

Natural Resources Conservation Service Southeast American Indian Work Group



*Southeast American Indian Work Group members during the 2009 American Indian Alaska
Native Employees Assoc. Training Conference in Green Bay, Wisconsin*

Assisting Leadership in Indian Country Today

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Chapter 1

Role of NRCS in the Southeast American Indian Work Group

Our Vision

Productive Indian lands that use the effective traditional and innovative conservation techniques to sustain the natural resources.

Our Mission

To provide leadership that creates opportunities for information exchange and training between work group members, American Indians and other organizations that results in increased conservation of natural resources on American Indian Lands, increased employment of American Indians by USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and sustains the preservation of cultural resources and traditional values.



Background

NRCS has over 75 years experience in working with private landowners across the nation to provide technical and financial assistance in conserving their natural resources. As an agency, NRCS has led the way to assist Indian Tribes by establishing offices in Indian Country as defined by the U.S. Congress, the President of the United States, and USDA-NRCS policies. Native American governments are sovereign nations existing within the boundaries of the United States and have special legal and political relationships with the United States. NRCS is striving to establish effective relationships with those sovereign governments by consulting with Indian Nations on a government-to-government basis and making agreements for the betterment of natural resources, economic development, health, and educational needs.

The Southeast American Indian Work Group was created in 1996 to ensure the delivery of those same services to American Indians in the nine southeast states. Originally, the members of the work group included one NRCS staff person from each state who was appointed by the NRCS State Conservationist to serve as either the state Emphasis Program Manager (EPM) or as an American Indian Liaison to one or more Tribes within the state. Leadership was provided by the Regional Conservationist, a staff person from the Regional Office, and a state conservationist who served as a “Work Group Champion.” The work group continues to operate with representatives from each state, with leadership provided by the workgroup champion, and guidance from the Elder Advisory Council.

The NRCS Southeast American Indian Work Group includes the following states:

- | | | |
|------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 1) Alabama | 4) Kentucky | 7) South Carolina |
| 2) Florida | 5) Mississippi | 8) Tennessee |
| 3) Georgia | 6) North Carolina | 9) Virginia |

There has been discussion of expanding to include the northeast states; however, so far this has not proven feasible and the Elder Council feels that the current size is most advantageous for networking and solving common issues.

Today, the Southeast American Indian Work Group has transitioned into an effective networking group who shares information, organizes regional meetings, recruits employees, and involves the American Indians in conservation activities.

Our Values

1. The work group will ensure that USDA program delivery is provided to all American Indians, including but not limited to, federally recognized, state recognized, and community-based Tribes, and individual American Indian landowners.
2. The work group will respect the cultural and traditional values of each Tribe through guidance provided by the Southeast Elder Advisory Council.
3. The work group will provide high quality standards of work on Indian land.
4. The work group will strive to improve quality, accountability, effectiveness, and consistency of conservation assistance to sustain and improve Tribal natural resources.

Customers, Services, and Products

Customers	Services	Products
➤ Elders	➤ Conservation Technical Assistance	➤ Best Management Practices
➤ Tribal Administration	➤ Consulting	➤ Conservation Plans
➤ Department Heads	➤ Advising	➤ Critical Preliminary Findings
➤ Tribal Members	➤ Finding Financial Assistance	➤ Survey Reviews
➤ Division Directors		➤ Comprehensive Studies
➤ State Conservationists		➤ Educational Programs
➤ NRCS Employees		➤ Information

Value of Work Group to Chief and Agency Leadership

- Establishes a formal network for communications between NRCS and the numerous American Indian Tribes, community based organizations, and American Indian individuals.
- Provides a feedback mechanism on how well policies and requirements are being implemented.
- Improves accountability by providing information on agency performance and evaluating effectiveness and efficiency of NRCS programs, activities, and operations in Indian Country.
- Increases the knowledge and skill of the staff working with the American Indians.

