

IMPROVING COMMUNITY NUTRITION THROUGH
TRADITIONAL TOHONO O'ODHAM FOODS:
A COMMUNITY BASED HEALTH INTERVENTION STUDY

FINAL REPORT TO THE USDA ECONOMIC RESEARCH SERVICE
AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES/NATIVE PEOPLES TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE OFFICE
SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM
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Tohono O'odham Community Action
2005-2006 Grant Activities Assessment Report
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Community-Based Health Intervention Study

Project Status

- TOCA proposed to establish individual and family participant groups in an evaluative study of the effects of increased traditional foods consumption as a prevention and treatment strategy against diabetes among the Tohono O'odham. Our plan outlined a community-centered and culturally sound approach to research activities within a tribal community that was successful on an individual and institutional basis, but did not realistically anticipate tribal political concerns and contemporary strains on academic-tribal relations in Arizona due to recent events involving ASU.
- Despite these tensions, TOCA has been working to identify institutional and political partners and gain community support for proposed health intervention activities. TOCA has successfully established working relationships with Santa Rosa Boarding School and the Tohono O'odham Head Start Program as sites to engage in health intervention practices. TOCA is currently working to negotiate a contract with tribal officials and University of Arizona to initiate individual and family health intervention evaluation. The following summary presents a detailed assessment of TOCA's grant activities and concludes with a forecast for continued efforts.

Detailed Summary of Project Activities

- **Household Clinical Trials**—TOCA had proposed to recruit ten O'odham families as intensive intervention subjects who would illustrate the effects of consuming two servings of traditional Tohono O'odham foods per day through weight measurements, blood sugar monitoring and personal journal entries. Recruitment has been halted due to legitimate tribal concerns regarding personal privacy and the testing of biological fluids containing DNA data. TOCA is currently engaged in an intensive education campaign to alleviate tribal official's concerns about biological materials and TOCA's human subjects protocols involving blood draws. TOCA is also working in collaboration with members of the Tohono O'odham Executive Office and the University of Arizona Contracts Office to ensure safeguards against misuse of tribal biological materials and to impose culturally-sensitive research and evaluation practices.
- **Increased Production of Traditional Tohono O'odham Foods**—TOCA had proposed to increase foods production as a significant step in building the infrastructure for food systems change within the Tohono O'odham Community. In the past two years, TOCA has quadrupled its production and harvest of tepary beans, O'odham peas, O'odham squash, cholla buds, and saguaro fruit/syrup. This success assures the availability of traditional foods servings for household clinical trials once we have completed negotiations with tribal and U of A officials.
- **Increased Distribution of Traditional Tohono O'odham Foods**—TOCA has established markets and retail outlets for traditional foods outlets at all retail outlets on the Tohono O'odham Nation and in the only grocery store serving the Nation. TOCA has also contracted with the Tohono O'odham Senior Center, the Santa Rosa Boarding School, and the Tohono O'odham Head Start Program to provide traditional foods for their food services. At this point TOCA can confidently claim that traditional foods are commercially available to any consumer seeking them out. There are some barriers, however, in increasing markets for traditional foods; for instance, federal food programs do not consider traditional Tohono O'odham foods as part of their health standards and educational institutions must first meet federal standards before incorporating traditional Tohono O'odham foods; institutional cafeterias within the Nation are also not fully equipped for on-site food production, thereby limiting the amounts of traditional foods that can be prepared and consumed on-site; finally, federal food assistance programs do not include traditional Tohono O'odham foods and so economically dependent families must make difficult financial choices before purchasing traditional foods.
- **Increased Education Campaigns for Traditional Tohono O'odham Foods**—TOCA staff

have been very active in conducting educational workshops in local schools and community centers on the cultivation and harvesting of traditional foods, preparation of traditional foods, and nutritive benefits of traditional foods. TOCA staff maintain five community gardens throughout the Nation, visit the Santa Rosa Boarding School monthly to present culturally-based health and wellness education to students and their families, and conduct foods preparation demonstrations at local health fairs. As TOCA's reputation for such quality programming grows, contracting opportunities should also expand throughout the Nation.

Activities Forecast

- **Research and Evaluation Trials**—As noted above, TOCA is engaging in productive dialogue regarding the risks and benefits associated with diabetes research on the Nation rather than avoiding such discussions and abandoning the project altogether. The Tohono O'odham Executive Council is currently reviewing a draft proposal for Family and Community Health Intervention Strategies involving family trials drawing weight and blood data to determine the preventive and regulating effects of traditional foods on diabetes and other health risks. The proposal also builds on existing health and wellness awareness programming to encourage Tohono O'odham to increase healthy activities in a culturally-informed manner. The potential benefits of this study demand that TOCA continue to negotiate the concerns and needs of the Tohono O'odham—Executive Council included—so that these activities can be implemented as soon as possible.
- **Production of Tohono O'odham Foods**—TOCA anticipates that agricultural yields will sustain themselves at the current rate, which is adequately meeting current demand. In hopes of increased demand, however, TOCA is pushing for a long-term lease of farmland from the Tohono O'odham Executive Council and is seeking more sophisticated processing equipment to increase yield from current harvests. As we continue to use inefficient processing equipment, we are unable to carry full yield to market.
- **Distribution of Tohono O'odham Foods**—TOCA is currently working to assist local institutions in food policy formation and infrastructure development that will allow for increased incorporation of traditional foods in their food service systems. These advancements should increase traditional food consumption for Tohono O'odham children and elders who are served by institutional cafeterias. TOCA also continues to seek external markets for traditional foods and is expanding its traditional foods marketing in the gourmet food market. Being featured on the upcoming PBS series, "Seasoned With Spirit," should increase national exposure for TOCA's food label.
- **Educational Campaigns for Traditional Foods Awareness**—TOCA is seeking means to convert our educational programming into a source of contract income because of its success throughout the Nation. We are also working to step up physical fitness programming through a traditional Tohono O'odham Games League and will be preparing for the third annual O'odham Olympics this fall. Attendance at last years' Olympics increased three-fold from the first year and we anticipate continued interest and growth in attendance.