

First Peoples Worldwide
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

SUPPLY CHAINS & SOVEREIGNTY: NATIVE-LED FOOD SYSTEMS SOLUTIONS

SUMMARY AND KEY TAKEAWAYS

[Read the Full Report](#) | Published by First Peoples Worldwide, November 2022

Supply Chains & Sovereignty: Native-Led Food Systems Solutions, a new body of research conducted by First Peoples Worldwide with support from the Native American Agriculture Fund, focuses on Native food supply chains as a vital approach to enacting food sovereignty. These supply chains facilitate Native communities' access to culturally relevant foods produced by Native food producers, and support strong relationships centered around Native food systems. Native supply chains allow Native consumers to access foods that are produced according to Indigenous values, and support the continuation of Native foodways.

The report found that Native food service workers and food producers are already cultivating Native food supply chains through their work, and that there is strong interest in strengthening these supply chains. In addition to the cultural, political, environmental, relational, and gustatory value of Native food supply chains, research participants emphasized their economic value. **Strong Native food supply chains keep money circulating within Indian Country, and allow Native businesses to thrive at each phase of processing and distribution. Native supply chains also allow Native food systems participants to have more agency in deciding where to sell their products, and, if desired, ensure that Native-produced foods are feeding Native families.** Research participants almost ubiquitously supported the idea of strengthening and expanding Native food supply chains.

The report highlights the voices of Native food systems participants, centered around the topic of Native food supply chains. The report also highlights the interconnections between Native food systems and the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities, and the environment. **Native food businesses are creating tremendous social value through their work alongside economic benefits, and the intentional creation of social value is often grounded in Indigenous values that center respectful and reciprocal relationships and prioritize the wellbeing of community as the primary goal of food systems work.**

This brief summary presents key themes from this research. Readers are encouraged to reference the full-length report for examples, quotes from research participants, survey data, and a more nuanced discussion of these high-level takeaways.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1

Research participants almost ubiquitously expressed strong support for strengthening and expanding Native food supply chains; many would like to see intra-tribal, local, regional, and national Native food supply chains enacted simultaneously.

2

Impact investors are missing significant opportunities to expand social impact in Native communities by funding Native businesses—in addition to Native non-profit organizations—given the social and educational value these businesses provide.

3

Native chefs and food service workers use tiered systems that prioritize sourcing practices based on Indigenous values.

4

There is unfulfilled demand for Native food products from Native food service businesses.

5

Lack of infrastructure, limited land and water access, environmental impacts, and the climate crisis are all constraining the current supply of Native-produced foods.

6

Given limited supply, research participants want to prioritize Native-produced foods feeding the local community of each Native food producer first, then any extra supplies can be used to build broader Native food supply chains.

7

Tribal casinos are one underdeveloped Native market many Native producers would like to reach.

8

Many Native nations invested COVID relief money into food sovereignty. Native nations, individuals, and businesses also used this funding to purchase Native foods for community distribution, which resulted in an increase in demand for Native-produced foods.

9

Native ownership at every step of the supply chain will allow Native businesses to capture value added during processing and distribution and channel it into Indigenous economies, where it continues to circulate and have local economic impact.

**The summary
concludes with
recommendations
towards:**

- Expanding Steady Markets for Native Food Businesses and Food Access for Native Communities
- Supporting Production and Native Food Systems
- Removing Roadblocks to Processing and Expanding Infrastructure
- Facilitating Networking, Supply Chain Connections, Distribution, and Logistics
- Addressing Regulation and Certification Barriers
- Supporting Knowledge Sharing and Education
- Building Strong Relationships and Partnerships
- Expanding Capital Access and Investments

The Current State of Native Food Supply Chains

Native chefs and food service businesses are increasing visibility of and appreciation for Native foods, and creating Native food access and community building spaces for Native people. In cases where key Native supply chain logistics do not exist, Native chefs are building innovative informal and formal distribution networks to procure ingredients directly from Native food producers. Native chefs and food service workers are using tiered systems that prioritize sourcing practices based on Indigenous values. In general, those who participated in this research prefer to source from local Native suppliers first, followed by Native suppliers nationally, then non-Native local suppliers, and then any organic or sustainable supplier, with non-Native corporately owned conventional farms being a last resort. Native chefs and food service business owners want to increase their Native sourcing, and there is clear unfulfilled demand for Native food products from Native food service businesses.

