

Case Study:

Pikuni Cooperative: Preserving Tradition through Cooperation

The Pikuni Cooperative, located on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana, is revitalizing Blackfeet lifeways to provide traditional medicine to the community while supporting new farmers and entrepreneurs. As a multi-stakeholder cooperative, members of the Blackfeet Nation can join the cooperative at different levels of membership—as producers, bulk purchasers, and consumers. While the cooperative is currently focusing on tea producers, it looks to expand into organic food in the future. Pikuni Cooperative is advancing the Blackfeet Nation in the direction of food sovereignty by producing culturally appropriate products through ecologically sustainable methods.



Organization's Name:

Pikuni Cooperative

Contact Information:

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O'yo'p' Food Bank Office: 406-338-7340

Website:

www.fastblackfeet.org

Services Offered:

Shared storage space for tea producers, shared marketing for tea producers, wholesale tea prices for grocery stores, a shared retail space and café for consumers

Value Proposition:

Native crops grown in the area will be made available for teas. All products will be sourced locally and collected in a traditional method using culturally appropriate harvesting and sustainability practices. Blackfeet traditions will be preserved and handed down to future generations.

Status:

The cooperative is in the process of drafting bylaws as of September 2022 and is hoping to fully incorporate by the end of 2022.

Other Information:

1) Impetus for the business:

Early during the COVID-19 pandemic, FAST Blackfeet (Food Access Sustainability Team) realized that they could not provide tea at their food pantry despite community members requesting it, and that community members could not afford to buy tea at the high prices commonly found on reservations. Through an incubator growing program, FAST identified a significant community interest in not only growing and selling tea, but reconnecting to Blackfeet traditional practices of growing, harvesting, and foraging native plants.

2) Business structure and justification:

The Pikuni Cooperative will be a multi-stakeholder cooperative, with at least three tiers of membership. The first tier will be the tea producers, the second members who wish to purchase the tea wholesale, and the third consumers of the tea. FAST Blackfeet also hopes to add on a tearoom for consumers.

The multi-stakeholder structure allows the entire community to participate in the production, distribution, and consumption of the tea.

3) Development process:

FAST Blackfeet started the Growing Health Tea Project program in Winter of 2020 after not being able to provide tea to the O'yo'p' Food Pantry. The combination of food being prohibitively expensive on reservations and the rise in prices due to COVID-19 meant that community members could not access tea, a form of traditional Blackfeet medicine.

Members of the project grew yarrow, wild rose, peppermint, bergamot, elderberry, raspberry, and sage. They learned together how to farm as well as forage sustainably. After blending the teas, producers sold them to FAST Blackfeet to distribute in food pantry boxes. In 2022, the tea producers decided to form a cooperative to collectively store, market, and sell their teas.

As of September of 2022, the cooperative steering committee is working to define their membership and write their bylaws with the assistance of the Montana Cooperative Development Center.

4) Lessons learned:

In setting up their membership, the Pikuni Cooperative Steering Committee encountered a man asking if he could sell his traditional Navajo teas. After much consideration, the group decided that the Pikuni Cooperative would limit their membership to producers growing traditional Blackfeet tea within traditional Blackfeet territory. This encounter helped the steering committee refine their vision: to encourage traditions and lifeways traditional to the Blackfeet nation.