Chapter 2

Southeast American Indian Elders Advisory Council



Early in the process, it was realized that the work group would benefit from following an Indian tradition of seeking advice and guidance from Indian Elders. Currently, each state is invited to have an Elder representative who serves on the Southeast American Indian Advisory Council.

Appointment of an Elder is usually done in consultation between the NRCS State Conservationist and the NRCS staff person serving on the work group. The Elder is chosen due to their knowledge of American Indian affairs in that state. They may be a chief or assistant chief; however, that is not a requirement. The invitation should be discussed with the Elder first, and then formalized in a letter from the NRCS State Conservationist.

Expectations of Elders

- Knowledgeable about American Indian affairs in the appointing state.
- Provide guidance to the work group representative and the NRCS State Conservationist on NRCS programs and services and how they impact the American Indians.
- Attend some of the monthly teleconferences of the work group.
- Review material and provide input to the work group representative.
- Participate in the American Indian Program Delivery Initiative Meetings sponsored by the work group.

The Elders are an integral part of the work group and are invited to all meetings and teleconferences. They are treated with respect for their knowledge and wisdom and for the many hours that they have volunteered to assist NRCS.

Current Elders Serving On Southeast American Indian Advisory Council

Elder	Tribe	State
Mr. Billy Smith	Poarch Band of Creek Indians	Alabama
Mr. Richard Bowers	Big Cypress Seminole Tribe	Florida
Principal Chief Marian McCormick	Tama Tribal Town	Georgia
Ms. Virginia Willis	Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians	Mississippi
Mr. Jerry Wolfe	Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians	North Carolina
Mr. Donald Rogers	Catawba Indian Nation	South Carolina
Mr. Cubert Bell	Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians	Tennessee
Mr. Reggie Tupponce	Upper Mattaponi Tribe	Virginia

Elders Recommendations to Work Group

The following five questions were posed by the American Indian Liaisons to the Tribal Elders representing their states. These are the direct responses of the Elders.

1. What are some of your Tribal natural resource concerns?
 - a. Protection of the water quality.
 - b. City removing large volume of water from river.
 - c. Wetlands protection which will also protect the native cultural resources that are being inundated.
 - d. Concern over pesticide use on rented cropland.
 - e. Water quality and quantity.
 - f. Forest management.
 - g. Cultural resources.
 - h. Erosion.
 - i. Education for future generations.
 - j. Have Tribal leaders send out surveys for all members to list their resources concerns.
 - k. Water contamination.
 - l. Ponds on Tribal land.
 - m. Soil erosion.

2. How can we encourage more participation in the NRCS programs?
 - a. By getting the word out to the Tribal Leaders and Elders.
 - b. Holding meetings in the Tribal Communities.
 - c. Educate and inform agricultural producers by discussing Farm Bill programs at monthly meetings.
 - d. Meeting with Tribal leaders.
 - e. Meetings for Tribal members/landowners.
 - f. Hold the American Indian Program Delivery Initiative Meetings.
 - g. Work with other Tribal organizations to get NRCS program information out.

3. How can we identify the American Indian farmers who would participate in NRCS programs?
 - a. Holding a meeting at the Tribal Grounds would make most more at ease.
 - b. Advertise in the local papers that you are holding a meeting for American Indian farmers to acquaint them with NRCS programs.
 - c. Too little land is farmed by Indians to worry about it.
 - d. A list of agricultural producers that are Tribal members can be obtained from Tribal leadership headquarters.