Native food producers across sectors are selling their products to Native and non-Native people and businesses within local, national, and global markets. Native seeds are the foundation of Native food systems; supporting seed keeping and expanding opportunities to share seeds based on Indigenous protocols is vital. A number of Native fishery owners started their fisheries specifically to establish equitable markets and seek fair prices for fishermen in their tribes; these businesses have successfully moved the needle by negotiating for higher prices and posting their prices at the beginning of the fishing season. The cold chain shapes the structure of fish and seafood supply chains, and can limit market opportunities because of the need to sell large volumes to ready buyers. Some Native ranching businesses are primarily cow-calf operations, and overall Native ranchers want to transition into direct marketing, or are already engaged in direct marketing. Location shapes the specific challenges that Native ranchers encounter in their supply chain—for ranchers operating in populous areas, land access is the biggest barrier. For ranchers operating in rural areas, finding customers and accessing necessary infrastructure for processing, transportation and storage are the biggest barriers.

“Part of the community building aspect is going [directly] to the source. I really appreciate going and honoring the work that’s being done in maintaining and sharing the traditional knowledge and the traditional practices. I know it’s not like a production level sourcing, but it makes it a much more valuable experience. [...] And being able to support [Native food producers]—I’m willing to pay what they need me to pay to source them, to continue that work being done. [...] And it’s a little bit more time consuming to be able to do it that way, but the quality is so much better.” —*Anonymous, participant in Native chef focus group*

METHODOLOGY

[Supply Chains & Sovereignty: Native-Led Food Systems Solutions](#) is based on community-driven applied research. Over the course of seven months, First Peoples Worldwide collected qualitative and quantitative information through direct engagement with a total of 42 Native food entrepreneurs via interviews and focus groups, and 45 Native food entrepreneurs via an online survey. The report delineates factors that shape Native food entrepreneurs’ supply chain choices, describes how Native food businesses have been affected by and adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic, and draws upon Native food producers’ expertise and experiences to collate recommendations about how to build and expand Native food supply chains.

TERMINOLOGY

We define “Native food supply chains” as any situation where a Native American-owned food business is sourcing from Native food suppliers, buying from or selling to other Native-owned food businesses, selling to Native customers, or working with Native-owned businesses for transportation, processing, or other aspects of the food supply chain.

Trends in Native Food Supply Chains

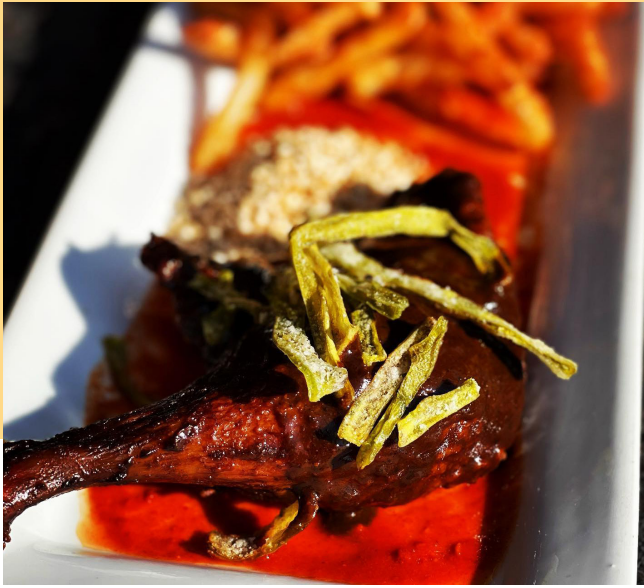
There are some overarching trends in Native food supply chains across industries:

- There is a limited supply of Native-produced foods, and increasing production volume can be in tension with producing foods in sustainable ways or in accordance with Indigenous values.
- In some situations it is possible to use Indigenous knowledge and intensive management to increase production in sustainable ways, but this process is labor intensive.
- Lack of infrastructure; limited land and water access; and environmental impacts and climate change are all constraining the current supply of Native-produced foods.
- When Native food producers price their products in equitable ways that reflect the time, labor, and knowledge that go into their production, these prices can be inaccessible for some lower-income members of Native communities.
- Competition with the commodity market is a barrier to building Native food supply chains, particularly for Native ranchers, though also in other sectors.
- Despite their strong desire to expand their Native markets, many Native food producers are having difficulty connecting with Native customers to sell their products, whether via direct to consumer sales to Native individuals, or establishing business relationships with tribally-owned businesses and Native institutions such as convenience stores, grocery stores, and schools.
- Tribal casinos are a specific underdeveloped market that many Native producers would like to reach.
- Food safety regulations, particularly those pertaining to the processing and sale of animal products, are limiting Native to Native commerce and market access.
- Building Native supply chain relationships can take significant time and logistical work, so businesses having limited personnel bandwidth can also be a barrier.

