



Policy Brief

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Integrating Traditional and Local Foods into the Tribal Commodities Program

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Issue

There are approximately 276 tribes (out of 562 federally recognized tribes) in the United States currently receiving benefits from the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) in the form of monthly food boxes, also known as “tribal commodities”. In fiscal year 2016 FDPIR served 93,038 individuals on a \$122.2 million budget, spending about \$57 on FDPIR foods per participant/month or \$1.90 per participant/day (FNS 2016). Although FDPIR is intended to be a supplemental food package, it is the sole or primary source of food for 38 percent of households (Pindus et al. 2016). Commodity foods, which include canned meats, juices, pasta, processed cheese and flour, have been provided by various government initiatives since the late 1700s in association with the removal of Native Americans from their lands onto Indian reservations. The dramatic dietary shift from traditional to commodity foods has contributed to high rates of obesity and chronic diet-related diseases among Native populations; rates that are two to three times higher than the national average. In response to a call by Native communities not only for **better quality** and **more nutritious** foods but also for **culturally relevant foods** in FDPIR, pilot efforts to integrate traditional foods into FDPIR have been met with varying success. Our research with FDPIR clients in the Klamath Basin of California and other FDPIR stakeholders at the regional and national scale suggests how FDPIR can better support food security and wellbeing of Native American people by improving integration of traditional foods and other healthy, local foods into FDPIR.

Policy Implications

FDPIR is governed and funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). Through an open bidding process, USDA approved vendors supply bulk quantities of commodity and other foods filling FDPIR monthly food boxes at a national scale. The 2008 Farm Bill, included a provision authorizing the establishment of a fund to purchase traditional and locally grown foods (Box 1) for the FDPIR program, however it wasn't until 2015 that Congress appropriated funds for the program (\$5 million). For the first time, FDPIR began to offer clients a few traditional foods, including bison, blue cornmeal, salmon, and wild rice, on a more consistent basis.

The 2014 Farm Bill included a provision (\$2 million) for a traditional and local foods pilot project to be tested by one or more Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs). This would allow ITOs to be the purchasing agent of traditional foods included in the package rather than the USDA. Congress has yet to appropriate funds for this pilot project. While these two Farm Bill provisions are a good start, they do not provide consideration for the context (social, cultural, ecological, place-based) inherent to traditional foods. Bison, blue cornmeal and wild rice, for example, are as non-traditional to the Klamath Basin tribes as salmon is to the Hopi and Navaho, and the commercial development and processing of these foods may not support the cultural values, harvesting etiquette, or economic parity of Native peoples, and the distribution of such may infringe upon social norms and seasonal restrictions. In addition, the Farm Bill provisions do not support

alternative forms of remuneration for tribes who neither want to commercialize their foods nor quantify their value.

Box 1.

Traditional foods are native plants and terrestrial and aquatic animals (such as huckleberries, salmon, and elk pictured below) that “are traditionally prepared and consumed by Native Americans” (Agricultural Act of 2014). Depending on the tribe, traditional foods are wild foods and/or domesticated foods. These foods are specific to geography and culture; cultural significance includes intangible traits such as methods of rearing and harvest, season of harvest, methods of processing and preparation, and cultural responsibility and respect practiced by those involved in the process.



Local foods are foods grown in the same region (town, county, geographic radius) as their point of purchase or consumption. In the Agricultural Act of 2014, “local” is defined as 400 miles or less between production and market. Locally produced foods are often grown and marketed using methods that promote environmental and social health and local economic development. For many Native peoples, traditional foods are local foods.

Alternatives might take the form of allowing for the trade of goods or services - customs practiced between tribes since time immemorial. For example, lower Klamath tribes might trade salmon for a portable USDA-approved kitchen or antelope from the upper Klamath Basin tribes. This brief and corresponding full publication provide a discussion on how policies governing FDPIR can better support the food security and holistic well-being of FDPIR clients by going beyond just providing the physical traditional food but including policy objectives that prioritize growing, gathering and processing traditional foods according to cultural values and norms, decentralizing the sourcing and distribution of traditional foods at a local or regional scale, prioritizing businesses owned and operated by tribes or tribal members, and consideration for tribes who do not wish to commercialize their traditional foods.

