

# Report Overview

A movement exists in a growing number of Native American communities to develop projects that reclaim and revitalize Native agriculture and food systems in order to increase health, self-sufficiency, and the ecological integrity of the land. Tsyunhehkwa, a program of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin that specializes in growing and processing heirloom white flint corn, is an excellent example of this development. Currently Tsyunhehkwa consists of an organic farm, cannery, and retail store. Tsyunhehkwa wishes to assess the effectiveness of their current operations and capacity to increase production and processing, as well as involvement in the community. As such, this report seeks to: review Tsyunhehkwa's operations, particularly the cannery and farm; assess the program's capacity to increase production and processing of the Oneida White Flint Corn; and provide a summary of suggestions made by Tsyunhehkwa staff members, Oneida community members, and our research team to increase Tsyunhehkwa's effectiveness and strengthen community participation.

## **Program Description**

Section One explores and describes Tsyunhehkwa as a program within the tribal structure. As one of the Oneida programs focused on food and agriculture and the cultural arm of the Oneida Community Integrated Food Systems (OCIFS) program, Tsyunhehkwa operates under three tiers of guidance: Oneida Nation's general agricultural goals, OCIFS objectives, and Tsyunhehkwa's own mission and program standards. These are outlined to provide a background context of Tsyunhehkwa's organizational structure. Tsyunhehkwa is encouraged to prioritize education and increase production, processing, and marketing capacity over time, including that of white flint corn products. Many Tsyunhehkwa staff members see obtaining tribal food self-sufficiency as a major goal of their program services. More effectively incorporating this goal into Tsyunhehkwa's mission statement might better communicate the role of Tsyunhehkwa to the community and focus program actions.

## **The Farm**

After a brief overview of farm production, focusing on white flint corn and the services the farm provides to the community, Section Two offers a formula for a cost analysis of white flint corn production. A cost analysis is an important exercise to discover room for increasing efficiency, effectively freeing up financial resources for other areas of Tsyunhehkwa's operation. Additionally, after reviewing and summarizing maps provided by the Oneida Nation Geographic Land Information Systems office, optimal field-use suggestions are offered. Overall, seven plots consistently ranked well in the twelve criteria and are the best areas for cultivation. These are the plots numbered 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 11 on the map (see Figure 2.1). A discussion of common production perils experienced on the farm, including lack or abundance of water, corn smut, corn earworm, corn borer and thistle, follows. There are several farming practices that address more than one of the problematic issues on the farm. First, the current crop rotation may need to be altered: some plots should be set aside and three years should pass before corn is planted to reduce smut. Second, close monitoring and quick action is important to prevent on-farm problems from escalating. For example, precipitation should be

monitored and crops irrigated when low precipitation occurs. Finally, the stalks of the corn plants should be destroyed shortly after the Harvest Festival to reduce smut and corn borers. Concluding this section is a survey of issues that arise when considering production of beans on a larger scale, something in which Tsyunhehkwa farm has expressed recent interest, and would contribute to the processing of corn products such as the corn soups and cornbread. Due to a lack of commercial bean production in the area, additional research and experimentation are needed. Overall, it is important for farm staff to reach out to the numerous technical and advisory resources available, including the Oneida Nation Farm, extension agents at Wisconsin universities, Oneida Geographic Land Information Systems, as well as continued attendance at national and international conference training opportunities.

### **The Cannery**

Section Three describes the cannery and the processing of its white flint corn products (dehydrated corn, soups, and cornbread). The cannery faces the challenge of juggling its responsibilities to supervise community canning, educate the community through workshops, and commercially can products for Tsyunhehkwa and the Oneida Nation Farm. To address this issue, it is suggested that the cannery implement a more regular schedule where time is allotted for individual canning, as well as the requirement of advanced notice from the farm for large orders. Better communication between the farm and cannery will also allow for a more regular schedule and better products due to coordination of harvest time with the other responsibilities of the cannery. It is also suggested that the supervisor move to a solely managerial role and be able hire at least another part-time employee to assist in individual and commercial canning. Addressing the constraints on staff will help the cannery to meet the needs of the community in a more efficient manner. A need to update the facility and equipment for increased efficiency also exists. One suggestion is that the cannery first be moved to a larger and more convenient location followed by the upgrade of equipment as needed. A cost analysis is included to review the cannery's financial status and need for reducing input costs and increasing revenues. Finally, in an effort to increase its line of products to meet the need for increased revenue and varying tastes of community members, as well as promote increased food self-sufficiency, Tsyunhehkwa might consider the introduction of two new products: a "Three Sisters Soup" and a corn and bison meat soup.