In general, Native chefs and Native food producers believe the limited supplies of Native-produced foods should go to feed the local community of each Native food producer first. Then, when extra supply is available, the food can be used to build broader Native food supply chains.

“I feel like we have entered this area where we’re playing this dance, of trying to help increase the demand so that it’s sustainable, and Indigenous farmers can have reason to increase the supply. [...] That’s part of the struggle for me too, is how do we engage in this dance of helping to increase the demand and increase the knowledge and education around these ingredients, but how are we doing it in a way that is mindful of community access to these ingredients, because that is really the priority.” –*Anonymous, participant in Native chef focus group*

Photos courtesy of Ray Naranjo, former executive chef of Indian Pueblo Kitchen and owner of Manko LLC.



How the COVID-19 Pandemic Shaped Native Food Supply Chains

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted Native food businesses in many ways. International supply chain disruptions made it difficult for Native food businesses to obtain certain non-food items and essential operational supplies. Safety protocols shaped businesses' daily operations. Market dynamics shifted in ways that had complex positive and negative effects—there was a spike in demand for local food, a loss of restaurant sales that necessitated a shift to other sales channels, critical changes in global market demand, interruptions in growth due to market uncertainty, and overall better market access for businesses with websites that allowed online sales.

Some restaurants flourished during the pandemic, while others struggled to stay afloat. The primary adaptation for restaurants was changing where and how they serve food. In some cases, border closures impacted Native food producers' abilities to move their products. The pandemic created dynamics that accelerated the loss of agricultural land in some regions. Ranchers experienced difficulty accessing meat processing. On the other hand, many Native nations used COVID relief money to invest in food systems infrastructure which supported and strengthened Native food supply chains and food sovereignty. Native nations, individuals, and businesses also used COVID relief money to purchase Native foods to distribute to their communities; this resulted in a notable increase in demand for Native-produced foods.

The pandemic both positively and negatively impacted relationships within Native food supply chains. During the pandemic many Native food entrepreneurs reoriented their lives and careers towards further prioritizing Native food systems work. **While Native communities experienced profound and disproportionate losses during the pandemic due to existing inequities, research participants emphasized that this is not the first hardship that Native people have been through. The pandemic has served as a catalyst for Native people to do beneficial food systems work both within and beyond Indian Country.**

“I think I’m not the only one who took that state of quarantine as a time to really make a decision to go full steam ahead and commit ourselves more toward that goal of restoring our traditional foodways, restoring the health of our people through this work.” –*Nico Albert, owner of Burning Cedar Indigenous Foods*

6 HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SHAPED NATIVE FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS

Supply Chains & Sovereignty: Native-Led Food Systems Solutions | Summary and Key Takeaways

Photo courtesy of Nico Albert, owner of Burning Cedar Indigenous Foods.



Photo courtesy of Ben Jacobs and Matt Chandra, co-owners of Tocabe: An American Indian Eatery.



Indigenous Values in Native Food Businesses

Native food systems participants are incorporating Indigenous values into their businesses. Examples of these values include focusing on respectful and reciprocal relationships, acting with consideration for future generations, utilizing sustainable environmental practices, and many more. In many cases, Indigenous values shape how Native food producers engage with plants and animals in their work, and guide chefs' choices about menu design and food preparation.

