



BLOG

Increasing Traditional Ecological Knowledge, Youth Engagement, Farmer Support, and Climate Adaptation on the Tohono O'odham Nation

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A sustainable and just local food system for Native Americans is the goal of an Arizona nonprofit. The Ajo Center for Sustainable Agriculture (Ajo CSA), a Native American-governed 501(c)(3) nonprofit, is working with the Tohono O'odham Nation in southern Arizona to preserve and revitalize traditional O'odham seeds, agriculture, and culture, including dryland farming. The center supports projects including the O'odham Farmer's Market, business incubator programs, year-round and summer youth agricultural internship programs, and the annual Southwest Native Foodways Gathering.

In 2022, Ajo CSA was awarded a \$420,104 Equity in Conservation Outreach Cooperative Agreement through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Outreach and Partnership Division. The center is working with the Sells, Arizona, NRCS office and the [Tohono O'odham Soil and Water Conservation District](#) to identify the conservation needs of local farmers, provide workshops and technical assistance, record and disseminate information about climate-smart agriculture, provide opportunities for Native American youth to increase their knowledge of natural resource conservation, and develop new leaders.

From a new office in Sells, on the Tohono O'odham Nation, the team is connecting local schools and farmers through the Tohono O'odham Farm and Food Working Group, Tohono O'odham Youth Agriculture Day, O'odham Farmer's Market, school garden programming and the Sells Community Garden. New urban partners include Tucson Mission Garden, Ha'asan Preparatory School, and Tucson Indian Center.

At one site, the team is partnering with a local medical center’s diabetes prevention program to promote the importance of fresh, local foods. At Pancho Farms, a 40-acre dryland site operated by Noland Johnson, tepary beans (*bawi*), 60-day corn (*hu’n*) and squash (*ha:l*) are grown using rainwater that runs off the nearby mountains into irrigation channels. This site demonstrates traditional and climate-adapted agricultural practices.

The Tohono O’odham Nation – about the size of Connecticut – shares a watershed and environmental resources with nearby Tucson and Phoenix. Shared challenges include climate change, population pressure, sometimes unpredictable weather patterns and competition for water.

Ajo CSA interim co-director Nina Sajovec says it’s important to keep traditional drought-tolerant agricultural and conservation practices alive for and available to youth and growers on the reservation and to share Native American traditional environmental knowledge and seeds, in a native-designed and implemented approach, with growers off the reservation and with partners like NRCS.



“Our only chance at a sustainable, as well as equitable and just, future for all is to get ready to face drastic climate events and climate change together,” emphasizes Sajovec.

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