

Investing Where it Matters

As a tradition, our family attends the Window Rock Fair every year and personally, I think it's a must to visit the 4-H tent. It's a wonderful way to see a variety of livestock showcased in a way that's educational and informative. While perusing the exhibit, I was greeted by a little girl with a plaid long sleeve Wrangler shirt that had the famous 4-H emblem on the sleeve, complemented with boot cut blue jeans and dusty pink boots. "Hello, my name is Delilah! Would you be interested in hearing a presentation about bunnies?" She asked me, speaking as if it were rehearsed, and to that, I gave a nod. Within minutes, she had taken me to her booth and gone into detail about how to care for the small animals, why we benefit from having them, and the supplies needed to care for them. She did all of this while scruffing her black and white bunny named Max. Within the context of her presentation, I was enlightened to learn that Max was an American Fuzzy Lop. Some of this information I had known from my attendance in an Agriculture class, but the rest was completely new to me. After she had finished her presentation, she asked me if I had any questions, comments, or concerns. I thanked her for her insightful presentation and asked a few questions about her program and other interests. She was very articulate and engaging but I had one question and it wasn't for her to answer: Why don't we have more young people like Delilah invested in these types of programs?

Delilah was fortunate enough to come from a strong, established 4-H program that borders our reservation. Currently there are two such 4-H programs in border communities and considering that our reservation is 270,000 square miles in size both

programs would be needed to establish this proposed investment. Given the question posed coupled with the \$100,000 investment funds, an Agricultural Network Education Program (A.N.E.P) between more remote schools would be established with the larger 4-H programs acting as central liaisons offering opportunities to incorporate livestock and food systems education that are not only regenerative but also offer the opportunity for youth in remote communities to showcase how education, though networking can help to open avenues to seeing the world of agriculture in a more global, impactful way.

The proposed Agricultural Educational Networking Program would include four remote reservation schools divided between the two larger liaison 4-H programs on the border communities. Each remote school would receive a grant of \$10,000 each and the liaison schools would receive a \$15,000 grant. The remaining \$30,000 would be used as follows: \$15,000 for establishing a cyber classroom network between the schools, \$12,000 for an in depth, comprehensive agricultural fair that brings other resources that will help spark more options to enhance the proposed programs and the remaining \$3,000 could be set aside for advertising and funding of interactive workshops for the participants.

First, the four remote schools would receive \$10,000 each: With this grant fund, they could choose an agricultural based project that meets the needs of their respective community. For example, the designated program could utilize an agricultural resource that is readily available and coveted within our tribe: sheep herding. Within the given example: the understanding of caring for the animals, the skill of proper wool shearing and the process of “sheep to loom” concepts. Using this example, there are many

options for expanding the learning to grazing, sheep to table (butchering), animal anatomy, meat production, cooking skills and the undertaking of creating a traditional rug.

Second, the liaison schools with an established 4-H programs will receive a grant of \$15,000 to direct workshops for their remote schools. This allows them to maintain the proper supplies needed to conduct a variety of educational activities with the remote schools and to help enhance the quality of the A.N.E.P.

Next, \$15,000 would be designated to pursue cyber classes for the students. The schools are equipped with laptops or computers that students can access. The money would be used to compliment the workstations/classrooms already available by setting up a strong, reliable internet connection between the schools and by the establishment of VPNS, Skype accounts, virtual classrooms or other methods school's see fit for a clean and clear connection. The cyber classrooms can be used to reach other schools for networking purposes between youth. This allows for an inexpensive way students can collaborate with other agricultural programs like FFA, United States Department of Agriculture, Native American Business Institute and local cultural centers that would strengthen the program.

With \$15,000 remaining: \$12,000 would be used for the establishment of a comprehensive, interactive Agricultural Exposition that would bring together resources programs and \$3000 would be used for advertising. This expo would consist of schools, nonprofits and other community based projects that will involve youth. It would include tribal, local, state and federal organizations as well. This gives everyone an opportunity

to browse a selection of current innovations, new ideas and plans that would best suit their youth based programs. An expo of this caliber can be a useful tool to impact parents and youth to join these programs. Although the initial \$100,000 investment would be primarily designated to only six schools, a major tribal Agricultural Expo will link together other schools and communities to available resources. The Agricultural Network Education Program established with the originating schools would be heavily featured at the expo as a blueprint of truly investing in our youth and how to reach youth who may not have known or been given a chance to find an opportunity like Delilah.

What does the future of agriculture gain by investing in youth? Today's youth are the people who will dictate what will happen with our food systems and agricultural affairs in years to come. If our goal is to invest in our future and assist in making sure we have a healthy economy that includes agriculture, then we have to start by impacting our youth now by providing creative and exciting educational options that serves to broaden their vantage point to a more global spectrum. A.N.E.P would do this first by offering the means for a smaller remote community to see that they are a part of a larger effort to strengthen regenerative and sustainable agriculture. It also gives the liaison schools/communities the mentorship opportunity to see that shared knowledge and communicative efforts brings us all closer together in this goal. But, this isn't the only benefit we have by investing into these youth, we also can intertwine our native culture and traditional foods into their teachings. We know there is no way to turn back time but we do have embedded in our beings as Native people our culture. We honor our ancestors and their way of agriculture where there were no GMOS or artificial flavorings.

We honor our ancestral ways of caring for livestock and other cultural traditions like “sheep to loom” concepts with weaving. Regenerative and sustainable agriculture must include the human element or it will never work. Investing in our youth is the first step because that investment is not only the financial aspects of monetary funds, it's the spark of creativity, education, shared cultural knowledge and programs that regenerate and sustain this spark.

Imagine a world with 100 more Delilahs, or maybe even 300. All we have to do is take that first step of listening to that little girl's presentation about bunnies.

Works Cited:

“H Hands-On Learning & Education Programs for Kids.” 4, <https://4-h.org/>.

“ Native Americans In Philanthropy “ <https://nativephilanthropy.org/non-profits/>

“ CyberSecurity “ <https://www.edx.org/learn/cybersecurity>

“ United States Department of Agriculture” <https://www.usda.gov/>