Research Findings

Native Americans in the Klamath River Basin desire access to more traditional foods and healthy foods. FDPIR clients in the Basin had statistically significant greater demand for more fresh foods and traditional foods than users of other food assistance programs (Figure 1). Compared with households that did not use food assistance, about 22% more FDPIR users rarely had access to healthy foods they desired and 65% of FDPIR households rarely or never had access to the traditional foods that they desired in the past year. This suggests that despite the demand, FDPIR users continue to have poor access to both healthy and traditional foods. Furthermore, nearly 40% of FDPIR clients in the Basin said they relied on food assistance because traditional foods were not available at all or in the portion they required.

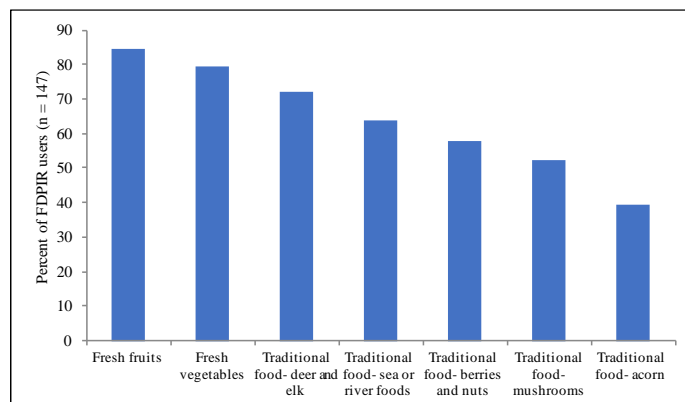


Figure 1. The proportion of FDPIR users in the Klamath River Basin that wanted more (or any to begin with) fresh foods and traditional foods.

Due to the 2015 appropriation, there are four traditional foods currently provided or soon to be provided to FDPIR clients (see Table 1). Although the effort to include traditional foods in the FDPIR food package is indeed an important first step, we ask how traditional or culturally appropriate are these foods, considering the tremendous geographic and cultural diversity of Native communities and their traditional foodways? Survey respondents raised concerns about implementation of this program, including:

- the extent to which these foods are produced according to Native values
- whether the companies supplying these foods are owned and operated by tribes or tribal entities

- whether these foods account for regional differences in traditional food preferences among Tribes.

With the exception of a portion of the bison and the wild rice, the other traditional foods are supplied by businesses that are not Native American owned (Table 1). Wild rice is currently the only traditional food grown, harvested, and processed using culturally appropriate methods.

Table 1. Traditional foods provided to FDPIR clients.

Traditional food provided by FDPIR	Tribal region of importance	Companies that currently provide the traditional food
Bison	Tribes in the plains region	KivaSun, American Indian Enterprises, and Intermountain
Blue cornmeal	Tribes in the southwest region	Millstone Mills Inc.
Sockeye salmon	Tribes in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska	Ocean Beauty
Wild rice	Tribes in the Mid-west region	White Earth Nation and Leech Lake Band of Objibwe

USDA policy requires nationwide distribution of each traditional food to all FDPIR clients, despite the fact that the same traditional foods are not considered traditional by all Native Americans, would not garner uniform demand, and may not consistently be available in bulk quantities. One respondent commented that “forcing or even encouraging Native American producers into an industrial food supplier model” was not a viable solution and would actually create more conflicts between tribes. Thus, tribes in the Klamath River Basin and beyond are interested in exploring alternative methods of providing traditional foods through their local FDPIR.

Lastly, FDPIR eligibility requirements in California prohibit simultaneous enrollment in SSI, posing food security challenges to some of the most vulnerable low-income tribal households. In California, the state adds money to monthly, federal Supplemental Security Income (SSI) cash payments, replacing state food assistance obligation for SSI recipients who qualify for food assistance. Consequently, elders and disabled people who receive SSI in California are not eligible for FDPIR, even if they meet the minimum monthly income requirement. Given the high cost of living in California, as one local FDPIR manager explained, some elders might receive \$400-600 a month through SSI, yet they remain food insecure as the majority of their SSI is spent on rent and utilities and *not* food. Consequently, many

tribal elders currently dependent on SSI in California would benefit from direct food assistance.

