

## Center for Rural Affairs' Santee Sioux and Umonhon (Omaha) Tribal Food Sovereignty Plans

### Background

Prior to the European colonization of the Americas, the food system of indigenous peoples was a closed loop, with communities being self-sufficient. They enjoyed food sovereignty, control over the production and distribution of their means of sustenance. Food was a central part of tribes' cultural traditions and social order.

The loss of food sovereignty in the past century or more has resulted in an erosion of cultural traditions as well as increased food insecurity and abnormally high rates of diet-related diseases, such as diabetes. As Indian nations have sought to reclaim these traditions and improve the health and welfare of their communities, they have turned to the USDA Community Food Projects program as a source of funding.

### CFRA's Prior Efforts

Since 2013, the Center for Rural Affairs (CFRA), one of the nation's flagship family farm-oriented organizations, has been working with the Omaha nation on two of its reservations in Northeast Nebraska in the small towns of Macy and Walthill. The Center received effusive support from tribal members for its community food initiative. It helped 100 families start gardening, created a new farmers market as well as taught classes in fresh food preparation. These efforts were of particular importance given the high rates of poverty among Omaha peoples. On the Macy reservation, 61% of families were living under the poverty line. The lack of employment and economic opportunities were contributing factors to their degraded economic status, with 36% of Macy and 24% of Walthill adults unemployed.



### Planning Process

In 2015, CFRA received a two-year Community Food Projects planning grant to work with the Omaha nation and the Santee Sioux nation in northern Nebraska to develop a food sovereignty plan (CFRA had also been working with the Santee on gardening and healthy food preparation). Located in the Santee reservation along the Missouri River near the border with South Dakota, the Santee people faced similar challenges as the Omaha. More than half of their population was living in poverty (as compared to one in seven among the overall Nebraska population), and more than one in four had diabetes.

Both tribes established community advisory committees as part of a partnership with CFRA. Made up of community residents, these committees provided guidance on the content and process of the planning project. With the Santee and Omaha nations, CFRA developed and administered a 43-question survey based on First Nations Development Institute's Food Sovereignty Assessment Tool (a previous Community Food Project grant recipient), as well as interviewed numerous community members.

The purpose of these community food assessments was three-fold: to develop and document a broad understanding of each tribe's food systems; build a community-wide understanding of the impacts of the food system on the community; and to identify strategies that will enable each tribal nation to develop a food sovereignty plan to help them move toward achieving self-reliance.



### Findings

Both of these food sovereignty assessments found similar food system-related issues on the Santee Sioux and Omaha reservations. Community residents identified that:

Grocery store access is limited in both communities. Little fresh produce is available and it tends to be expensive and of poor quality. In Santee, 69% of respondents were traveling 106 miles roundtrip to Yankton, SD to the closest Walmart to buy groceries. Fifty five percent of persons would like greater access to fresh produce, and identified price as a barrier to increased consumption. A majority of the Omaha respondents were also traveling long distances off-reservation, for example to Sioux City IA to a nearby Walmart. For both the Omaha and the Santee, there is no public transportation anywhere near their communities.

Many cultural food traditions have been lost, and there is minimal knowledge of what constitutes healthy diets. A majority of individuals are interested in learning more about native food traditions. For the Santee, those foods include berries, bison and corn. For the Omaha, they are venison, squash and corn.

On both the Santee and Omaha reservations, the tribal government owns significant tracts of land that could be dedicated for local food production. The Santee tribe owns 12,000 acres of cropland and 20,000-30,000 acres of pasture land- and the Omaha tribe 27,000 acres- that are being rented out to non-native producers, who grow row crops for the general marketplaces. These fields produce revenue for their respective tribal governments.



## Recommendations

The food assessments for both the Santee and Omaha identified a series of interwoven themes to promote the food sovereignty of community residents. The reports suggested that additional investment in community food programs such as gardening, grocery co-op development, mobile markets, native seed libraries, farmers markets, nutrition education, food preservation, and farming be made. These programs would meet multiple goals of increasing food access, reducing health disparities, and generating income for tribal members. The assessments identified strong economic development potential through increasing the production of local foods on tribally owned lands and marketing them through new farmers markets, CSAs, and at new grocery stores. They also suggested that the market for local products could be developed through tribal policies, encouraging schools, casinos, gas stations, and other institutions to purchase them or utilize them in their food service. Food hubs were also suggested as an important tool for aggregating locally grown products to facilitate their efficient marketing. The reports also suggested that existing programs such as WIC, SNAP and commodity distribution programs could be utilized.

Finally, the studies emphasized that the revival of cultural food traditions should be central to this food system revitalization process.

With the completion of these assessments both tribal nations are well poised to demonstrate the community interest and demand for community food initiatives that could be funded by the USDA Community Food Projects program.

