Fort Belknap Reservation Embraces Food Sustainability Efforts

The Fort Belknap Reservation covers 650,000 acres of mostly rolling plains in North Central Montana and is home to the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre tribes. With only three towns, Hays, Lodgepole, and Fort Belknap Agency, the population of approximately 3,500 is very rural and access to fresh fruit, vegetables, whole grains and other staples of a good diet is a real concern. MSU Extension’s Federally Recognized Tribes Extension Program (FRTEP) has been a leading partner in the Fort Belknap Sustainable Foods Program (FBSFP). In cooperation with the tribes, successful community gardens have been developed in Hays and Lodgepole. The Wasay Wapka Community Council sponsors a community orchard in Lodgepole, where MSU Extension assisted in planting 72 new fruit trees. MSU faculty mentors individuals and provides tools and resources to create their own raised gardens at home. Through MSU Extension, elders and community partners provide holistic, culturally-based programming that empower families by going back to traditional ways of eating. Families learn to preserve fruits, vegetables and meats while learning about history and growing relationships. Last year more than 1000 pounds of extra vegetables from the gardens were provided at no cost to community members. During 2016, participants in FBSFP indicated they’d like to learn more about how to extend the growing season to produce more fruits and vegetables. MSU Extension staff wrote for and succeeded in earning a First Nations Food Sovereignty Grant of $10,000 to provide additional classes and support in building and utilizing high tunnels and root cellars. The funds will immediately help address the specific needs identified from families within the program, another great example of how MSU Extension’s structure encourages true engagement and local involvement and expertise.

Welcome to Fort Belknap Reservation

A healthy natural environment allows gardens to thrive on the reservation. Extension staff provided education on tools and techniques for gardeners to employ in the development of healthy soils and water sources. Classes on composting, mulching, and the use of organic fertilizers were well-attended.

This frog in Lodgepole provides an indication of a good growing environment!
Nutrition Education and Food Preservation at Fort Belknap

The Fort Belknap Indian Community’s Nutrition Education Services for Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) project provided nutrition education services for 674 FDPIR participants and FDPIR eligible participants. The project has been largely successful, in terms of participation numbers and audience served. Nutrition education and garden education services have been provided to FDPIR participants and FDPIR eligible participants. The communities of the reservation have benefited from the partnerships, education classes, demonstrations, and resources associated with this project.

This project evidenced success in all areas of implementation, largely due to unprecedented participation rates among our community members. Our partnership efforts, classes, demonstrations, and community/resource distribution events were well-attended; participants were eager and interested to learn, share and expand efforts toward the important issues of nutrition, health/wellness, community cohesion and food self-sufficiency. Our goals were met by our frequency, variety, and locality of events.

Of particular note, the participants reported increased confidence in approaching the topics of healthy foods, gardening and community cohesion. This increase in confidence was, to us, a very important step in the educational process. The participants took a genuine and consistent ownership of the project tasks, and eventually began implementing activities without the physical presence of the educators and project staff. We were very encouraged by this shift in confidence, as it allows us to look to future projects with our own sense of confidence in the participants’ ability to “move ahead and beyond”, so to speak, toward more diverse and ambitious learning opportunities. As we all know, confidence breeds more confidence, and we look forward to building onto participants’ now positive approach to learning with more advanced nutrition related topics and skill building.
4H agricultural, gardening, and nutrition classes were conducted throughout the 2015-2016 school year. Dodson School, Jr. High Science Class dove into vermicomposting, greenhouse gardening and community garden development with fifteen students starting a community garden.

Thirty third and sixth grade Mission Grade School students dug their fingers in the wormy vermicomposting and starter plants. While gardening was taking place during school, healthy cooking classes were offered after school at Hays/Lodgepole High School. The classes averaged 11 students making homemade pies to pizzas.

Head Start preschoolers enjoyed weekly garden classes at the new Hays Community garden while growing their own flowers, carrots and sunflowers.

Horse Play Days were conducted in collaboration with Blue Heaven Harnessing Hope during the months of June-August, averaging 30 youth and family members. Horse Play Days gives new and experienced riders an opportunity to enhance their horsemanship skills on and off the horse.
Fort Belknap MSU Extension conducted educational outreach workshops for local seasoned and potential cattle producers. Fort Belknap Extension co-sponsored with Fort Belknap Livestock Marketing Co-Op and Native American Community Development Corporation, the Rancher’s Roundup during the local Mid-Winter Fair. USDA, Rural Development, Montana Department of Agriculture, NACDC, Tribal Land, NRCS, FSA, and ANC tribal Extension Programs presented to area producers. This workshop brought 10 programs to one place, eliminated travel cost for 15 producers from as far away as Helena. Twenty-one local youth from Hays Lodge Pole High School attended and participated in the Junior Agricultural Loans workshop and learned about the variety of programs to help with starting or continuing the ranching lifestyle.

Fort Belknap MSU Extension collaborated with Fort Belknap Livestock Marketing Co-op to provide economic opportunities to local ranchers and encourage new youth producers. The Montana Department of Agriculture Loan Programs provides opportunities for youth and beginning ranchers to apply for small loans. NACDC and Fort Belknap MSU Extension conducted a Financial Literacy Workshop and Junior Ag Loan Workshop at Hays/Lodge Pole High School. Fifteen students attended and completed the steps to apply for a Junior Agricultural Loan. As a Result, the Extension Agent aided with the completion of two Rural Ag Loans and three Junior Ag Loans, bringing in five new young ranchers with a total of $120,500 in new cattle investment on Fort Belknap.

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