

## Introduction

On April 29, 1994, at a historic meeting with the leaders of federally recognized Indian tribes at the White House, President Clinton said, "So much of who we are today comes from who you have been for a long time." President Clinton's statement applies to American Indian farmers and their beneficial effect on the European settlers in the continental United States, as well as people around the world.

This ***Guide to USDA Programs for American Indians and Alaska Natives*** describes the wide array of USDA programs and services available to American Indian and Alaska Native communities. As we look toward the future, it is instructive to look to the past as well, and to identify historical highlights of American Indian agriculture and the contributions that American Indian farmers have made to the United States and the world. These highlights provide an important context for American Indian agriculture today and suggest how USDA can work in partnership with Indian tribes on a government-to-government basis to learn from, and contribute to, American Indian agriculture.

Indians were the first farmers in North America, and agriculture has been a mainstay of the American Indian culture and economy for thousands of years. In fact, the Indians of Central America and Mexico, or Mesoamerica, were engaged in agriculture 7,000 years before Europeans settled in the present-day United States.

Archaeological evidence indicates American Indians began farming in what later became the continental United States by 5000 B.C. utilizing indigenous agricultural practices as well as practices learned from Mexican and Central American cultures. By A.D. 1000, American Indian farmers had developed a productive and complex agricultural system based on corn, beans, and squash, which have been commonly referred to as the "three sisters." These American Indian farmers were primarily women; the men hunted and fished.

There has been variety in American Indian agriculture and economy. Before contact with the European civilization, American Indians in the northern United States cultivated the river valleys and flood plains with bone and wooden hoes and digging sticks. American Indian women raised the traditional crops of beans, squash, and many varieties of corn--the most important crop. In the upper Great Lakes, the Ojibwa (Chippewa) and the Assiniboin sowed, harvested, dried, threshed, and stored wild rice. Some northern tribes also tapped sugar maple trees and made sugar. Over time, American Indian farmers in the southern United States cultivated squash and bottle gourds, and then traded agricultural products in market centers. Southern farmers raised a significant amount of their own food as well as a surplus for lean times, and for trade with each other and later with the European settlers.

American Indians used highly developed agricultural methods and practices. The Southwest Indian farmers developed a new type of corn, which provided the subsistence basis for southwestern Indian civilization; cultivated several varieties of squash and beans; grew cotton; developed water-conservation practices; and used several methods of irrigation. From A.D. 800 to 1400 the Hohokam Indians in the Southwest, called the "canal builders," constructed major systems of irrigation canals that were 150 miles long or more. Although the Plains Indians relied mainly on hunting and gathering, by A.D. 1000 the Indians of the central Plains practiced well-developed agriculture with corn, beans, squash, sunflowers, and tobacco being the important crops.

R. Douglas Hurt, writing on "The Native American Experience" in *American Agriculture: A Brief History*, wrote:

In retrospect, the history of Indian agriculture is the story of supreme achievement. Nearly three millennia before the arrival of white settlers, Native American farmers learned to cultivate plants of local and Mesoamerican origins. They discovered how to select the seeds that would yield maximum harvests in local soil and climatic conditions. By so doing, they made great strides toward farming in harmony with nature.

When Hernando DeSoto's expedition landed on the coast of Florida in 1539, his food supply was nearly depleted. American Indian agriculture was so bountiful that the Spaniards appropriated a three-month supply of corn from the fields, enabling the expedition to continue. Later, the American Indian farmers showed European settlers which plants to cultivate, particularly corn, beans, pumpkins, and tobacco, and how to make maple sugar and prepare hominy.

American Indian agriculture has had a significant effect on worldwide agriculture and economy. Jack Weatherford,

in his book *Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World*, pointed out that Indians cultivated over 300 food crops, and contributed to the world three- fifths of the crops now in cultivation. The Indian farmers of North and South America gave the world corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, beans, pumpkins, squash, chocolate, vanilla, papayas, persimmons, jicama, pecans, chilies, hickory nuts, peanuts, cassava, sunflower seeds, maple syrup, tapioca, and avocados.

American Indian agricultural crops have spread from American farmers to farmers in other parts of the world. Today farmers grow corn over a larger area of the world than any other cultivated food. The white potato spread from Bolivia and Peru to Ireland across Europe to Russia, and provided more calories and nutrition per acre than any grain. Corn and cassava contributed to the increase in Africa's population in the last century and throughout this century. Sweet potato and corn were cultivated in areas in Asia where rice did not grow. Farmers grew corn, sweet potatoes, peanuts, tomatoes, and chilies in new areas of China. Today many countries are economically dependent on these American Indian crops.

Clearly, American Indians' historic agricultural achievements made important contributions to the United States and the world. These accomplishments provide an instructive perspective on USDA's government-to-government relations with Indian tribes.

USDA programs and services that are available to American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and their members are described in the following pages. USDA administers these programs through seven mission areas: Natural Resources and Environment; Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services; Rural Development; Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services; Food Safety; Research, Education, and Economics; and Marketing and Regulatory Programs. The Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations, Departmental Administration, and other offices support USDA in implementing programs in all these areas.