- e. Tribal Census - Each Tribe is required to have a data base of their membership; most of them will share their membership list, especially if it is an opportunity to help their members.
 - f. The Tribes are able to send out surveys to their members. This would be an excellent way to obtain the Tribal members who are farmers or producers.
 - g. Hold conservation tour to show completed conservation practices and have success stories given by participants.
4. How do you feel about your role as a Southeast Elder for NRCS?
- a. It is an honor to represent my people. I am able to find out about the concerns of my people and take it back to the Tribe and let them know how to tap into these programs. The Elders used to travel to other areas and find out what is working with other Tribal groups, but have not had the opportunity to do so in a few years. I enjoy working with NRCS and other Tribal Elders.
 - b. I am comfortable with progress I have made. Can always do more.
 - c. I am very proud to be serving as an Elder Advisory Council member for the Southeast American Indian work group.
 - d. I am honored to be a spokesman for my Tribe, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians.
 - e. I see all Tribal Elders as role model for our future generation of young people, and this is very important to me.
 - f. I believe that the Southeast Elder Advisory Council is working, but we need to get more involved.
 - g. Confusing and inactive.
5. What is your role as a Southeast Elder for NRCS?
- a. To let NRCS know what the concerns of my Tribe are and how NRCS can best serve and reach the Tribal community.
 - b. To take back to my people how to work with NRCS and how to help Tribal people be more at ease with the government programs.
 - c. Possibly set up times that NRCS can work with a group of Tribal farmers.
 - d. Offer advice to NRCS and producers on issues of mutual importance.
 - e. To help educate NRCS and ensure that Tribal protocol is used.
 - f. To help ensure that the Tribe and its leaders are open to working with NRCS and participate in NRCS programs available to them to address resource concerns.
 - g. Make sure that regular meetings between NRCS and Tribal leaders are held to maintain and improve relationships.
 - h. Educate new Tribal leaders in the USDA programs available to help the Tribe and Tribal members.

Chapter 3 Work Group Structure



NRCS Staff Serving American Indians in the Southeast

The NRCS Southeast American Indian Work Group consists of members who are appointed by their respective NRCS State Conservationists to represent the state. Leadership is provided by the Work Group Champion who is appointed by the Regional Conservationist - East. State Conservationists within the Southeast Region serve as advisors to the workgroup.

Current Southeast American Indian Work Group Members

Person	Work Group Position	Work Title	State
Dr. William Puckett	Work Group Champion	State Conservationist	Alabama
Edith Morigeau	Member	National Tribal Relations Coordinator	USDA/NRCS Headquarters
David Elliott	Tribal Liaison-PT	Soil Con Technician	Alabama
Randall East	AIAN-EPM	Engineer	Alabama
John Harper	AIAN-EPM	RC&D Coordinator	Florida
Debbie Henry	Tribal Liaison-PT	Soil Con Technician	Georgia
Lee Reeves	AIAN-EPM	Soil Con Technician	Georgia
Pat Green	AIAN-EPM	RC&D Coordinator	Kentucky
Tim Oakes	Tribal Liaison-FT	Soil Conservationist	Mississippi
John McCoy	Tribal Liaison-FT	Soil Conservationist	North Carolina
Daniel Cabaniss	AIAN-EPM	Soil Conservationist	South Carolina
Kelly Gupton	AIAN-EPM	Ag Engineer	Tennessee
Robin Smith	AIAN-EPM	RC&D Secretary	Virginia

Current Southeast American Indian Work Group Advisors

Person	Work Group Position - Title	State
Leonard Jordan	Regional Conservationist – East	Washington, DC
Carlos Suarez	State Conservationist	Florida
James E. Tillman, Sr.	State Conservationist	Georgia
Thomas A. Perrin	State Conservationist	Kentucky
Homer Wilkes	State Conservationist	Mississippi
J.B. Martin	State Conservationist	North Carolina
Ann English	State Conservationist	South Carolina
Kevin Brown	State Conservationist	Tennessee
Jack Bricker	State Conservationist	Virginia

Chapter 4 Work Group Goals



Summary of Goals

- Goal 1** Increase the conservation of natural resources on American Indian land including reservation, Tribal, and privately owned lands.

- Goal 2** Sustain and establish, where needed, working relationships with American Indians so they are familiar with the services available and know where to go to receive assistance.

- Goal 3** Enhance the knowledge of NRCS leadership about the conservation needs of American Indians and the unique definition of responsibilities to provide services.

- Goal 4** Improve the knowledge and skills of NRCS employees who work with American Indians.

