

# *Community Tiered Approach to Conservation Planning:* **Strengthening Capacity of Native Producers & Communities**

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## **Introduction**

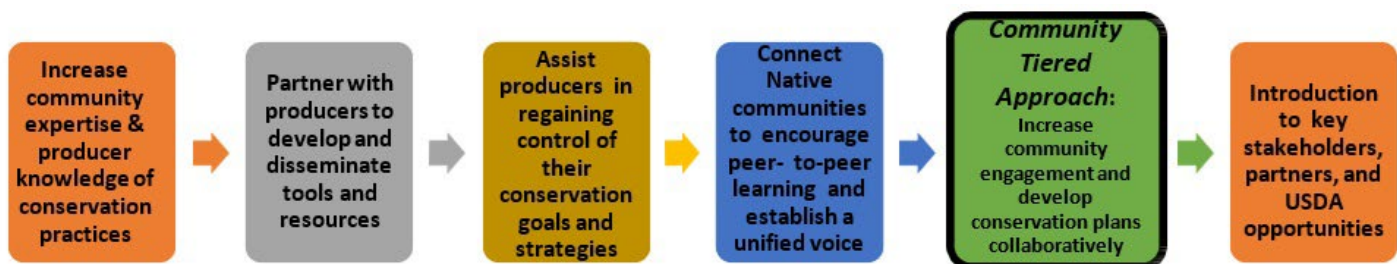
Since 2012, First Nations Development Institute (First Nations) has been working with Native American producers and communities located on the Colorado Plateau and in Arizona to increase their capacity to manage Tribal lands consistent with traditional ecological stewardship practices and the USDA-NRCS 9-step conservation planning process.

In this capacity, First Nations has worked to increase access to technical assistance in communities through the provision of training and education for community members on the USDA-NRCS 9-step conservation planning process, with the overall goal of developing local technical service providers (TSP's) who were knowledgeable of conservation planning and could convey information in their Native language.

In 2015, efforts were expanded to assist Native producers and communities in the development of a unified platform for 10 Arizona tribal conservation district. Through this effort, First Nations assisted the organization in the formalization of the Arizona Association of Tribal Conservation Districts (AATCD) as a nonprofit entity.

Throughout, work was ongoing to increase Native American participation in USDA programs like EQIP, through the provision of technical assistance that would lead to a completed conservation plan, a crucial step for participation. Through individualized technical assistance, First Nations released, *A Conservation Planning Guide for Native American Ranchers*. The guide provides Native producers with conservation best practices, required regulations by tribal and federal agencies and the on-the-ground knowledge for the producers themselves.

Most recently, work was expanded to strengthen the capacity of producers and the communities they live in. This report summarizes outcomes and activities conducted under U.S. Department of Agriculture Conservation Innovation Grant #69-3A75-17-44.



**Approach to Strengthening Conservation Initiatives in Native Communities**

## PROJECT GOALS:

The goal of the *Community Tiered Approach to Conservation Planning* project was to create an adaptable process for Native American communities to engage multiple and diverse stakeholders in developing community-wide conservation plans, and for Native American producers to leverage this momentum and information to create their own conservation plans. The effect of the development of these conservation plans will be to increase the ability of Native American tribes, entities and producers to participate in USDA programs and grant opportunities.

## *Why Community?*

Often land is jointly held by several family and community members and/or in concert (or trust) with the tribal government. With this fractionation of ownership and control, ***creating a conservation plan for one producer most often requires input and participation from other tribal members.***

Unlike the private landowner, where conservation and economic decisions are made for the land on an individual basis, Native producers often require approval from their communities and neighboring land permittees in how and when the land will be used and what it will be used for.

The community tiered conservation planning approach works within the confines of fractionated land ownership, streamlining available information and resources for the benefit of the communities and individual producers within those communities who will use the community-wide conservation plan as a springboard for developing an individualized conservation plan. This approach supports First Nations' mission: to assist Native peoples to control their own assets and build the capacity to direct their economic futures in ways that fit their cultures, using tools of direct technical and financial assistance.

## PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

1. Build the capacity of four selected model Native American tribal communities in Arizona to create community-wide conservation plans that will comply with requirements of USDA and other federal agencies.
2. Leverage the community-wide conservation planning process to support four model Native American producers (one in each of the four model communities) to develop a conservation plan for their own farm or ranch.
3. Document the process, outputs and outcomes of working with the four communities and the four producers and strategically disseminate a final report to encourage adaptation in other Native communities, or by other Native producers.