“How I conduct myself in doing these things is really asking [for] an exchange and permission to use these foods. [...] I want to feel like I'm respecting and honoring other people's relationships that they have with what they grow. And that I'm doing service to that, the energy I put in, when I'm preparing meals, be that at a community level, or for tribal events. I try to send some things back that we gather that are really seasonal so that we have those exchanges and that our plant relatives understand that we're all trying to help each other and do this in the best way possible that holds our values as who we are as our tribal people.”
—*Chef Trina Fyant, Bitterroot Salish/qlispe/Blackfeet, member of the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes, and owner of Qene's Catering*

“It's our generation that has a certain responsibility to carry the torch for the next. We are all from different tribes from all over the country, but there's so many common threads to what I'm hearing. [...] Your work is making a difference, my work is making a difference, together as we work toward this, hopefully we can pull some of the kernels of wisdom from our past, from our ancestors, so that we can add something to the narrative as a whole.” —*Anonymous, participant in Native chef focus group*

The Social Value of Native Food Businesses

Native food businesses are creating tremendous social value through their work. For Native-owned businesses the creation of social value is often grounded in Indigenous values that center respectful and reciprocal relationships and prioritize the wellbeing of community as the primary goal of food systems work.

Many for-profit Native-owned food businesses are using their revenue in community-oriented ways, ranging from directly investing in tribal or community programs to providing economic support to other entities within Native food systems. Native-owned food businesses are also:

- Creating and expanding employment opportunities for Native people;
- Feeding people in their communities, creating access to healthy foods in underserved regions, creating access to Native and traditional foods, and participating in free food distribution projects;
- Creating spaces for Native community building; and
- Engaging in social justice work such as increasing the visibility of Native people and Native foods, counteracting erasure of and discrimination against Native foodways, and presenting accurate positive representations of Native Peoples and cultures to the public to speak back against racism and stereotypes.

Concurrently, Native chefs and food producers are working to heal Native communities and address health disparities by reconnecting people with Native foodways and creating access to healthy, culturally relevant Indigenous foods. **Environmental health, sustainability, and environmental justice are guiding metrics for many Native food producers' daily agricultural practices; producers' positive environmental impacts are amplified by those who purchase their products and support their businesses.**

Native chefs are educating the non-Native public about Native cuisine and foodways; they are using food as a means to engage people, counteract the erasure of Indigenous Peoples, and advocate for Native self-representation. Native chefs are also sharing knowledge about Native foodways with Native people, both youth and adults. Native-owned farms and harvesting businesses are offering on-farm educational programming. Some Native food producers offer mentorship and support for other Native-owned food production businesses. Native food systems participants are sharing their knowledge to ensure the continuation of Native foodways and support thriving Native food systems.

Many Native food businesses are social enterprises which operate with a clear motivation to benefit people within and beyond Indian Country. Furthermore, for-profit Native-owned food businesses often play similar roles in their communities as non-profit Native food organizations. Funders that focus on creating social impact in Native communities are currently missing significant opportunities to expand this impact by funding for-profit Native businesses, given the social and educational value these businesses provide.

“One of our biggest motivators was to provide healthy, actually nutritious food to our Indigenous community in Minneapolis and the surrounding areas. We felt that a lot of our Indigenous seeds in our seed bundles would be part of that, that we could grow our Indigenous seeds and supply that to the community members, whether it was through our CSA boxes or selling to local chefs down there in Minneapolis [...].”

—*Lucas Humblet, co-owner of Yawelyahsi•yó• Farm*

Native Food Supply Chain Visions

Native food business owners expressed strong interest in further developing Native food supply chains. **The majority of interview and focus group participants are already participating in Native supply chains in some way, and all 42 directly stated that they would like to increase their involvement in Native food supply chains.** This theme was confirmed by survey results, which show both strong interest in participating in Native food supply chains, and that there is room to increase participation.

Many research participants would like to see intra-tribal, local, regional, and national Native food supply chains enacted simultaneously. By prioritizing food going to the Native food producer's community first, and to export second, supply chains can be built with respect for the relationships between Native producers and their communities, while also building mutually beneficial relationships across Indian Country.

Through Native ownership at every step of the supply chain, Native businesses can capture the value added during processing and distribution and channel it into Indigenous economies, where it will continue to circulate and have ongoing economic impact. Currently, this value is lost when Native enterprises sell their food to non-Native companies which bring these products to their end markets.