Detailed Goals, Objectives, and Strategies

Goal 1 Increase the conservation of natural resources on American Indian land including reservation, Tribal, and privately owned lands.

Objective A: Liaisons and EPM's provide support to field staff in how to assist American Indians.

Objective B: Host a bi-annual American Indian Program Delivery Initiative Meetings for American Indian Tribal officials and NRCS staff to improve working relationships and knowledge about effect conservation strategies.

- Strategy 1 Include success stories to show American Indians commitment to conservation.
- Strategy 2 Provide training to NRCS field staff on how to improve services.
- Strategy 3 Include USDA officials to sustain and improve the working relationship with Indian Leaders.
- Strategy 4 Support attendance by Tribal elders by including them on the program.
- Strategy 5 Gain insight from Tribal Elders by having them provide words of wisdom and guidance during opening sessions.

Goal 2 Sustain and establish, where needed, working relationships with American Indians so they are familiar with the services available to them and know where to go to receive assistance.

Objective A: Strengthen the involvement of the Southeast American Indian Work Group Elders Advisory Council.

- Strategy 1 Ensure Elder participation on workgroup teleconferences.
- Strategy 2 Develop written guidelines about the Elders Council role and how they are appointed.

Objective B: Provide each federal and state Tribe with current information about NRCS programs.

- Strategy 1 Provide information thru mail, email and website concerning NRCS programs.
- Strategy 2 Host meetings for the Tribes.
- Strategy 3 Attend Tribal natural resources meetings.

Objective C: Provide all federally recognized Tribes with a NRCS liaison to ensure a government-to-government consultative process is sustained.

Strategy 1 Liaison communicates regularly with Tribal representatives on natural resources issues.

Objective D: EPM'S establish contacts with and provide information to state recognized Tribes.

Objective E: Provide information to community based American Indian Groups on an as needed basis.

Goal 3

Enhance the knowledge of NRCS leadership about the conservation needs of American Indians and the unique definition of responsibilities to provide services.

Objective A: Provide reports to the NRCS Regional Conservationist regarding activities of the Southeast American Indian Work Group

Objective B: Offer training for NRCS leadership at the American Indian Program Delivery Initiative meetings.

Objective C: Write up success stories and share with appropriate NRCS leadership.

Goal 4

Improve the knowledge and skills of NRCS employees who work with American Indians.

Objective A: Host regular teleconferences for Southeast American Indian Work Group members to network and share information.

Objective B: Southeast American Indian Work Group members provide information to NRCS employees within their state on how to effectively establish relations and work with American Indians.

Objective C: Increase membership involvement with the National American Indian Alaska Native Employees Association (AIANEA).

Objective D: Ensure Southeast American Indian Work Group members attend NRCS training courses and other classes on establishing and sustaining effective working relationships with Tribes.

Chapter 5 NRCS Staff serving Tribes and Groups



The states committed to this work group range north to Virginia and south to Florida with the western boundary set by Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky. The Tribes within those lands have a tremendous variety of customs, traditions, and resources available to them.

NRCS Staff Serving Tribes

State	Fed Tribes	State Tribes	Community Based Org	Part-Time AI-EPM	Liaison Full -Time	Liaison Part-Time	Outreach Coordinator Part-Time
Alabama	1	8		1		1	1
Florida	2	3	2	1			1
Georgia		3		1		1	1
Kentucky			1	1			
Mississippi	1			1	1		
North Carolina	1	8	3	1	1		1
South Carolina	1	6	7	1			1
Tennessee			6	1			1
Virginia		11	6	1			2
TOTAL	6	39	25	9	2	2	8

- AI/AN EPM = American Indian Alaskan Native Emphasis Program Manager, which is a collateral duty.
- American Indian Liaisons are assigned to specific Tribes and are either part-time or full-time in that capacity.
- Outreach Coordinators serve many types of underserved customers including American Indians.

