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TRIBAL FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IS CHILD POLICY

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My Indigenous Mexican heritage shaped how I understand community. I was raised with the belief that our responsibility to one another extends beyond our immediate families—that our well-being is intertwined with that of our neighbors, our elders, and the generations that come after us. That understanding has also shaped how I view other Indigenous communities. While our Nations each have their own histories, cultures, and traditions, the struggles of other Indigenous communities are not distant from my own. They are part of a broader story of resilience, responsibility, and the enduring pursuit of self-determination.

That belief followed me to Arizona, where my work addressing food insecurity brought me alongside Tribal communities in ways that profoundly shaped my understanding of federal nutrition policy. From supporting food access in the Grand Canyon to working with child nutrition programs serving rural reservation communities throughout the state, I witnessed challenges that extended far beyond whether food was available. Families spoke of wanting healthier options for their children, while broader barriers—including limited infrastructure like a lack of grocery stores, inadequate food distribution systems, and limited transportation; geographic isolation; and policies that often failed to reflect Tribal priorities—continued to shape daily life. Those experiences made clear that addressing food insecurity requires more than expanding food assistance. It requires recognizing Tribal Nations as leaders in designing policies and programs that affect their communities.

The Farm Bill shapes many of the nutrition programs that support children and families across the country, making it one of the federal government's most important tools for addressing food insecurity.¹ At a time when millions of people are already losing access to nutrition assistance, the next Farm Bill will play a critical role in determining whether federal policy expands opportunity or deepens existing inequities. For Tribal communities, the Farm Bill is one of the most important federal opportunities to strengthen Tribal food sovereignty, improve children's health and nutrition, and advance racial equity by ensuring Tribal Nations have a greater voice in shaping the systems that nourish their communities. As Congress negotiates the next Farm Bill, Tribal food sovereignty should be understood as an early childhood and racial equity priority.

Colonization, Food Systems, and Racial Equity

Indigenous food insecurity did not emerge by chance. It is rooted in centuries of federal policies shaped by settler colonialism that displaced Tribal Nations from their homelands, fractured Indigenous food systems, and undermined Tribal self-determination.² Policies such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830³ and the General Allotment (Dawes) Act of 1887⁴ dispossessed Tribal Nations of millions of acres of land, disrupting traditional practices of farming, hunting, fishing, and gathering that had sustained Indigenous communities for generations. As access to land and natural resources diminished, many Tribal communities became increasingly dependent on federal food assistance programs and commodity foods to meet basic nutritional needs.⁵

While programs like the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations⁶ (FDPIR) have long played a critical role in reducing hunger, they also reflect a broader history in which the federal government largely addressed food insecurity **for** Tribal Nations rather than **with** them.⁷ Early commodity foods often replaced⁸ nutritious, culturally relevant traditional foods with highly processed alternatives, contributing to disproportionately high rates of food insecurity, diabetes, and other diet-related illnesses that persist in many Tribal communities today.⁹ These disparities are not simply public health concerns. They are the enduring consequences of historical federal policy and long-standing racial inequities in the government's treatment of Tribal Nations.

Tribal Food Sovereignty Matters for Young Children

These investments are especially meaningful for young children. Nutritious foods support healthy growth and development¹⁰ during the earliest years of life, while culturally relevant food systems help preserve¹¹ the traditions, knowledge, and relationships that connect children to their families and communities. Strong Tribal food systems also strengthen the economic stability¹² of caregivers and create healthier environments in which children can thrive. Nearly three-quarters of Farm Bill funding¹³ supports nutrition programs, making it one of the federal government's most significant investments in food security and the health¹⁴ of children and families.

The Farm Bill Is an Opportunity to Advance Tribal Food Sovereignty

The Farm Bill is the nation's primary food and agriculture law.¹⁵ In addition to legislating farming policy, the bill also governs nutrition assistance, conservation, forestry, rural development, and agricultural research.

The 2018 Farm Bill¹⁶ included 63 Tribal-specific provisions¹⁷ that expanded Tribal self-governance, strengthened nutrition programs, and supported local food production, Native agriculture, and traditional foodways. These investments helped create new opportunities for Tribal Nations, but persistent disparities in food security demonstrate that more remains to be done.