Recommendations

We propose that lawmakers and the USDA explore innovative approaches to promote a healthier, more culturally appropriate and equitable FDPIR program that meets not only tribal food security needs but also Native cultural values and principles of self-determination. We also encourage U.S. legislators and agency administrators to consider the legacy of settler colonialism and “think outside of the box” in funding and programming designed to reduce food insecurity among Native American communities by restoring Native food sovereignty. To address these, we propose the following policy recommendations:

Remove barriers to access FDPIR

- Reconsider policy restrictions that inhibit vulnerable populations from accessing FDPIR when enrolled in other welfare assistance programs (for example, elders on SSI in California)

Integrate more traditional and local foods in FDPIR

- Increase the amount and frequency of delivery of fresh fruits and vegetables to ensure better quality. This could be accomplished by having a bi-weekly vegetable and fruit pick-up rather than the current monthly pick-up, sourcing from local producers, or allocating funds to support a tribal farm or garden on-site at the ITO.
- Redefine local foods in the Farm Bill to include both farm raised *and* non-domesticated foods and shorten the geographic distance between production and market/consumption.
- Augment funding allocations towards the purchase of authentic traditional foods – foods that are grown and reared following cultural norms, by Native owned and operated entities, and that are regionally/culturally relevant.
- Provide a different type of remuneration structure for tribes who *do* wish to provide their traditional foods to local FDPIR clients but *do not* wish to commercialize their traditional foods through USDA vending. This should include a way to manage for, harvest, and distribute these foods in a way consistent with tribal policies, codes, and values

Update FDPIR procurement and vendor policies

- Decentralize traditional foods procurement and distribution, allowing flexibility in the quantities supplied, enabling smaller-scale Native producers to supply regionally appropriate foods at a more reasonable scale. This can be accomplished by funding the 2014 Agricultural Act provision to allow tribes, pueblos, rancherias and nations to purchase local produce and traditional foods for FDPIR.
- Update USDA procurement rules and vendor requirements to recognize unique attributes of traditional foods and Native American culture instead of contorting traditional systems to fit USDA requirements. This might include sourcing traditional foods for the FDPIR program from local, Native American owned and operated businesses that adhere to agreed-upon tribal sustainability metrics developed in consultation with tribes, pueblos, and nations in each region.
- Provide training to Native American vendors through pilot projects designed to supply traditional foods on a local scale. This will help develop local, Native American vendors, provide opportunity for education and training, and increase the likelihood of success.

Restore traditional management of Native foods through tribal-led programming, education and workforce development

- Restore traditional hunting/fishing and gathering rights on ancestral tribal lands and waterways, currently governed by state and federal agencies.
- Explore innovative land restitution or co-management initiatives to restore tribal ownership/management of ancestral lands for food and fiber provisioning and agro-ecological resilience.
- Augment federal funding to tribes for cultural lands and fisheries restoration to restore the quality, availability and abundance of traditional foods.
- Support the establishment of tribal led education institutions that integrate traditional ecological knowledge and western science to train the next generation of natural and cultural resource managers.
- Provide culturally relevant workforce development/employment opportunities to tribal

members (in fisheries, forestry, ecosystem restoration, wildland resource and fire management) to reduce dependence on FDPIR.

Increase funding opportunities for traditional foods

- Augment funding for and provisions in various Farm Bill Programs (e.g. the Federally Recognized Tribal Extension Program (FRTEP), Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) and other USDA programming such as FM/LFPP) to support research, education and extension that promotes non-domesticated food production and traditional food economies that prioritize food security and tribal food sovereignty and non-monetary forms of exchange.
- Include “traditional foods” as a possible focal area in all USDA Requests for Proposals (RFPs) that focus on food security, nutrition education, food assistance, farming, agro-forestry, agricultural marketing and promotion.

This policy brief is drawn from the full publication:

Mucioki, M. Sowerwine, J., and Sarna-Wojcicki, D. (2018). Thinking inside and outside the box: local and national considerations of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). *Journal of Rural Studies*, 57:88-98.

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