Federally Recognized Tribes in the Nine Southeast States

State	Name of Tribe	Number of Members	Approximate Acreage in Reservation	Approximate Acreage in Tribal Land
AL	Poarch Band of Creek Indians	3,049	386 acres	7400 acres
FL	Miccosukee Tribe of Florida	600	75,000 acres	
FL	Seminole Tribe of Florida	6,350	89,000 acres	
GA	No Federal Tribes			
KY	No Federal Tribes			
MS	Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians	8,760	35,000 acres	2,600 acres
NC	Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians	14,000	56,875 acres	
SC	Catawba Indian Nation	2700	711 acres	633 acres
TN	Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians	(same as MS)		150
	Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians	(same as NC)		30
VA	No Federal Tribes			

All numbers and acreage is estimated and not an exact figure.

State Recognized Tribes in the Nine Southeast States

State	Tribe Name	Number of Members	Approximate Acres in State Reservation	Approximate Acreage in Tribal Land
AL	Echota Cherokee Tribe of Alabama	33,000		100 acres
	Cherokee Tribe of Northeast Alabama	4,900		10 acres
	Ma-Chis Lower Creek Indian Tribe of Alabama	5,000		10 acres
	Star Clan of Muscogee Creeks	350		20 acres
	Cher-O-Creek Intra Tribal Indians	350		5 acres
	MOWA Band of Choctaw Indians	9,000		25 acres
	Piqua Shawnee Tribe	250		
	United Cherokee Ani-Yun-Wiya Nation	500		1 acre
	FL	Perdido Bay Tribe	245	
Santa Rosa County Creek Indian Tribe, Inc.		600		38 acres
Muscogee Nations of Florida		260		10 acres
GA	Lower Muskogee Creek Tribe	3,000		80 acres
	Georgia Tribe of Eastern Cherokee	450		
	Cherokee of Georgia Tribal Council	450		30 acres
KY	No State Tribes			
MS	No State Tribes			
NC	Coharie Intra-Tribal Council			
	Cumberland Co. Association For Indian People			
	Haliwa-Saponi Tribe			
	Lumbee Tribe of NC.	40,000		
	Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation			
	Sappony			
	Waccamaw-Siouan Tribe			
SC	Chaloklowa Chickasaw Indian People			
	Eastern Cherokee, Southern Iroquois and United Tribes of S.C. Inc.			
	Natchez Tribe of South Carolina			
	Pee Dee Indian Tribe of Beaver Creek			
	Piedmont American Indian Association, Lower Eastern Cherokee Nation of South Carolina			
	Wassamasaw Tribe of Varnertown Indians			
TN	No State Tribes			
VA	Pamunkey Indian Tribe Reservation	80	1,200 acres	
	Mattaponi Reservation	450	150 acres	900 acres
	Nansemond Tribe	300		
	Chickahominy Tribe	750		200 acres
	Eastern Chickahominy Tribe	150		
	Rappahannock Indian Tribe	300		119 acres
	Upper Mattaponi	100		20 acres
	Monacan	900		118 acres
	Patawomeck Indian Tribe			
	Nottaway Indian Tribe			
	Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Indian Tribe	283		100 acres

All numbers and acreage is estimated and not an exact figure.

Chapter 6 Success Stories



While the biggest success story of the work group is the increased involvement of all of the Southeast states NRCS staff with the American Indians, four success stories are offered here:

- A. Trail of Tears Corn
- B. Use of NRCS Program Funds on Indian Lands
- C. American Indian Program Delivery Initiative Meetings
- D. Rivercane Project

A. “Trail of Tears” Corn Harvest



By Debbie T. Henry, American Indian Tribal Liaison for NRCS in Georgia

In the spring of 2002, the staff of the Jimmy Carter Plant Materials Center planted some of the original corn seed carried on the “Trail of Tears” 1838 Indian Removal. This seed has been given to several Tribes and Tribal members throughout Georgia to

plant on their land. The corn has been used for educational purposes, as well as providing food for their families.

