

## PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS & IMPACTS

### 252,000

healthier school breakfasts and lunches in just the first year of the pilot program.

### 700

school children have healthier school meals.

### \$300,000

Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) grant received to pilot a school food service enterprise

### 15

jobs to be created for residents of the Nation, including kitchen staff, farmers, and a food service director.



## Profile: Desert Rain Food Service, Tohono O'odham Nation



For the Tohono O'odham Tribe in southwestern and central Arizona, food is the foundation of health, culture, community, family, and economies. And, until the twentieth century, the Tohono O'odham Tribe had maintained food self-sufficiency using traditional agricultural practices. Now, less than 200 acres of food crops are produced on the Nation, and the 22,000 residents of the 4,600-square-mile reservation have access to only one supermarket.

Since 1996, the grassroots community organization [Tohono O'odham Community Action](#) (TOCA) has been dedicated to improving the health, cultural vitality, sustainability, and economic revitalization of the Tohono O'odham Nation. Beginning with its first community garden in 1996, TOCA has built a set of food system programs to support this culturally rich but economically poor Nation, where the unemployment rate remains above [60 percent](#), and the poverty rate is [41 percent](#). This is twice the unemployment and poverty rates for the state of Arizona and its counties.

The Nation is also experiencing a diabetes epidemic. Prior to the 1960s, Tohono O'odham adults had never suffered from type-2 diabetes. Now the Nation has the highest diabetes rate in the world, with more than 50 percent of O'odham adults suffering from the disease. Disturbingly, [76 percent](#) of O'odham middle schoolers are overweight or obese, a major factor contributing to the Nation's high childhood diabetes rate. This drastic



increase in chronic diseases occurred as the Tohono O’odham diet shifted away from traditionally farmed and desert-harvested foods to a more highly processed diet.

This fall, thanks to TOCA’s new school food enterprise, Desert Rain Food Services, 700 children on the Tohono O’odham Nation will be served healthier school food sourced from local farmers. TOCA received a \$300,000 [Healthy Food Financing Initiative \(HFFI\)](#) grant to pilot a school food service enterprise that supports healthier eating and a strong indigenous food economy. Desert Rain Food Services, will serve TOCA-designed menus featuring traditional ingredients like cholla buds and O’odham squash, and dishes like brown tepary bean quesadillas. Food will come from Native food gatherers who harvest wild foods, like prickley pear and mesquite bean pods, and from O’odham farmers who have completed TOCA’s beginning farmer training program.

TOCA's broad goal is to restore O'odham food sovereignty to create jobs, improve health, and reclaim Native food traditions. The Nation spends an estimated \$70 million annually in food expenditures, of which less than one percent is captured locally. Desert Rain Food Services will build the regional food economy by creating stable institutional markets for tribal food producers. TOCA hopes the pilot school food enterprise will demonstrate that it can compete for district-wide school food contracts within the O'odham Nation, currently valued at \$1.6 million and held by the multinational food services provider Sodexo.

Desert Rain Food Services intends to follow the successful example set by another TOCA food enterprise. The [Desert Rain Café](#), started in 2009, serves traditional O’odham foods in Sells, Arizona, next door to the Nation’s only supermarket. The café created seven full-time positions for tribal members, six of whom had previously been unemployed. With the new school food services enterprise, TOCA hopes to continue creating new jobs for community members, as well as improve existing cafeteria food service jobs. Post-pilot phase, TOCA intends to create 15 jobs for residents of the Nation, including kitchen staff, farmers, and a food service director.

School food service will serve as a good testing ground for TOCA's food sovereignty mission. "It's easy to do school food systems," said Tristan Reader, TOCA co-director. "You have very clear numbers and a steady market." The recipes TOCA developed were based on clear financial data about food and labor costs, enabling TOCA to design menus that fall within the federal reimbursement rate. Even with this data, HFFI financing is crucial to demonstrating proof of concept before scaling the enterprise to achieve economic stability. "Without HFFI funding, this would not be a project that is happening," Reader said.



For more information about the Healthy Food Access Portal, contact us at [info@healthyfoodaccess.org](mailto:info@healthyfoodaccess.org).