

# Ponca Tribe Experiences Quick Success in Agriculture Program

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One man's dream is becoming a reality as he leads a new agriculture program for the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma.

His goal? To have the Ponca people grow more of their own food — healthier food — to improve the lives of tribal members, to encourage young people to learn self-sufficiency, and to eventually expand the agricultural operation into profitable ventures.

Tribal member Amos Hinton, 46, says he always wondered why his fellow members of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma would lease allotments of tribal land to non-Indian farmers for "a few hundred dollars" each year when it could be better used to provide more value to the owners and to the tribe as a whole.

After tribal elections in December 2011 changed the make-up of the tribal business committee, Hinton took his ideas to the committee in February 2012. The committee gave the go-ahead and Hinton immediately went to work.

He consulted with business committee members, he consulted with the nutritionist and diabetes coordinator at the White Eagle Health Center and he consulted with grant technical consultants to determine a beginning course of action. Hinton decided to begin with two major initiatives.

The first initiative was to restore the tribe's historical Ponka Grey Corn, a blue-grey colored flour corn that the Ponca had grown in their traditional lands in and around Nebraska. Working with officials from the Great Platte River Road Archway, Tom Hoegemeyer, a Nebraska corn geneticist, Nebraska Department of Agriculture, Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs and the Intertribal Agricultural Council, hundreds of Ponka Grey Corn seeds were obtained and a crop planted near Kearney, Neb., in April 2012. Two interns from the Pawnee Tribe helped tend the crop.

The crop was a success and several hundred pounds of seed corn is now in the possession of the Ponca Tribe for planting near White Eagle the next growing season. Four other varieties of heirloom corn have been collected from other tribes and also will be grown.

The second initiative is to raise pigs as a much leaner source of protein than the fatty beef now consumed. Hinton says that the Ponca people for centuries ate lean buffalo and deer meat along with nutritious vegetables and other plants. However, the forced move to reservation life with white flour and a high-fat diet has led to high rates of diabetes among the Ponca people.

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When a former tribal grant writer said they couldn't help him write an agricultural grant proposal, Hinton wrote a proposal from scratch and submitted it to the First Nations Institute in Longmont, Colo., a technical assistance and grant referral source, which directed it to an appropriate corporate foundation. The grant proposal — the first Hinton had ever written — was approved almost immediately for \$25,000.

The grant funds were used to begin a pig breeding program. To date one pig has been processed, providing lean meat for 31 elders. Hinton says another pig will soon be processed and three others are being retained for breeding.

Tribal officials said a recent governmental grant audit review generated high praise from the examiners who reportedly stated that the Ponca agricultural program has made more progress in a few months than many other programs have accomplished in several years.

Hinton credits excellent technical advice and assistance from both the First Nations Institute and from the Intertribal Agricultural Council for greatly contributing to the early success.

Next up is the addition of three 24-foot by 16-foot hoop-framed greenhouses to be installed at three locations around White Eagle.

"These will extend the growing season by a month or two" for several crops, Hinton said.

Future plans may include chickens and other protein food sources, according to Hinton.

Ponca Tribe Business Committee Chairman Earl Howe III cites Hinton's initiative and passion for the fast startup and early positive results.

"The council is fully behind the agriculture program and will do what it takes to support it," Howe said.



AMOS HINTON displays a basket with different varieties of heirloom corn gathered from different tribes, including the Ponka Grey Corn at the top. At the far right is a sweet corn variety. (News Photo by Rolf Clements)



PONKA GREY CORN grows near Kearney, Neb. in June 2012. Note the efficient drip-line irrigation hoses (blue).



THE TASSLES of Ponka Grey Corn are seen in the spring in Kearney, Neb.



PONKA GREY CORN heads are shown in this provided photo.



THE PONCA TRIBE'S first pigs in the new agriculture program are inspected by Amos Hinton.