

Case Study:

Red Paint Creek Trading Post A Local Solution by the People It Serves

Red Paint Creek Trading Post, located on the Fort Belknap Reservation, is a nonprofit grocery and retail store serving the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre tribes, as well as surrounding community members. As Fort Belknap is classified as a food desert (an area with limited access to affordable, fresh, high-quality food), Red Paint is an extremely valuable addition to the community.



Organization's Name:

Red Paint Creek Trading Post, formed in 2017. Montana Secretary of State business entity #D118769.

Contact Information:

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Website:

No website. See Facebook page Red Paint Creek Trading Post

Services Offered:

In 2018, Red Paint opened as a not-for-profit grocery store in a building that previously housed a food bank. The grocery store also serves as a retail outlet that carries local artisan's products. The retail store operates within the grocery store. A greenhouse operation, apple orchard and community garden are also operated from the grocery store to enhance community access to local and fresh food products.

Value Proposition:

This is a grassroots organization started and developed by the Fort Belknap Tribe to serve primarily enrolled Assiniboine (Nakoda) and Gros Ventre (A'aninin) tribe members. Basic food staple items are available in the grocery store. Other items are also located in the store such as cleaning supplies, school supplies and convenience items. Gas and diesel fuel pumps are also located at the store, saving residents a 30-40 mile trip to Harlem or Malta for these services.



Status:

Since 2018, the grocery store is open Monday through Friday from 3-7PM. The food bank that preceded the grocery store has been relocated as room for additional groceries, refrigeration and freezer space was needed to expand the grocery store operation.

Other Information:

Many tribal areas in the intermountain and northern plains region suffer from the lack of access to decent and affordable food. The Fort Belknap Indian Community has taken steps to reduce this problem by adding a grocery store in Lodge Pole. While many challenges still exist here, this is a positive step in the right direction.

Population served:

The combined enrollment of the Gros Ventre/A'aninin and Assiniboine/Nakoda Tribes is 4,000.

Other Information:

1) *Impetus for the business:*

To provide basic goods, fresh fruit, produce, and services to the surrounding population.

2) *Business structure and structure justification:*

It was easier initially to set up a not-for-profit through the Fort Belknap Tribal government. Eventually, it is the goal of the Tribal members to establish a cooperative. Tribal members are familiar with the cooperative business model as Big Flat Electric Cooperative provides power for local area residents.

3) *Development process:*

The Red Paint Creek Trading Post originated in 2017 with a formal adoption of cooperative bylaws under the guidance of the Montana Cooperative Development Center. The grocery store and food bank opened in 2018 using a grant from First Nations to build an add-on modular building. Unbeknownst to some members, Red Paint Creek Trading Post was initially incorporated as a foreign nonprofit under the Secretary of State in Montana and is now considered a not-for-profit entity by the State. Though Red Paint is governed like a cooperative, there are pros and cons to a conversion. Discussions between Red Paint and the Montana Cooperative Development Center are in progress and there is a general wish of the organization to add a cooperative commercial kitchen for incubation of food businesses and development of local food systems.

4) *Major challenges and setbacks:*

There are a small number of area residents who are reluctant to pay higher prices for the convenience of shopping at home. The high costs of product through Associated Grocers, who provide stock for the store, along with the high weekly minimum for restocking orders remain active concerns for the management of Red Paint Creek Trading Post. The tribally owned convenience store in nearby Hays purchases products from Red Paint and helps the grocery store maintain its weekly minimum.

As of September 2022, a current concern of Red Pain Creek Trading Post as they explore a cooperative kitchen incubator and program is the need for 3-Phase power. At this time, there are limitations on what expansion can occur to the site until further funding is available to expand electrical services. Through the Montana Cooperative Development Center, connections to Big Flat Electric cooperative have been made and discussions are underway on how to address this obstacle.

5) *Lessons learned:*

One of the biggest lessons learned from this project was the need to understand the Montana cooperative laws as related to Tribal laws. This project was the push that Montana Cooperative Development Center had to build their Indigenous Cooperative Program that led to the creation of the Indigenous Digital Library.

From the lessons on Red Paint, MCDC worked with the Native American Development Corporation and the University of Montana Margery Hunter Brown Indian Law Clinic to complete a legal review of tribal law and cooperatives (find this legal review on MCDC's Indigenous Digital Resource Library). That study then led to MCDC studying, developing partnerships and creating materials for two years to better serve the Native American populations of Montana.

Additional Resources:

USDA RD Rural Energy for America Program. The cooperative would like to expand into renewable energy as a geothermal heat source is nearby. Solar power, possibly a micro grid system, could also be deployed to help with inconsistent power delivery and help with self-sufficiency.

USDA RD Ag Marketing Services. Expansion of distribution would be helpful to tribal members making products available for sale beyond the reservation boundaries.