“The idea of the trade chain, I’ve been talking about that forever. You know, we have finfish, but we don’t have bison. We have shellfish, but there’s stuff over there on the east side of the mountains that we don’t have. [...] What I’ve always thought was how can we go over there and feed that community what we eat over here, and what we have available. And to have somebody come from over there, and feed us in our community what they’re accustomed to. And I think if we’re able to do that, that’s a start. If you can source that product out there into these communities over there, then it will open the door for selling product.”
–*Anonymous, participant in Native fisher focus group*

“Our ideal supply chain is, for us, to reduce the amount of hands that participate that are non-Native and [non-]Indigenous. [...] Making sure from a supply chain standpoint that money stays within Indian Country 95-98% of the time.” –*Matt Chandra, co-owner of Tocabe: An American Indian Eatery*

“I think that a grand vision is for it to be [...] a huge distribution supply chain. [...] If we can [guarantee distribution] through a successful restaurant brand, then that only extends our ability to distribute further and more items. So I think the grand idea is to just be able to really be the resource for Native food producers to get their items to market.” –*Ben Jacobs, co-owner of Tocabe: An American Indian Eatery*



Photo courtesy of Daisy Perez-Defoe and Rusty Defoe, owners of Birds N Things Farm.

Recommendations

The full-length report provides actionable steps that policy makers, institutions, Native organizations, tribes, investors, funders, advocates, and consumers can take to enact the recommendations identified within each category.

EXPAND STEADY MARKETS FOR NATIVE FOOD BUSINESSES AND FOOD ACCESS FOR NATIVE COMMUNITIES

1. Provide support for Native-owned food service businesses to increase Indigenous sourcing.
2. Provide steady markets for Native food producers through purchasing agreements.
3. Create a safety net program to support Native food producers during market transition.
4. Encourage non-Native purchasing by educating consumers.
5. Increase direct to consumer sales to Native customers through flexible payment options.
6. Tribes can support their food producers by creating opportunities for them to sell their products, preferentially purchasing from tribal member producers, and believing in their producers.
7. Increase tribally-owned casinos' purchasing from Native food producers.
8. Universities and other institutions should modify their food purchasing policies to allow Indigenous sourcing for food-based educational programming.
9. Revise the federal definition of "local" food to allow for inter-tribal trade.
10. Address commodity competition.
11. Direct funding to cover the purchase of Native-produced foods to feed Native communities, and expand the FDPIR 638 Self-Determination Demonstration Projects so all tribes can participate.

SUPPORT PRODUCTION AND NATIVE FOOD SYSTEMS

1. Address federal policies that prevent land and water access for Native nations and Native individuals, and return land and water to Native Peoples.
2. Continue to elevate the importance of addressing climate change, and create risk mitigation programs to support food producers who experience climate-related losses.
3. Support and fund Native seed keepers, seed banks, seed libraries, and educational seed keeping programs.
4. Address the limited personnel bandwidth of Native enterprises by providing support for workforce development, shifting work culture in the food service industry, and providing mental health support for food systems workers.

REMOVE ROADBLOCKS TO PROCESSING AND EXPAND INFRASTRUCTURE

1. Create additional federal, tribal, and private programs to fund meat processing infrastructure; fund fish processing infrastructure, mobile processing units, and ongoing workforce development.
2. Address the existing shortage of state and federal meat inspectors to provide equitable access to inspection across geographic regions, and provide designated inspectors for Native nations to ensure that tribal producers have access to inspection.
3. Fund the creation and expansion of infrastructure for production, transportation, processing, distribution, and retail, owned by Native nations, Native entrepreneurs, and Native cooperatives.
4. Increase producer revenue by providing support for value-added product creation.

“I believe the inspector, whether it’s a state inspector or USDA inspector, is the key for tribal members to ensure that they’re able to get their product out. [...] There are not enough inspectors, both state and federal inspectors, to meet the tribal need.”

–Anonymous, participant in Native rancher focus group



Photo courtesy of Spring Alaska Schreiner, owner of Sakari Farms.

FACILITATE NETWORKING, SUPPLY CHAIN CONNECTIONS, DISTRIBUTION, AND LOGISTICS

1. Expand networking resources such as Native food systems directories, include information and search functionalities to build supply chain relationships, use targeted outreach to build more comprehensive directories, and create programs for interactive supply chain networking.
2. Establish distributors, aggregators, and/or food hubs that are Native-owned (cooperatively or privately) to provide larger volumes of Native-produced foods to Native customers.
3. Address the limited personnel bandwidth of Native enterprises by outsourcing time-intensive supply chain logistics coordination work to Native organizations.
4. Utilize stopgap approaches and/or expand the use of existing infrastructure to distribute Native-produced foods while working to build more long-term solutions.
5. Support supply chain resilience by building redundancies into supply chains and establishing multiple distribution channels.

