



United States Department of Agriculture  
Office of the Secretary

**Office of Tribal Relations**  
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**Official Business**

**From:** **USDA Office of Tribal Relations, Director, Heather Dawn Thompson**  
**USDA Food & Nutrition and Consumer Services, Deputy Under Secretary, Stacy Dean**  
**DOI Bureau of Indian Education, Director, Tony Dearman**

**To:** **BIE-Operated and Tribally-Controlled School Leaders and Staff**

**Re:** **Supporting Indigenous Foods & Food Sovereignty in Schools**

November 16, 2023

Dear School Leaders and Staff,

Hihanni waste, greetings, my name is Heather Dawn Thompson (Cheyenne River Sioux) and I am the Director of the Office of Tribal Relations (OTR) at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in the Office of the Secretary. I am writing you during Native American Heritage Month alongside my colleagues Stacy Dean, Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition and Consumer Services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Tony Dearman, Director of the Bureau of Indian Education at the U.S. Department of the Interior.

During this fall time of reflection and thanksgiving, we want to thank you for all that you do to educate and nourish our next generation of Indigenous leaders. We also want to express our support for your efforts at incorporating Indigenous foods and food sovereignty into your Child Nutrition Programs and work.

The Office of Tribal Relations serves as a single point of contact for Tribal issues at USDA and works to ensure that relevant programs and policies are efficient, easy to understand, accessible, and developed in consultation with the American Indian and Alaska Native constituents they impact. If you'd like to stay in touch, sign up for our USDA OTR newsletter [here](#).

We want to share with you a few opportunities as you work to serve Indigenous foods in Child Nutrition Program meals, and to ensure that your meal programs support your community's food sovereignty goals:

**Department of the Interior Indigenous Food Hubs Initiative.** In September 2022, the Department of the Interior announced the Indigenous Food Hubs Initiative for BIE-operated schools to help source Indigenous foods, enhance culturally-based, healthy nutrition education,

and boost training for healthy and culturally-appropriate food preparation as part of the White House Initiative on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health. In support of this initiative, BIE has taken two major steps: 1) BIE has identified four Bureau operated schools as pilot sites for the Indigenous Food Hub Initiative to serve Indigenous food-based meals; and 2) BIE has hired Indian Affairs' first ever Nutritionist, LCDR Casey Cavanaugh (Western Shoshone) to support the Indigenous Food Hub Initiative.

The four Bureau-operated schools identified as pilot sites include: 1) Sherman Indian High School - Riverside, CA; 2) San Felipe Pueblo Elementary School - San Felipe Pueblo, NM; 3) Wingate High School - Gallup, NM; and 4) Nenahnezad Community School - Fruitland, NM.

BIE Schools have been at the forefront of implementing the Indigenous Food Hubs Initiative. With the welcome addition of LCDR Cavanaugh and her expertise, BIE continues to implement the Indigenous Food Hub Initiative, working individually with each school to address specific needs. BIE continues to build key partnerships to explore ways to source Indigenous foods from Indigenous producers, and to align its work with USDA's Food Sovereignty and Farm to School programs.

**Resources to Help You Serve More Traditional Indigenous Foods in Your Child Nutrition Programs.** USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) has a new [landing page](#) on its website that offers a growing set of resources to support serving traditional Indigenous foods in the Child Nutrition Programs. On November 1, 2023, FNS released an updated memorandum, TA 01-2024, [Crediting Traditional Indigenous Foods in Child Nutrition Programs](#). The memorandum provides guidance on incorporating traditional Indigenous foods into school meals that meet CNP meal pattern requirements and includes an updated and expanded list of traditional Indigenous foods that credit the same as similar foods currently listed in the [Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs](#). [RESOURCES HERE](#).

**Indigenous Foods Cooking & Foraging Videos, Recipes and Guides for Children.** USDA worked with Indigenous chefs, foragers, and knowledge keepers to develop resources designed to support [Indigenous food sovereignty](#). These include cooking videos and recipes, as well as foraging videos and guides. These resources are part of USDA's broader efforts to promote traditional food ways, Indian Country food and agriculture markets, and Indigenous health. Please share these videos with your middle and high school community! [RESOURCES HERE](#).

**“Sovereignty Gardens:” New Children’s Educational Short Animated TV Show.** USDA launched “Sovereignty Gardens” – a series of short educational shows created to build excitement and pride with children about using Indigenous knowledge across topics such as gardening, food sovereignty, traditional foods, and healthy eating habits. “Sovereignty Gardens” uses animation and puppetry to follow “Stompy” the buffalo and his friend Bran through a series of learning adventures, which include cameos by Indigenous and scientific leaders. Please share these videos with your elementary teachers and families! [VIDEOS HERE](#).

