

## Agriculture: Investing in Sovereignty

Thank you for the \$100,000 Community Agriculture Grant. I know exactly how I will put this grant to use at Akwesasne. I plan to implement a project called, “The Return of the Three Sisters”, which refers to the traditional Haudenosaunee planting system that our ancestors used for centuries long before we walked Mother Earth. The Three Sisters consists of corn, beans, and squash. Our ancestors knew that these three plants easily grow in a single garden. In addition, The Three Sisters, provide all the nutritional values that a Haudenosaunee person needs to survive.

The basis for this project comes from several grave issues that affect Akwesasne. The first is obesity, which can lead to diabetes and heart disease. This is a serious matter which affects all levels of the community. A primary factor is the colonized diet that Akwesasne has been forced to adopt. The second issue is food sovereignty, which is a large issue among all native communities. Food sovereignty is the movement towards self-sustainability of food products and a return to foods found in our traditional diet. Growing a garden helps to tighten the circle of consumption, reducing our reliance on mass-produced food and corporate farms.

The third issue is helping people find a renewed connection to the land, culture, and continue the passing of traditional environmental knowledge (TEK). By providing each family with a garden they can renew their connection to the earth, learn the Kanien'ke:haka names of plants and animals, and understand why certain plants grow how they do and how it relates to our culture. While each of these factors are important, when considered together, they support the idea that the Return of the Three Sisters would be deeply beneficial to the community of Akwesasne.

Allow me to provide you an example of how the Return of the Three Sisters would work. Working with the Diabetes Center, we would identify families that would benefit and dedicate time to a garden on their property. We would go to their home and use a tiller to prepare a 700 square foot garden, which should provide food for a family of five. The most difficult part of gardening is maintaining the garden. Therefore, this would be facilitated through the hiring of workers who would make weekly visits in order to help care for and manage the garden, all while educating the owners. The weekly visit might include planting, watering, picking weeds, and harvesting. Workers would also help identify bugs and local animals that get into the garden.

The weekly visit could also include TEK about how the garden interacts with the environment and ceremonies in the Longhouse. It would provide Kanien'ke:haka people a chance to think about their connection to the land through the garden. We would encourage people to give thanks to the Creator for providing us with this food. We would also encourage Kanien'ke:haka language in the garden, such as names of plants and vegetables, names and places, animals who are in the garden, and oral history of the area or stories related to planting. Therefore, a secondary benefit of the garden is that Kanien'ke:haka people will feel an increased connection to the land and develop a greater sense of stewardship.

It is important that any actions taken in the garden be chemical free, organic, non-GMO, and in harmony with the surrounding nature. Our goal is to exist within the environment, which is why we encourage planting the Three Sisters. By existing within the environment, we are also hoping to close the food cycle and reduce our dependence on corporate farms that do not care about the land but exist purely for

profit. Finally, corn, beans, and squash are part of our traditional diet. Returning to a traditional diet would help to decrease dependence on cheaply made fast foods which are high in calories and chemicals but low in nutrition.

We would encourage all families to donate their excess crops to a community farmer's market stall. The profits made from the stall would be used to support further growth of the Return of the Three Sisters gardens. This directly correlates to our belief in "One Dish, One Spoon". This principle promotes the idea of taking only what you need and giving back to Mother Earth. By asking the gardeners to only take what they need and give the rest to the community farmer's market stall we are encouraging unity and cultural values as a community.

During the first year of the grant we may not reach that many families. However, over time, we hope that the success of the first few gardens will help encourage other families to participate and join the Return of the Three Sisters and grow their own garden. Also, we would work with the Diabetes Center to monitor those families that have a garden to see if their diet has improved as they eat fresh garden food.

Upon success of this program at Akwesasne, I would like to work with other nations and communities within the Haudenosaunee to replicate our program. I would also like to include universities and post-secondary programs within the traditional territories of the Haudenosaunee to include their participation. For example, Cornell University College of Agriculture and the American Indian Indigenous Studies Program, Syracuse University, and SUNY ESF students could grow their own gardens and maintain their indigenous identity while on campus.

Other benefits of the program would include job growth within the community. The grant would be used to hire workers with modern knowledge of planting and machinery as well as people who have language and TEK skills. Therefore, we would be hiring workers with varied skill sets. This would increase the overall employment rate of Akwesasne and the communities that follow. The message this sends to the community is that we value Kanien'ke:haka that pursue an education in STEM, and value Kanien'ke:haka who are the keepers of TEK.

With regards to professional development, the families to receive a garden and go through several planting cycles will become enlightened in the knowledge of our ancestors. These families will receive deep and lasting knowledge of Kanien'ke:haka language and understanding of traditional customs and ceremonies they can pass on to their children.

In closing, niawen:kowa for investing \$100,000 in the community of Akwesasne and the Return of the Three Sisters garden project.