### **Outreach and Education**

Section Four describes the outreach and education methods used by the cannery, farm, and retail store to educate and market to the Oneida community, as well as some of the current challenges. This section develops a framework for better conceptualizing and organizing outreach goals and strategies to encompass the three outreach needs of the program: raise awareness about community services, increase community participation at events, and increase awareness and purchase of products. A main issue is the decreased community participation in Tsyunhehkwa's activities, not only over the years, but also as a given year progresses. This presents a significant challenge since participation is necessary for the achievement of the program's goals. Suggested outreach techniques include: increased coordination between the three branches of Tsyunhehkwa with one staff member overseeing all outreach, a consistent definition of the target audience, and

building effective partnerships with other Oneida community organizations. Specifically, Tsyunhehkwa could work to strengthen their relationships with OCIFS, the Environmental Health and Safety Department, the Health Center, the tribal school, and the Elderly Services Department. The majority of the outreach techniques described are directed at the Oneida community, with some additional consideration for specific methods Tsyunhehkwa might use if it chooses to market its products off of the reservation. For example, unique labels, such as “Certified Organic,” “Made by American Indians,” or “Made by Oneida.” could effectively differentiate and promote Tsyunhehkwa’s products and raise awareness about environmental sustainability and food traditions of the Oneida.

### **Conclusion**

Lasting improvements in the community food system are likely to occur as the Oneida people increase their involvement in Tsyunhehkwa’s mission. Unfortunately, like many communities throughout the United States, there are significant challenges involved in people’s understanding and acceptance of the services offered by an “alternative” food system.

With this and other organizational challenges in mind, Tsyunhehkwa staff must work together to be more specific about their program goals so the community understands how they can invest themselves. If community self-sufficiency is a real goal and not merely an implicit aspect of their work, Tsyunhehkwa should address this in their mission. The staff should also have a clear and consistent understanding of the intended beneficiaries of each service they provide. Greater coordination and collaboration between Tsyunhehkwa and other tribal entities could strengthen the community and provide Tsyunhehkwa with more support in fulfilling its own objectives. Finally, increased record keeping and documentation by all three parts of the Tsyunhehkwa program could allow its staff to measure trends and evaluate their work so as to increase their efficiency and accountability to the community. A great amount of institutional knowledge exists within Tsyunhehkwa that could be captured by such documentation and used as a foundation to build upon as the program moves into the future.

Tsyunhehkwa is a leader in the grassroots effort towards food sovereignty, agro-ecological sustainability, and self-sufficiency. With their rich history and organizational foundation, they are poised to make even greater strides towards fulfilling their mission and objectives. Central to this is increasing their effective production and processing of white flint corn products and community outreach.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our research team would like to extend gratitude to the entire Tsyunhehkwa Staff (Jeff Metoxen, Jill Martus-Ninham, Carol Elm, Reann Skenandore, Jaime Betters, Diane Skenandore, Lee Lopez, Louis Williams Jr., Ted Skenandore, Kyle Wisneski, Mitch Skenandore, and Bonnie Stoneman) for their support in this endeavor. Their insights and ideas were essential to the construction of this report, and their generosity and kindness invaluable. Particular gratitude goes to Jeff Metoxen, Jill Martus-Ninham, and Carol Elm for the great deal of time and effort they spent to ensure this project's completion.

We also wish to thank other members of OCIFS who were integral to our research: Nori Damrow and Pat Cornelius. Considerable gratitude also goes to Bill Vervoort for his guidance from the inception of this project to its completion, and his liaison role in our communications with the tribe.

There were several individuals from other departments within the Oneida tribal structure that were instrumental to our work. These individuals include:

John Breuninger, Planning Department

Parker Plitz, Planning Department

Jennifer Hill-Kelly, Environmental Health and Safety Department

Jennifer Falk, Environmental Health and Safety Department

Tony Kuchma, Environmental Health and Safety

James Snitgen, Environmental Health and Safety

Michael Finney, Eco-Services Director of Oneida

Debbie Danforth, Health Department

Susan Beck, Health Department

Charles Eliot, Printing Department

Bill Doxtater, GLIS

Other Oneida community members who contributed significantly to the report with their knowledge of the Three Sisters, Oneida White Flint Corn, and the nutritional status of the Oneida community include Annette Cornelius, Mike Finn, and Diana Peterson. We thank them for their important input.

Our deepest appreciation also extends to those people who contributed technical information and macro-scale knowledge for background purposes. These individuals include:

Tony Busch, NRCS

Alan Dellapenna, Division of Environmental Health Services, HIS

Kevin Erb, UW Extension Environmental Resources Center

Jackie Tiller, First Nations Development Institute

Sarah Alexander, White Earth Land Recovery Project

Finally, we are grateful to Tufts Institute for the Environment for financially supporting this project. We would also like to thank Kathleen Merrigan, Director of the Agriculture, Food, and Environment program at Tufts University, who served as faculty advisor.