The White Eagle Corn is commonly referred to as the “Trail of Tears” corn because it was carried by the Cherokee as they traveled west on the Trail of Tears. It is a Blue and White Dent Corn that was well adapted to the needs of America’s early farmers: high ear placement facilitated hand picking and tall stalks provided a good source of food for cattle. It is a beautiful white and blue corn with a red cob. Young corn is a substantial flavorful sweet corn; mature it makes a good blue corn flour. Occasionally there will be an all-blue ear. This variety of corn is considered very sacred to the American Indians as they have special ceremonies where they offer prayers blessing the seed and Mother Earth. At times the image of a white eagle can be seen in the kernels.

In March of 2007, Debbie Henry, American Indian/Alaskan Native Special Emphasis Program Manager and Tribal Liaison for Georgia, traveled to Alabama and delivered some of the corn to the Poarch Band of Creek Indians (a federally recognized Tribe) as well as nine state recognized Tribes. This seed was also sent to Tribes in Mississippi and Kentucky to plant for educational use as well as food for Tribal members.

Due to a continued interest in this project, our seed supply was depleted. James E. Tillman Sr., Georgia NRCS State Conservationist, agreed to support the planting of another crop to replenish our seed bank. The heirloom grower, located in Oklahoma, that supplied NRCS with the corn for the 2002 crop was contacted and we were able to obtain some more of this very sacred seed.

In the spring of 2007, personnel of the Jimmy Carter Plant Materials Center planted a second crop. On August 23, a group of twelve NRCS employees and five Earth Team Volunteers gathered to hand-pick the 2007 crop of "Trail of Tears" corn. The yield was very good and we received several more requests for seed. In addition to the previously mentioned states we have also provided seed to the following states;

In Oklahoma, we worked with a representative from the National Society for the American Indian Elderly (NSAIE) who partnered with the Red Earth Action Project to plant conservation/community gardens. They will use corn from the gardens to feed low income and elderly in the Cherokee Nation. In Virginia, we provided seed to the Mattaponi Indian Tribe & the Eastern Woodland Indians to be used for educational purposes in their museums.

A representative from the Yougiogaheny River Band of Shawnee Indians in western Maryland contacted me to obtain some seed for their tribal gardens after seeing our project on the internet. In North Carolina, the Eastern Band of Cherokee made a request for their plant nursery and to distribute to tribal members. Georgia distributed seed to all three of the State Recognized Tribes for their members to plant as well.

The Plant Material Center in North Dakota requested seed after reading of our project online. This has brought our total distribution to 9 states and numerous tribes. We are very pleased with the success of this project and much appreciation has been expressed to Georgia NRCS for providing this product to the tribes. We still have a limited amount of seed if there are other tribes who are interested in obtaining some to be used within the tribes.



B. Use of NRCS Program Funds on Indian Lands

NRCS programs have proved to be a tremendous opportunity for the Tribes within our Southeast Work Group boundaries to enhance, improve, and preserve their natural resources. By forming strong relationships between NRCS and the Tribal leaders, we have several Tribes that are now participating in USDA/NRCS programs.

Currently NRCS has obligated over \$4,222,954.00 in the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP), \$83,022.00 in the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP), \$150,000.00 in the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), \$419,402.00 in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts with Tribes and individual American Indian landowners within our Southeast workgroup area. NRCS has obligated over \$1,884,000.00 through the Emergency Watershed Protection Program (EWP) agreements. Tribes have also benefited with \$385,881.00 in funding through the Resource Conservation and Development Program (RC&D). We have highlighted programs administered by NRCS, but there are many other USDA Agencies that have provided funds as well. It is thru these programs that Tribes as well as individual American Indian landowners are able to address their resource concerns on cropland, pastureland, and forestlands to preserve, enhance and maintain for future generations.