**Proposed Nutrition Standards for Your School Meals to Better Incorporate Traditional Indigenous Foods.** In February 2023, FNS published a [proposed rule](#) to update the Child Nutrition Programs nutrition standards. FNS proposed allowing BIE-operated schools, tribally-

controlled schools, and schools, institutions, facilities, or sponsors serving primarily American Indian or Alaska Native children to serve vegetables, including starchy vegetables, to meet the grains requirement in the Child Nutrition Programs. The rule also proposed to clarify any misunderstandings by explicitly stating in regulation that traditional Indigenous foods may be served in reimbursable school meals to uplift awareness and support local efforts. The proposed rule would also allow “locally grown, raised, or caught” as procurement specifications for unprocessed or minimally processed food items in the Child Nutrition Programs, supporting increased local purchasing. Please be on the lookout for the announcement of this “proposed rule” in its “final rule” form in the Spring of 2024; we hope these changes can support your efforts to serve culturally appropriate foods that support Indigenous food systems and economies. [PROPOSED RULE HERE](#).

**Expanded Access to Healthy Food for Children in the Summer Months: Summer EBT.** The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, established a permanent Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer for Children Program ([Summer EBT](#)) beginning in Summer 2024. The new Summer EBT Program will provide EBT benefits on an ongoing basis to low-income children during the summer months to ensure continued access to food when school is not in session. This new program is an extraordinary opportunity to combat summer hunger, especially for those who have not been served by the traditional summer meal programs.

Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) that administer the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) may elect to administer Summer EBT as a State agency. In general, children are eligible for Summer EBT benefits if they are enrolled at a school that participates in the National School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program and are determined to be eligible for free or reduced price meals, or if they are school age and participate in certain means-tested programs including the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Benefits issued by ITOs may be used by eligible households to purchase supplemental foods from vendors that have been approved for participation in WIC.

Even if administering Summer EBT is not part of your approach, Tribes can spread the word about Summer EBT through your Tribal communication channels, schools, WIC clinics, and other networks. Meetings between Tribes and USDA leadership to discuss Summer EBT implementation will occur monthly. The first scheduled call is on November 20, 2023. [SUMMER EBT SITE HERE](#).

**“Grab ‘n’ Go” or Delivery of Summer Meals for Children in Rural Areas: Rural Non-Congregate Meal Service.** The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, amended the National School Lunch Act to allow children in rural areas to take Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) and Seamless Summer Option (SSO) meals offsite beginning in Summer 2023. Non-congregate (i.e. grab ‘n’ go or delivery) meal service addresses critical access challenges in rural areas by allowing program operators to adopt a wider range of approaches for reaching children with summer meals. ITOs that sponsor SFSP or SSO or participate as sites and are located in rural areas, may be eligible to participate in the non-congregate meal service option. [SUMMER NUTRITION PROGRAMS SITE HERE](#).

**Access Funding for Local, Indigenous Foods in School Meals: Farm to School.** There are some farm-to-school opportunities we want you to be aware of, which can support Tribes' efforts to incorporate Indigenous foods in school meals and provide culturally appropriate food, nutrition & agriculture education. Applications for the [USDA Patrick Leahy Farm to School Grant Program](#) will be accepted through January 12, 2024. Indian Tribal Organizations (ITOs) and schools are eligible to apply, and ITOs are eligible for up to \$500,000 per award. Funds provided under The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (25 U.S.C. 5322) may be used to fulfill the non-Federal match requirement of at least a 25 percent cash or in-kind non-Federal match. These grants can help support your school's efforts around food sovereignty, serving Indigenous foods in school meals, partnerships with Tribal farmers, and more. Grant funds can be used for eligible purchases such as supplies, equipment, travel, training, and staffing. [GRANT INFO HERE](#).

**Be Counted in the USDA Farm to School Census.** The [USDA Farm to School Census](#) is underway, capturing important information about farm to school efforts across the country. The Census questionnaire asks about serving local foods in school meals and engaging students food, nutrition and agriculture education, concepts which intersect directly with indigenous foods, food sovereignty, indigenous foodways, and traditional food preparation. This survey is critically important to understand and highlight the good work happening in Indian Country, and to help us better meet your needs. You should have an email in your inbox sent October 2, 2023 from Farm2SchoolCensus@dir-online.com with your unique link to fill out the USDA Farm to School Census. [CENSUS INFO HERE](#).

We hope you find joyous ways to celebrate Indigenous foods and foodways during Native American Heritage Month. On behalf of USDA and BIE, again, we thank you for the important work you do.

Lila wopila (much thanks),

**Original Signed**

**Heather Dawn Thompson**

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U.S. Department of Agriculture

**Original Signed**

**Stacy Dean**

Deputy Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition & Consumer Services  
U.S. Department of Agriculture

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