

Eastern Sierra Tribal Food Coalition: Improving Native American food systems

Katie Larsen

Summary

With the support of Toiyabe Indian Health Project as a backbone organization, the nine Paiute Shoshone tribes of the Eastern Sierra have joined together in a common mission to improve the local food system so that communities may know health and wellness. The Eastern Sierra Tribal Food Coalition is building joint policy, memorandums of understanding and a community conversation about the local and regional food system. This coalition believes that collaboration is the first step towards Native American food system sustainability and community health.

Challenge

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, obesity and chronic disease prevalence among Native Americans is at an all time high. In 2013, a CDC study found that 75.3% of California Native Americans were considered overweight/obese, having a BMI over 25.

With high rates of obesity, healthy food access and changes to how the Eastern Sierra Tribal communities support food systems is paramount and yet, organizing nine different tribal governments to support a common cause, establishing food system policies that create community wide paradigm shifts, appeared, until recently, to be a monumental task.



Your Involvement is Key

Being actively engaged in policy development and community collectives, provides people with the ability to influence their environments to be a place of health for all, at all times. Coalitions that bring all voices to the table, create stronger resource bonds and solve issues on many different levels. The Eastern Sierra Tribal Food Coalition is one such group, developing strategies to influence the regional food health and system.

Solution

With Toiyabe Indian Health Project acting as a backbone organization, nine Tribal community partners, local health professionals and community members were brought together to discuss the sustainability of policy and advocacy for health and healthy food access. During this discussion it was determined that all of the various food related projects occurring in the region, would only be sustained if all the different Tribes contributed to a collective, sharing policy, ideas, resources and goals. Through these talks the group formed a coalition united to look at a bigger, more regional picture, that would support the idea of building a collaborative regional food system.

Results

The Eastern Sierra Tribal Food Coalition (ESTFC) was established in May 2015 and quickly developed a mission, "To help implement a vibrant local food system that enhances the health of all residents, protects the earth, increases economic vitality, expands social connectedness and improves food security" and outlined objectives, bylaws and goals for coalition action.

Focusing primarily on joint resource acquisition and policy formation to create support for all community agriculture initiatives, the ESTFC has created a Memorandum of Understanding for all Tribal leaders to sign, furthering the support for community agriculture and its sustainability.

The coalition is one step closer to bridging the efforts that all Eastern Sierra Tribes undertake in building and sustaining a vibrant food

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"The food coalition is doing work that is unprecedented in our Tribal communities thus far. They're collaborating in many ways, to leverage resources and to build capacity to be a productive, sustainable coalition for years and decades to come."

- Kate Morley

Sustainable Success

With expertise training from organizations like Change Lab Solutions and The Community Initiative, the ESTFC members will become trained facilitators, able to guide local communities to create strategic plans, coalition sustenance and policy development around healthy food access. Continued support from Toiyabe Indian Health Project, will support present coalition members and work to build on the diversification of the coalition. Joint talks continue to consider the coalition growing into an organization of non-profit status, with the hopes that the coalition itself can become an agricultural and food access resource center for future projects in the Native American communities.