In 2022, more than 78,000 American Indian and Alaska Native Producers¹⁸ stewarded 58,336 farms and ranches across 63 million acres, generating more than \$6 billion¹⁹ in agricultural sales annually. Yet despite this significant agricultural presence, Native communities continue to experience disproportionately high rates of food insecurity. A nationwide survey of Native households found that half of the respondents²⁰ experienced food insecurity, while one in four experienced very low food insecurity, with households raising children facing even greater challenges. Together, these data reveal that food insecurity in Indian Country is not simply a matter of food production. Despite the strength of Native agriculture, enduring structural barriers continue to prevent many Tribal communities from fully benefitting from the food systems they have long sustained.

The 2026 House Farm Bill includes nearly 40 provisions²¹ specifically referencing Tribes, including a new 638 demonstration project²² for the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which would give Tribes greater authority over food procurement for older adults; a cooperative purchasing program that reserves 10 percent of funding for Tribes; and conservation initiatives that recognize Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), the ecological knowledge and land stewardship practices developed by Indigenous communities over generations, and provide Tribes with enhanced federal cost-sharing opportunities. These provisions reflect meaningful steps toward expanding Tribal self-determination. However, they exist within a broader Farm Bill that does not adequately respond to the growing food insecurity facing families across the country. At a time when over four million²³ people have already lost access to SNAP,²⁴ the bill misses a critical opportunity to strengthen the nation's nutrition safety net and instead advances policies that are likely to deepen hardship for millions of households.

While certain provisions would make important progress, significant gaps remain. The 2026 House Farm Bill does not make the existing FDPIR 638 Demonstration Project²⁵— which allows participating Tribes to directly procure culturally relevant foods through Tribal self-determination agreements—permanent, leaving one of the most significant Tribal-led nutrition initiatives without long-term certainty. Several Tribal initiatives also remain dependent on pilot authorities or future appropriations, creating uncertainty for Tribal governments seeking to make long-term investments in local food systems. In addition, persistent gaps²⁶ in federal data collection on Native food insecurity continue to limit policymakers' understanding of community needs, making it more difficult to ensure that federal investments effectively reach Tribal communities. These shortcomings are especially concerning given the broader erosion of nutrition assistance nationwide. Together, these limitations suggest that meaningful progress toward Tribal food sovereignty requires not only recognition in federal law but also sustained implementation, funding, and accountability.

Advancing Tribal Food Sovereignty

While the Farm Bill offers one of the strongest opportunities to advance Tribal food sovereignty, lasting progress will require sustained federal commitments that extend beyond a single piece of legislation. Priorities for Congress must include:

- **Centering Tribal Nations in policymaking.** Federal nutrition and agriculture policies should be developed in meaningful partnership with Tribal Nations, recognizing their expertise and right to shape the programs and decisions that affect their communities.

- **Making Tribal self-determination permanent.** Permanently authorizing²⁷ the FDPIR 638 Demonstration Project would provide Tribal governments with greater certainty and authority to procure culturally relevant foods that reflect community priorities. Long-term authorization would also allow Tribes to make sustained investments²⁸ in local food systems rather than rely on temporary pilot programs.
- **Investing in Tribal food systems.** Federal investments in Native producers, local food procurement, food infrastructure, and TEK can strengthen Tribal economies while expanding access to nutritious and culturally relevant foods for Native children and families.
- **Improving Native data collection.** Improving federal data collection on Native food insecurity would help policymakers better understand²⁹ how nutrition programs are serving Native children and families and where additional investments are needed.

The Path Forward

The next Farm Bill presents an opportunity to recognize that Tribal food sovereignty is a matter of child well-being, racial equity, and Tribal self-determination. The choices made in this legislation will shape more than food programs; they will shape who has the authority to nourish communities, preserve cultural knowledge, and define what food security looks like for future generations. A truly equitable food system cannot be built without recognizing Tribal Nations as leaders in shaping their own food futures. The impact of this legislation cannot be measured solely in acres cultivated or dollars appropriated, but in whether Native children inherit not only food security but also the freedom and authority to define it on their own terms.

Endnotes

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