

Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID: Recovery and Resilience

Choctaw Fresh Produce

Tomas Delgado
National Farm to School Network

2023

[Choctaw Fresh Produce](#) (CFP) is a native-led, organic farming project centrally located in Mississippi's Neshoba County. Since 2012, CFP has challenged food inaccessibility and strengthened food sovereignty for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.

From the beginning, CFP has been committed to providing fresh, locally produced food to tribal institutions and businesses, and increasing access to nourishing local foods while providing economic development opportunities for tribal members who face staggering unemployment rates. Tomika Bell, the Local Food Manager for the organization, recounts shared that CFP's original vision for providing locally grown organic produce for the area's restaurants, resorts, and casinos, quickly transformed into providing an abundance of produce to markets and programs supporting tribal food security and access.

"Our drive is seeing our community together, eating together, and that alone keeps us going. We are providing food to tribal members, and through our food, we will sustain ourselves and hold our tribal identity" –Tomika Bell



Now, with more than five farms in Neshoba County, CFP has been sustained by dedicated community members who support the operation's transition to organic certification and expansion into new markets. Staffed by only four employees, CFP grows a range of produce on 5 acres ranging from cool-season crops and leafy summer greens to hearty root vegetables. While they do not focus on any particular agricultural process, CFP does practice organic farming methods, regenerative agriculture, and native agricultural traditions.

CFP's mission to provide nutrient-dense local produce for their tribal community has been recognized by local and regional media outlets, national nonprofits, and academic institutions including Intertribal Ag Council,

the Southern Poverty Law Center, Mississippi State University, Tuskegee University, and First Nations Development Institute. CFP's approach to growth and expansion has inspired other tribal communities who also want to address food insecurities within their respective areas. From the construction and utilization of earth ovens to the ability to identify local flora for food and medical purposes, efforts led by Tomika and the CFP community have centered on native food resilience.

"We now provide 10,000 lbs. of produce for more than 11,000 tribal members"
– Tomika Bell

The common threads through all of CFP's activity and mission are response, adaptation, and fortification of the Choctaw people's delicate food system. Before the COVID-19 disruption, CFP addressed exacerbated rates of food inaccessibility, food and agricultural education disparities, and the ongoing threat of losing connection with ancestral foodway practices of the Choctaw people.

In the face of these hardships, CFP's mission has been food sovereignty. CFP remains committed to doing what is best for their land and their community while expanding relationships with tribal and non-tribal farmers. That includes increasing food and agricultural access, community engagement, Choctaw foodway revitalization, strategic partnerships, and believing in the power of storytelling.

The success and resilience of CFP are attributed not only to the hard work and dedication of Tomika and her team, but also to the intentional and strategic partnership network CFP has cultivated. In addition to seeking diverse market channels—selling to schools, hospitals, casinos, grocers, and restaurants—Tomika approaches coalition building with the same careful deliberation. From several share-grant proposals with the Economic Development office for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians to tribal hospitals, Choctaw Fresh Produce's operation is sustained by strong cooperation among organizations, both tribally and non-tribally affiliated.

"I want our partnerships to grow and us to learn from other tribes about how they engage with their community"
– Tomika Bell



Thanks for reading!

This case study was created in fulfillment of a cooperative research agreement between the Marketing Services Division of the Agricultural Marketing Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA AMS), Colorado State University, and the University of Kentucky.

For more information and resources on Local and Regional Food Systems Response to COVID: Recovery and Resilience, visit www.lfscovis.localfoodeconomics.com.

Reviewed by: Cindy Ragin, U.S. Department of Agriculture – Agricultural Marketing Service

Special thanks to the following organization for contributing to this case study:



**United States
Department of
Agriculture**

The findings and conclusions in this innovation brief are those of the authors and should not be construed to represent any official USDA or U.S. Government determination or policy. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.