ADDRESS REGULATION AND CERTIFICATION BARRIERS

1. Provide technical assistance and cost share programs for food safety and other certifications for Native food producers.
2. Advocate for representatives of state and federal agencies to interface with tribes and Native food producers to ensure that Native foods are recognized and included in food regulations, and adjust regulations to encompass Indigenous methods of sourcing and producing these foods.
3. Clarify and streamline food safety regulations to facilitate the movement of Native-produced foods across jurisdictional boundaries.
4. Native nations can create their own food and agriculture codes to support and regulate their food systems and promote food sovereignty.

SUPPORT KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND EDUCATION

1. Fund additional programs to support the continuation of Indigenous food systems knowledge.
2. Create opportunities for knowledge sharing between Native business owners involved in food production or food service businesses.
3. Continue to fund education and business support on topics of interest to Native food systems participants, but as a complement to direct investment in Native entrepreneurs, not at the expense of direct investment in Native entrepreneurs.

“The feedback I get from a lot of folks doing this work is we need more spaces for folks to connect, and it can be a really isolating type of work to do sometimes. It is really important to have spaces to make these connections so that we can all support each other and knowledge share.” *–Anonymous, participant in Native chef focus group*

BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS AND PARTNERSHIPS

1. Approach strengthening Native food supply chains with respect for building good relationships, and elevate the expertise of Native food producers.
2. Address social inequities and discrimination *within* the Indigenous food sovereignty movement.

Photo courtesy of Daisy Perez-Defoe and Rusty Defoe, owners of Birds N Things Farm.



EXPAND CAPITAL ACCESS AND INVESTMENTS

1. Open grant funding opportunities to for-profit businesses that are providing social value by doing community-engaged work, and provide application support to increase grant access.
2. Directly fund Native food producers via loans, grants, investments, and integrated capital.
3. Support expanded CDFI access across Indian Country to address under-banking of tribal communities and ensure equitable access to federal programs administered via commercial lenders.
4. Investors should consider the benefits of investing in Native food businesses, such as monetary return on investment, social return on investment, and strengthening Native food sovereignty.
5. Both loans and investment capital must be provided in appropriate ways given the contexts Native entrepreneurs are operating in.

Photo courtesy of Ray Naranjo, former executive chef of Indian Pueblo Kitchen and owner of Manko LLC.



Conclusion

Native food businesses are creating food systems that care for both Native and non-Native people, guided by Indigenous values and self-determination. The report highlights Native food systems participants' pronounced interest in cultivating and expanding intra-tribal, local, regional, and national Native food supply chains. In addition to being a vital approach to enacting Native food sovereignty, Native food supply chains bring relational, cultural, environmental, and economic value to their participants and to Native nations.

The recommendations put forward highlight how systemic racism and inequitable access to capital continue to have profound and far reaching impacts on Native food systems—from lack of infrastructure to limited personnel bandwidth, many of the barriers limiting the current supply of Native produced foods can be addressed through creating sustained and equitable access to capital. The creation of Native cooperatives, distributors, or food hubs is another important step towards facilitating large-scale Native supply chain logistics. Additionally, policy makers, investors, and changemakers within and beyond the Native food sovereignty movement should involve Native food entrepreneurs in project planning—this is essential to make sure programs, policy changes, and infrastructure will meet food entrepreneurs' needs and serve the growth of Native food systems. Taken together, all of the recommendations in the report may create new and formidable access to markets for Native food producers, and facilitate the expansion of Native food supply chains.

At the broadest level, Native food producers are creating immense social value through their work, guided by Indigenous values that see the interconnections between Native food systems and individual, social, and environmental wellbeing. Supporting Native food producers to expand their work, and to connect through Native supply chains which support other Native food businesses, will multiply this social value and promote Native food sovereignty in the present and for future generations.

“Go out to visit your farmers, ranchers and sheep herders. You will see first hand what the needs are and you will be building long lasting relationships with the people who grow and raise your food. You will be a better advocate to them.” *—Anonymous, survey respondent*

Photo courtesy of Spring Alaska Schreiner, owner of Sakari Farms.





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