C. American Indian Program Delivery Initiative Meetings hosted by the Southeast Work Group

The Southeast Work Group hosted American Indian Program Delivery Initiative meetings in 2000, 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2009 to develop and improve working relationships with the Tribes and USDA Agencies throughout the Southeast. The meetings were all hosted by a Tribe on Tribal lands where there could be two-way communication about the programs offered by USDA and the type of services needed by the Tribes to effectively manage their natural resources.



SEAIWG Members taken during the May 2009 American Indian Program Delivery Initiative Mtg. at the Poarch Band of Creek Indians in Atmore, AL.

The stated objectives of the meetings are to:

- Communicate with Tribal leaders about how to access USDA programs and services to American Indian producers and landowners.
- Provide a listening forum to surface concerns that Southeastern Tribes have in accessing USDA conservation programs and services.
- Demonstrate ways that NRCS employees can work more effectively with American Indians and American Indian Tribal ways of government.
- Encourage the formation of Tribal conservation districts.
- Provide opportunity for input on the Farm Bill.

Most of the states involved sponsored representatives from at least one of their Tribes to attend the meeting. In addition to the NRCS Tribal Liaisons, the AIAN-EPM's and state conservationists from most of the states attended.

Speakers included a wide range of federal agency representatives from USDA headquarters which included NRCS, Rural Development (RD), and the Farm Service Agency (FSA).

A highlight at each meeting is receiving guidance and input from the work group Elders Council who offered many insights into the difficulties that need to be overcome to establish effective conservation programs on Tribal lands. Another highlight was the tour of Tribal grounds that included conservation practices that had been installed.



D. Rivercane Project

By David Elliott, American Indian Tribal Liaison for NRCS in Alabama

On Wednesday August 12, 2009, The Poarch Creek Tribal Youth Council brought back a sacred plant to their community. Rivercane once covered millions of acres across the southeastern United States. The plant was heavily depended upon by Native Americans, including Muscogee (Creek), Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, Cherokee, Houma, Chitimacha, and many others. Its many uses included blowguns, thatching for houses, mats, fishing spears, arrows, baskets, ceremonial items and hundreds more. It was one of the most important utilitarian plants of the Southeastern Indians.

Not only was it important to Native Americans, Rivercane played a pivotal role in the environment as well. Over 60 species of animals, birds, and insects called the vast canebreaks (large area of Rivercane) home, including bear, bison, Elk, and panther. Two species of birds, the passenger pigeon and Carolina parakeet, which also used the vast canebreaks as shelter, are now extinct.

Rivercane also proves to be a valuable asset in improving ecosystems. The high culm (woody stems) density is responsible for slowing flood waters and collecting decomposing matter which then turns into nutrient-rich soil. The interwoven system of rhizomes, which are the stems of Rivercane below ground, holds soil together to decrease erosion near creeks, rivers, streams, and branches of fresh water. Ultimately, Rivercane greatly improves the quality of freshwater.

Since European arrival to the continent, the Rivercane population has decreased tremendously. Deforestation, over-grazing by European livestock, Cattle and swine, and urbanization has depleted the native plant population to only a fraction of its original population. The U.S Geological Survey has listed the species as "Critically Rare" and the Nature Conservancy has it listed as "Globally Rare."

When the Poarch Creek Cultural Education program began in 2006, it had one goal-to bring culture back to the community and ensure its presence for years to come. Today, language, stickball, traditional gospel hymns, dancing, finger-weaving, basket-weaving, patchwork, are all part of the community once again. In order to gather cane, basket makers must travel over 90 miles to a canebreak in central Alabama-and even there, the cane is scarce. Creek basket makers here must use a commercial substitute to weave most baskets.