# APPROACH:

Select participating communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Assure that communities and producers are eligible communities/Tribes who currently hold appropriate grazing permits and/or are currently managing livestock enterprise on the land.</li> <li>Communities can be organizations that include, but are not limited to, Tribal cattle associations, Tribal ranches, range management units, and/or Tribal communities.</li> <li>Assure that communities and producers are eligible to participate in USDA opportunities.</li> </ul>
Communities commit to participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communities commit to organizing and participating in all 2-day on-site conservation planning sessions.</li> <li>First Nations technical assistance is made available to communities for coordination, facilitation, and capacity building.</li> <li>Community coordinates dates and times for conservation planning sessions.</li> </ul>
Develop training agenda and notify key NRCS representative for participation for each community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deploy conservation planning consultant to community.</li> <li>Develop training agenda for disbursement.</li> <li>Notify key NRCS representative for participation.</li> </ul>
Conduct Session 1 of 3 2-day classroom session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduction to key principles of rangeland management.</li> <li>Components of conservation plan.</li> <li>Gathering information for conservation plan.</li> <li>Development and presentation of producer and community of inventory maps.</li> <li>Conducting web soil surveys and establishing ecological descriptions.</li> <li>Creation of conservation goals and objectives, with resources, economic, and community goals.</li> </ul>
Conduct Session 2 of 3 2-day classroom session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Capture field data.</li> <li>Collect soil samples.</li> <li>Identifying ecological sites.</li> <li>Assess plant production, range health, wildlife habitat evaluations.</li> <li>Summarize field work, establish alternatives, and develop conservation plan map.</li> </ul>
Conduct Session 3 of 3 2-day classroom session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review conservation planning practices.</li> <li>Finalize and assemble conservation plan.</li> <li>Present plan to participants.</li> <li>Document remaining items for completion.</li> <li>Meet with USDA representative before leaving to identify next steps and timeline for further action.</li> </ul>

## *Effectiveness & Impact*

When Native community members are active participants in the development of asset-building models programs and processes, they begin to develop a future orientation in the development of goals for community development, based on their own values and belief systems. This approach was proven in the outcomes resulting from *Community Tiered Conservation Planning project*. Through the four community sessions, 105 tribal members participated in the 6-day sessions that resulted in the completion of ten conservation plans, with five producers applying for USDA-EQIP to advance their agri-business and/or conservation goals.

# OUTCOMES:

Four tribal communities received conservation planning training using the community tiered approach piloted during the project. Three Navajo communities/organizations (Tolani Lake Water Users and Livestock Association, Indian Wells Chapter and the Tohatchi Chapter) and the Tohono O’odham Gu Achi Range Unit received 48 hours of onsite training that was followed up with one-on-one technical assistance to complete conservation plans. The onsite trainings included field work, mapping, development of conservation goals, and community engagement. While communities identified in-depth goals during the onsite conservation sessions, a brief list is provided to show-case the ownership and vision of the communities:



*Figure 1 - Field Work at Tohono O'odham*

## *Resource Goals:*

- Manage grazing.
- Capture the maximum rainfall.
- Good grass lands.
- Maintain healthy vegetation
- Develop infrastructural waterline for domestic livestock/wildlife use.
- Maintain or restore the balance of grasses, forbs, shrubs and trees on each ecological site.

## *Economic Goals:*

- To promote a viable economic structure for the range and each range member
- With our established and approved conservation plan we be confident to apply for available Tribal, State and Federal funding to improve our Range Management efforts and goals
- Incorporation of the approved conservation plan into the local community land based/use plan booklet at chapter level.

## *Community Goals:*

- Involve grazing officials, local leaders, NRCS and USDA reps in implementing your particular conservation plan.
- Be an example of good land stewardship. Teach neighbors to do the same.
- Provide young ranchers with good education and training.
- Provide locally grown food for family and community (elders).
- Minimize or eliminate detrimental impacts from the agricultural operation on local communities, such as excess dust, excess runoff and flooding, or contamination of surface and groundwater.

## Lessons Learned

The approach in transitioning ecological stewardship strategies into the hands of Native American producers and communities is aligned with First Nations' asset building strategy. It is a strategy that strengthens and assists Native American producers and communities in regaining control of natural resources/land which contributes to the restoration of local food systems and local economies. When Tribal community members are active participants in the development of asset-building models and programs, they begin to develop a future orientation in the development of goals for community development, based on their own values and belief systems. This approach was proven in the outcomes resulting from the *Community Tiered Conservation Planning* project. Through the four community sessions, 105 tribal members participated in the three 2-day sessions that resulted in the completion of ten conservation plans, with five producers applying for USDA-EQIP to advance their agri-business and/or conservation goals.

## Conclusions

Through provision of technical assistance, onsite conservation planning sessions, outreach and coordination with USDA-NRCS, the four communities and participating Native American producers have enhanced their stewardship of tribal natural resources in ways that complement and do not compete with tribal values, cultures and economic needs.

The plans they created generated learning about the importance of and the process of creating conservation plans, either community-wide or for an individual producer. The community tiered conservation planning models developed through this project have inspired and educated Tribal communities and producers who value natural resources and want to develop plans that meet environmental, economic and cultural goals.

As Native communities and producers continue to forge ahead in regaining control of natural resources assets, programs, and processes, it is crucial that federal partners and stakeholders generate a community approach to doing business with Tribes. As observed during the conservation planning process, there is much historical and traditional ecological stewardship knowledge and practices that are ready to be passed on to producers who are willing and able to infuse history and tradition with western conservation practices to generate economic opportunities for their communities.

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