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Duckwater Shoshone Indian Reservation Agriculture and Natural Resource 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 session was to assist the Tribes in identifying agriculture and natural resource needs/issues on their individual reservations. Funding was provided by the USDA Risk Management Agency. Findings from the focus group session 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 Duckwater Shoshone Tribe on May 24, 2001. Approximately 20 tribal members and agency personnel attended the session. Agencies represented included the University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE), Natural Resource and 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.

Duckwater Indian Reservation

The Duckwater Shoshone Indian reservation is located 72 miles southwest of Ely and about 40 miles southeast of Eureka. The Reservation is located in the east central portion of Nevada in Nye County and is made up of lands acquired by the United States Government that were formerly known as the "Florio Ranch." The reservation is home to approximately 150 residents out of 337 enrolled members. The principal land use within the reservation is agricultural. The Duckwater Indian Reservation consists of approximately 3,850 acres of tribal land. It was established by the Secretary of the Interior on November 13, 1940 by the authority of Section 5 of the Indian Reorganization Act. Three additional acts (i.e. June 28, 1941, December 22, 1943, January 27, 1955) also contributed to establishment of the reservation. The Duckwater Shoshone Tribe has exclusive jurisdiction over its lands and is a federally recognized self-governance tribe.

Natural Resources Overview

The elevation of the reservation is approximately 5,500 feet with the lower part of the valley around Duckwater Creek made up primarily of agricultural lands. Portions of the reservation are also used for grazing cattle and horses. Individuals on the reservation operate up to 120-acre allotments, which are planted mainly with grasses and alfalfa. Current land assignments utilize most of the available farmland.

The reservation has two primary population centers. One is the residential area, which consists of a residential subdivision along with some minor recreational facilities. The second area consists of the elementary school (Pre K– 8), health building, Senior Citizens Center and administrative offices.

The isolated rural reservation has a unique hydrogeologic system that is atypical of most arid climates. Throughout the reservation geothermal activity carries warm groundwater upward to form numerous hot springs, allowing it to flow/seep freely through the soil before it reaches the surface. The irrigation system begins at a natural spring and is pumped through a piped system to flood irrigate agriculture lands on the reservation. Groundwater is also pumped to supplement the piped irrigation system.

The Duckwater Tribe is contesting an issue of trespass with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) concerning the grazing land that the Tribe has used for decades. The Tribe previously made an application to incorporate an additional 5,000 acres of public land into the reservation for grazing. Duckwater is also one of many Western Shoshone Tribes currently involved in a land fight with the U.S. government over the 1863 Treaty of Ruby Valley, which involves ownership of Shoshone ancestral lands.

History and Strengths

The common strengths in agriculture and natural resources as identified by the focus group participants living on the Duckwater reservation include land, water, range, livestock, plants and people. Agriculture on the reservation has evolved through new technology and development of the reservation's resources.

The earliest farming on the reservation included free flowing water, called open irrigation, across reservation lands creating abundant wildlife habitats. Participants described conditions 30 years ago as having more water,

more wildlife, no electricity, no phones, no running water in homes, less people, and better range conditions. Participants also stated that there were less state and federal regulations than the Tribe faces today. The houses were initially built out of mud, rock and wood and the roadways were finally paved in 1951. Livestock and ranching were the primary activities with older equipment being used. Individuals lived off the land by hunting and gathering.

When describing conditions 10 years ago, participants mentioned the purchase of new equipment, a new school, more tribal owned equipment available for producers, and the installation of a new piped irrigation system. Also identified was the fact that there were fewer noxious weeds and less computerized technology.

Vision of Agriculture & Natural Resources

Focus group participants described the agriculture and natural resources future they want to create. Their vision identified a reservation with sustainable (profitable) agricultural production from range improvements, land expansion and the creation and implementation of a comprehensive natural resource plan. Also identified was the need for improved internal and external relationships with governmental and other public agencies.

Range Improvement and Sustainable Agriculture.

There is already an existing range management plan, which was done by Resource Concepts, Inc. in the 1980's. While this plan needs to be updated, it can hopefully serve as the basis for a self-governance agreement between the Duckwater Tribe and the BLM.

The development of a self-governance agreement will be lead by the Duckwater Shoshone Tribe in collaboration with the BIA and the BLM. NRCS and UNCE will offer education and extension expertise support of range management and monitoring practices. NRCS also has the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to assist financially (cost-share) in range development. UNCE can assist in the preparation of budgets and in calculating economic impacts.

Land Expansion and Local Control

To identify potential additional lands for reservation expansion, Duckwater Tribal leaders need to meet with other tribes in the state and with BLM to identify public lands that are designated by BLM as "disposable lands." These designated lands have the potential to increase the reservation land base. Additional information needs to

be gathered on the Lincoln County Lands Act and in support for legislation for reservation land expansion.

A land use plan needs to be developed for any lands identified for land expansion. In addition, the Duckwater Tribe should lobby its congressional delegation to advocate land expansion. Many letters of support for expansion should also be written. Senator Reid's office was specifically mentioned to receive letters from tribal members.

The land expansion process needs to be led by the Duckwater Tribal Council. The Tribal Council should be meticulous in carrying out all needed tasks. The BIA should be involved in educating the tribe on the appropriate processes and procedures to be carried out for land expansion.

Duckwater Comprehensive Natural Resource Plan

Natural resources on the reservation need to be identified and inventoried. The condition of the reservation's natural resources needs to be evaluated and recommendations made on the priorities and potential for natural resource improvements/development.

Once natural resources have been identified a natural resource plan needs to be developed and implemented by the tribe with the assistance of NRCS. Such things as fencing, grazing rotations, water development and weed management need to be addressed. While the principal agency involved would be NRCS, the process should be led by the Duckwater Tribe.

Conclusion

The focus group session sought input from tribal members concerning their agricultural and natural resources. 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. Participants 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 Duckwater Shoshone Indian Reservation's agriculture and natural resource needs and issues are dependent upon the Tribe obtaining a self-governance agreement with the BLM. Regardless of whether a self-governance agreement is put in place, there is definitely a need for range management and monitoring education and expertise on the reservation. The Tribe has requested that assistance be offered to train individuals in range management monitoring.

Reference:

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