Now, with the Rivercane Restoration Project, the tribe will have access to this sacred plant for generations to come. The Poarch Creek Tribal Youth Council, which is an organization for Native youth to learn cultural values and history, leadership skills, community citizenship, and environmental protection, assisted in planting the one-hundred, three-month-old plants donated by the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Jamie L. Whitten Plant Materials Center located in Coffeeville, Mississippi. The PMC works with other agencies and organizations in carrying out its function. The PMC

produced the Rivercane plants at the request of Dr. William Puckett, Alabama NRCS State Conservationist. Dr. Puckett learned of the Rivercane project from Tribal leaders and pledged his support to partner with the Tribe to make this project a success. David Elliott, NRCS Tribal Liaison coordinated the pick up and transportation of the Rivercane plants from the PMC to the PBCI Reservation and will be monitoring the success of the project with the youth council. The youth council plans to continue the restoration project around other locations of tribal property. These plants will be ready to utilize in approximately ten years.



Chapter 7

Background Material for Plan Development



The following information was gathered to prepare this plan and is offered as background material to more fully understand the work of this group.

Southeast Work Group

“I think that due to the fact that everyone is from the Southeast and in the South everyone tries to be friendly, it overflows in our work group and the entire work group tries to be friendly with each other. In NRCS it is like a big family and in our small work group it is like a smaller family trying to promote American Indian/Alaska natives. This work group is very positive and I am lucky to have been a part of this effort in my career.”

Participants: Philip Dixon, Debbie Henry, Patrick Green, David Elliott, Roel Herrera, Tim Oaks, and Patricia Tyrrell.

Strengths of Work Group

- Elder’s Advisory Council members contribute to knowledge base.
- Regional coverage of nine states.
- Great working relationship with understanding and concern for American Indian values and Involvement in NRCS program implementation.
- Work group has built an incredible trust with Tribes.
- Good working relationships between work group members.
- Friendships among AIAN-EPM's and Liaisons.
- Small enough group to make plans and decisions.
- Recognized nationally by NRCS and Indian groups.
- Good support from NRCS State Conservationists.
- Plays a big role in USDA program delivery to Southeast Indian Country.
- Provide wisdom, knowledge, and direction for NRCS to be more effective and efficient when working within Indian Country.
- Work group has a direct relationship with NRCS State Conservationists and direct connection with Regional staff working as liaisons to Tribes.
- Initiate consultation with American Indian Tribes on a government-to-government basis.
- Provide quality guidance to leadership on Indian issues, i.e., conservation, cultural, environments, policies, and politics.

Weakness of Work Group

- Member's dedication can cause different degrees of participation.
- Lack of regular participation by the national program manager.

Upcoming Opportunities for Work Group

- Group is a working proto-type for other regions across the country.
- Opportunity to help other Tribes, whether in our region or not, to have the relationship we share in our region.
- Good experience for what it takes to work successfully with Tribes.
- Good exposure to program delivery for Tribes.
- Successful projects will add to our validity as a work group.
- Bi-Annual American Indian Program Delivery Initiative Meetings.
- Increase Tribal leadership involvement at NRCS state, regional and national level.
- Possibility for more Tribes to become involved.
- Effectively promote partnerships between Tribes and NRCS.
- Build strong partnerships with NRCS and Tribes based on conservation of natural resources.
- Expansion of partnership to include sister agencies.

Threats to the Work Group

- Need for increased NRCS management support.
- Increased number of members from expanding the East Region Work Group.
- Lack of support from some states.
- Loss of funding and budget cuts.

Action Plan Summary

The Southeast American Indian Workgroup is proud of the accomplishments that have been made within Indian Country in the Southeast. While these accomplishments have been a huge step in the right direction, it is the goal of our workgroup to continue to see NRCS, Tribes, and American Indian individuals reach new heights as we work together to protect, maintain, and enhance our natural resources.

We as a work group hope this document provides a history of where we have been and a guide to where we want to be with our activities in the Southeast Region.

The plan was approved by the Southeast American Indian Work Group on May 21, 2008.



CLIFF EADDY
SEAIW Chair



GARY KOBYLSKI
SEAIW Champion

The plan was updated by the Southeast American Indian Workgroup on April 22, 2010. All previous versions are obsolete.



JOHN HARPER
SEAIWG Chair



DR. WILLIAM PUCKETT
SEAIWG Champion

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