product, while others lack adequate access to the staple, despite nearly universal demand. Access to wild rice for tribal populations living off-reservation, or non-tribal native communities, is often limited to family and friends, urban Indian offices or limited numbers of retail outlets. For the most part, traditional foods are acquired through friends and family who have grown, gathered or hunted the food themselves, not from mainstream retail stores. Furthermore, disagreements among tribal members about the use of wild rice as an economic development tool, given its status as a sacred food and a core part of their prophecy, also impacts the approach and thinking around its harvest, distribution, and sales.

**Strategies** - Many tribal outlets use products, especially wild rice, produced by their own tribal department, but tribal outlets should carry additional native products, as should native-owned casinos, grocery and convenience stores, and other retail outlets. While availability of these products is a concern, awareness of and interest in the products, as well as adequate distribution channels, are larger issues.

Farmers markets have been found not to be central to the question of food access given the adequacy of other shopping outlets. Despite this, there is great interest in enlarging their role in native food systems. Farmers markets should carry locally grown as well as wild food offerings.

Transportation is a barrier since reservations are often composed of small communities spread out over large swathes of land, and many other Native American communities are located far from population centers. Mobile farmers markets have been suggested as a strategy to address the transportation barrier, since they would be able to provide fresh food to more remote communities. Some of these initiatives already exist on reservations in Minnesota, but have not demonstrated their effectiveness.

## Affordability of Healthy Food

---

**Barriers** - The higher cost of traditional and healthy food products is a barrier to expanding consumption in native communities. Traditional foods like wild rice and maple syrup, which have cultural significance and are important to improving health, are generally very expensive. Organically grown fruits and vegetables, and grass fed, free-range meats, are particularly out of reach for the 30 percent or more of the state's Native Americans living in poverty, despite the belief in many communities that these foods would better contribute to the health of their people and resonate better with their ethics and connection to the land than commodity foods.

**Strategies** - Educating consumers about how far a product will stretch when cooked and its greater nutritional value compared to fast and junk food is one promising strategy. Expanding food assistance programs to all farmers markets, increasing healthy options at existing SNAP vendors and improving items provided through the commodity program are additional strategies to address the cost issue. Indeed, there is a belief that the commodity program is a "dumping ground" for substandard food, and although it fed people when there was nothing else, there are calls to raise the quality of food provided through the program.

## Food Skills Education and Food Systems-Related Research

---

Education is an essential element in rebuilding food systems and encouraging healthier eating. Involvement at the K-12 level is of particular importance, given research demonstrating the importance of exposure at an early age to the formation of taste preferences and eating habits.

**Strategies** - As in non-native communities, food literacy is an impediment to healthy eating. Respondents to an informal survey about desired food literacy skills answered in the affirmative to almost all of the choices offered: Hunting, fishing, maple sugaring, ricing, harvesting plant foods, harvesting plant medicines, gardening, seed saving, raising livestock, from-scratch cooking and food preservation. (The choices of trapping and snaring rounded out the survey and although they also elicited many affirmative responses, they provoked ethical concerns for some.) One of the ways to teach traditional food skills is through culture camps. Concerns were raised that funding for these camps can lead to a loss of community

control or attach burdensome requirements. Instead, funding should allow for decisions to be made within the community, based on community needs and input.

Despite the promise and popularity of farm to school programs, as in many non-native communities, school kitchen facilities in tribal areas are generally not optimized for these programs, and staff are unfamiliar with or uninterested in from-scratch cooking. Pushback has been observed when portion sizes are reduced and unfamiliar foods are introduced. Parents reacting to poverty among earlier generations may feel their children are not getting enough to eat, and for children still in poverty, school lunch may indeed be their only meal of the day. Community ownership, control and decision-making are therefore essential before changes can be made to what and how much is served in school lunch. When traditional foods such as wild rice and venison are incorporated into school lunches, challenges arise due to a lack of USDA oversight for wild food. Reservations must create mechanisms for harvesting, aggregating and distributing wild foods in order to supply them to schools, without institutionalizing the food.

Farm to school efforts have begun in the communities of Fond du Lac and White Earth and are just one strategy to introduce healthy and traditional foods and recalibrate people's tastes. Making healthy and traditional foods available at powwows and potlucks, in elder care centers, and through cooking classes and demonstrations, could serve a similar purpose. Community-based educational efforts like that bring family leaders together to talk about their lifestyles, foodways, and healthy traditions are another option. There is also a great need in tribal communities for dedicated wellness spaces incorporating food and cooking, exercise, and family and spiritual activities. Many community buildings are already used for wellness activities, but they are also used for funerals, which take precedence over other activities. Dedicated wellness centers would allow health-promoting activities to occur. Minnesota's four tribal colleges are a major, largely untapped resource for food and agricultural research, leadership and action. Despite being hampered by inadequate funding for agricultural and natural resource programs, they are nonetheless expanding their focus on food issues. Promising strategies for the future include providing direct training, conducting research (independently or in partnership with land grant institutions or government agencies), acting as demonstration facilities, or providing culturally attuned education on topics from health to seed saving. Tribal colleges' adult education programs could also reach large segments of the community with education on healthy eating and food production. Another suggestion is to start culinary programs at tribal colleges, whose graduates would be hired by tribal programs such as the Elderly Nutrition Program, Head Start, homeless shelters and schools. Graduates would also be encouraged to work in the private sector promoting indigenous cuisine or opening their own food businesses. Business education was identified as a need that commercial kitchens or food business incubators would be helpful in addressing.



## Conclusion

---

Minnesota's native communities have a rich food history from which to draw in renewing food systems that provide healthy, affordable and safe food. Policy, systems and environmental change is necessary, but it is essential that tribal and native communities lead agencies and institutions in creating change that is culturally appropriate and ensures food sovereignty.