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PYRAMID LAKE PAIUTE RESERVATION AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES FOCUS GROUP SESSION RESULTS

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Introduction

During 2001, the Nevada Extension Indian Reservation Program (EIRP) held a series of focus group sessions with several Native American communities. The purpose of the sessions was to assist the tribes in identifying agricultural and natural resource needs/issues on their individual reservations. Funding was provided by the USDA Risk Management Agency. Findings from the focus group sessions were presented to more than 200 participants at the Nevada Indian Agriculture/Environmental Summit held at the Atlantis Resort Casino in Reno, Nevada in September 2001. A human research protection exemption was received from the university to publish the results.

One of these focus group sessions was held with the Pyramid Lake Indian reservation on June 4, 2001. Approximately 30 tribal members and 11 agency personnel attended the session. Agencies represented included the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

The focus group format was utilized because of its strengths related to (1) exploration and discovery, (2) context and depth, and (3) interpretations. Focus groups are frequently used to learn about either topics or groups of people that are poorly understood. Because the group itself can carry on a conversation about what interests its member, it is possible to start a conversation even when very little is known about the topic. Focus groups get at complex influences behind people's thoughts and

experiences. Focus groups also excel at interpretation-giving an understanding of why things are the way they are, how they got that way, and how they might be redirected if the group desires. The conversation centered upon strengths of the tribe's agriculture and natural resources, how agricultural production evolved on the reservation, how they would describe the agriculture/natural resource future they hoped for, what they would like to celebrate about agriculture/natural resource accomplishments in the future, and what they would have to do to bring about those accomplishments.

Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation

The Pyramid Lake Paiute Indian reservation is located 50 miles northeast of Reno, Nevada in Washoe County. There is a small portion of the reservation located in Lyon County. The reservation has a total of 476,728 acres of which Pyramid Lake occupies some 109,000 surface acres inside the boundary of the reservation and has a shoreline of about 125 miles. The lake is fed primarily by the Truckee River, has no outlet and is a residual body remaining from prehistoric Lake Lahontan.

The Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation was established on November 29, 1859 when a letter from the Indian Affairs Commissioner to Commissioner of the General Land Office concurred, for Indians in the Utah Territory, to reserve from sale and/or settlement a tract of land in the northern portion of the Truckee River Valley which included Pyramid Lake. The Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe has 1,979 members.

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Natural Resource Overview

Located in the high Nevada desert, the reservation has varying topography. There are about 366,600 acres devoted to livestock grazing and 1,093 acres of irrigated hay, pasture and forage. There are three principal communities within the reservation. These include Wadsworth, Sutcliffe and Nixon.

The reservation is famous as a fishery for Lahontan Cutthroat Trout and Cui-ui, which is on the endangered species list. Two fish hatcheries were constructed on the lake and along the Truckee River to replenish the fish supply and to maintain the supply for recreational fishing. The tribal government uses recreational permits as a means for yearly revenue to operate the fisheries. The fisheries employ approximately 25 people. The tribe also operates a smoke shop, marina, health center, Pyramid Lake High School and Natchez Elementary school.

The Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe is currently exploring the feasibility of a power plant on the reservation and also a possible casino on the lake for future economic development. The tribe was involved in a settlement of water rights on the Truckee River, which in turn affected tribal farmers and ranchers. The reservation is trying to balance such issues as economic development, natural resources, farming, ranching and protection of endangered species. There is also a need for additional land on the reservation.

History and Strengths

The common agriculture and natural resource strengths identified were related to water and rangeland. Agriculture on the reservation has evolved through the adoption and application of modern technology and a more developed water supply. Conditions 30 years ago were described as being very different from today. Thirty years ago the Tribe had more irrigated fields, no automobiles, better range conditions for their livestock, more cattle grazing on their rangeland, more precipitation, and no noxious weed infestations.

It was about 10 years ago when the first modern farming equipment was brought onto the reservation. At that time, the Tribe also acquired an additional 500 acres in the Wadsworth area. Through the use of new technologies such as laser leveling and the lining of irrigation canals with cement, irrigation efficiency has been greatly improved. However, an obstacle for tribal farmers is the fact that until recently, they have received no assistance from the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA).

Vision of Agriculture & Natural Resources

Focus group participants described the agriculture and natural resource future they want to create. Their vision identified a reservation with increased irrigation efficiency, more control over reservation water, improved range and livestock management, and youth programming in agriculture.

Irrigation Efficiency

Irrigation efficiency was identified as a problem. Water measuring devices on diversion and farm outlets need to be installed in order for farmers to document actual agricultural water use. Engineering and reconstruction of the main delivery canal for the reservation's irrigation system needs to be improved. An efficient irrigation scheduling system also needs to be created in cooperation with tribal farmers.

The tribal council needs to take the lead in carrying out these tasks after they have been presented at committee level meetings. The Tribe must also locate a source of financing. While UNCE and NRCS can provide technical and educational assistance related to irrigation efficiency, outside private companies will be needed to actually carry out construction tasks. The BIA can provide additional assistance in working with the tribe to improve the overall irrigation system.

Gain More Control of Water

There is also a desire for the tribe to have more control over water management on the reservation and assurances of full delivery of water right claims. Farmers, ranchers and tribal membership need to be better educated concerning tribal and producer water rights. Participants indicated that they were often unable to respond to water issues because of their lack of knowledge. The explanation of water rights on the reservation also needs to be initiated through a committee and approved by the tribal council. The tribe can then request agency support in the education process.

Range and Livestock Management

Enhanced range and livestock management requires the development and improvement of springs for water. In addition, there is a need to improve drift fences, well development, seeding and brush control while also reducing the number of mustangs from the grazing lands.

Livestock management on the reservation is another concern. Livestock producers need educational programming related to livestock marketing. This should be developed in coordination with the cattlemen's association. In addition to marketing education, other needs include record keeping, a bull management program, and proper livestock vaccination procedures. The marketing education could be initiated by the cattlemen's association with assistance from the UNCE.

More Land Assignment (Dodge Flats)

The tribe's land and resource committee needs to meet with the BIA and identify the required process that must be followed in order to provide tribal members with additional land assignments. The ordinance concerning land assignments must also be enforced for increased agriculture productivity and land use efficiency.

Small farmer financing options on assignment lands has been severely limited. There is a need to investigate alternative financing options that better meet tribal producer needs. The tribe needs to work with the FSA in exploring all possible options available to them.

Conclusion

The focus group session sought input from tribal members concerning their agricultural and natural resource needs. Individuals attending the session were asked questions relating to the strengths of the tribe's agricultural and natural resource base, how their agriculture has evolved over the years, and to describe desired future agricultural and natural resource conditions. They established goals and objectives to address the issues raised and drafted a plan of action.

Based on the results of the focus group session, the Pyramid Lake Paiute Indian Reservation's agricultural and natural resource needs and issues are coupled with a need for tribal membership to gain a better understanding of the water rights that have been allocated. In addition, there is a need to put in place a range management plan and livestock management practices.

There is an opportunity to develop joint efforts between the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, NRCS, UNCE and BIA to develop a comprehensive range and livestock management plan. As part of the tribe's comprehensive resource management plan, NRCS has recently completed a range inventory and GIS analysis of rangeland. This data will be used by the tribe to formulate alternatives and make decisions concerning their rangeland. The tribe and BIA will ultimately have the authority to set stocking rates and develop best management practices utilizing technical data and assistance provided by NRCS. UNCE has also committed to provide livestock management programs to the association. This joint effort between the agencies and the tribe will result in a profitable and sustainable agriculture operation on the reservation that protects and enhances reservation resources and empowers individuals to succeed.

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