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TOP STORY

Indigenous Peoples Summit brings tribal leaders to Omaha to discuss food issues

Jessica Wade

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Nick Hernandez, director of the Food Sovereignty Initiative, speaks during the Omaha Indigenous Peoples Summit on Tuesday at Metro Community College's South Omaha campus.

Z LONG, THE WORLD-HERALD

Jessica Wade

As farmers around the world struggle with climate change, tribal nations in Nebraska and elsewhere are establishing food sovereignty initiatives meant to withstand the changing environment and overcome generations of policy inequity.

In the Winnebago community, acres of traditional Indian corn and organic farmlands are used to combat food deserts.

Recent funding has helped the Omaha Nation turn to high-tech growing methods.

And infrastructure built by the Iowa Tribe of Nebraska and Kansas in a newly designated foreign trade zone will pave the way for the tribe to become major contributors in agricultural trade.

“This is a global issue,” said Timothy Rhodd, chairman of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska. “It’s not one state, it’s not just one region. We have to work together to fix this today, because if we don’t we will continue down the path of disease amongst our land.”

Rhodd was one of several tribal leaders who explored the critical relationship between sustainable farming, environmental issues and tribal sovereignty during the 2022 Omaha Indigenous Peoples Summit on Tuesday.

The event brought leaders and Indigenous people from across the region to the South Omaha campus of Metropolitan Community College.

With tones of both desperation and hope, some of the area’s largest tribal nations shared the farming practices recently implemented by their communities.

Around 2012, the Winnebago Tribe developed a leasing policy that furthered opportunities for native farmers to lease tribal land. As a result, the tribe has earned an estimated \$10 million to \$12 million more in the past decade due to the shift in policy.

The change kicked off years of transformative farming practices among the Winnebago Tribe.

“We were living in a food desert,” said Aaron Lapointe, senior agribusiness manager with Ho-Chunk Farms Inc. “We didn’t have the ability to have local, fresh produce provided to our community.”

Today, thanks to a committee formed among tribal health leaders, a nonprofit farm brings fresh produce to the community, and the tribe operates one of the largest organic farms in northeast Nebraska.

Ho-Chunk Farms has also expanded its traditional Indian corn program for students. The program began in 2017 with “the goal to revitalize a diminishing cultural practice in our community.”

As the Winnebago work to preserve farming practices of the past, the Omaha Tribe is looking to farming practices of the future.

The tribe recently received federal money to build three hydroponic greenhouses on the Omaha Reservation.

Hydroponic farming is an agricultural practice that grows fruits and vegetables in sand, gravel or liquid rather than soil. The method results in less water usage and greater yields than traditional soil-based agriculture.

Mike Grant, planning director of the Omaha Nation Garden Project, said the federal grant will be used to teach students how to grow through hydroponics.

The hydroponics facility is the first of its kind in the nation on tribal land.

“We are going to change the world,” Grant said. “We just have to be patient and work together.”
