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Walker River Paiute 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 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 Casino in Reno 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 at the Walker River Paiute Indian Reservation on April 26, 2001. Approximately 25 tribal members and 12 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 go 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.

Walker River Paiute Indian Reservation

The Walker River Paiute Indian Reservation is located 42 miles south of Fallon and 23 miles east of Yerington and is confined primarily within the boundaries of Mineral County. The reservation was established November 29, 1859 by a letter from the Indian Affairs Commissioner to the General Land Office requesting that land from sale or settlement, for Indian use, in the north eastern part of the Walker River Valley, including the Walker River Reservation and water rights be established from this date according to a court decree (Case No. C-125) handed down in 1940.

The constitution of the Walker River Paiute Tribe was finalized on March 26, 1937. The total number of tribal members in 1997 was 1,826 people with the majority of the population between 16 to 64 years of age. The majority of agriculture enterprises on the reservation are small and land is divided into 20-acre allotments.

Natural Resources Overview

An abundance of natural resources remain untapped on the reservation. These resources include farmland, minerals, wildlife, rangeland, water, and recreational uses. Due to insufficient irrigation infrastructure otherwise arable lands currently lay dormant. Although there is water flowing through the reservation and into Walker Lake, no additional state or federal water right allocations are available, thus limiting irrigated farmland development to the current 2,100 acres. However, with additional water, the reservation has the potential to develop an additional 8,000 acres.

Rangeland encompasses more than 50% of the reservation. Small ranching businesses strive to maintain economic profitability by managing livestock, primarily cattle. The rangelands designated for this purpose are composed of two vegetative / soil types. The first one consists primarily of sandy soils and sparse desert plant vegetation and the second includes alluvial fans near the mouth of Walker Lake that produces grasses and forbs.

While current water allocation amounts are sufficient to maintain the community, development of additional agricultural lands and possible future economic development activities are extremely limited. The Walker River flows through the reservation allowing for maximum recreational utilization, but is susceptible to pollution as it winds its way for 15 miles to Walker Lake.

The Walker River Paiute Tribe and the United States government are currently involved in litigation concerning the water rights for the reservation in the Walker River Basin. The tribe is seeking recognition of storage rights for Weber Reservoir and water rights for lands that were returned to the reservation in 1936. Currently water rights are allocated in the Walker River Basin through decree C-125.

History and Strengths

The common strengths in agriculture and natural resources identified by tribal members included water (quality and quantity), alfalfa, cattle, and land/range. Agriculture on the reservation has changed greatly over the years. The earliest farming on the reservation was family oriented and individuals worked together to farm 20 acre parcels divided into 4-5 smaller fields for irrigation. Historically the 20-acre allotment was an economically sustainable land base for a family. Today this is no longer true and there are currently fewer acres

under production. Insufficient irrigation water is also a limiting factor.

Agriculture, in the beginning on the Walker River reservation, was more of a priority as individuals produced much of their own food plus potatoes, sugar beets, alfalfa, and cattle. Agriculture products were bartered, sold or traded, and shipped on the railroad, as there was no other transportation available. Agriculture was viewed as a business and more socially oriented with less land being leased and the price of water being lower.

Individuals described the conditions of their natural resources and agriculture as very different from today. Agriculture production was different because there was no heavy equipment or cement. More water and storage capacity was provided by Weber Reservoir. There was a "Farmer in Charge" on the reservation that was identified as either an extension agent or water master. There were wetlands along the river and an abundant supply of waterfowl. Walker Lake was much higher than today. The rangeland had more forage and more water was available for their livestock.

Vision of Future Agriculture

Focus group participants described the agriculture and natural resources future they want to create. Their vision identified a reservation with sustainable agriculture that included clean abundant water, diversified crops, and improved irrigation facilities. In order to reach this vision the participants identified the following areas in need of improvement: water storage, irrigation efficiency (including technology), rangeland water development, water quality, and control of noxious weeds.

Water Storage

The tribe is currently hiring a contractor to complete an Environmental Impact Study (EIS) on Weber Reservoir. After completing the EIS the tribe will need to secure additional funding for the dam project due to inflation and the cost of the EIS. The next step would be to complete modification of Weber Dam with 13,000 acre-feet of storage. As a last step, individuals mentioned the recovery of the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout and the warm-water fishery. There currently is a group called the Walker Recovery and Implementation Team (WRIT) that is looking at different alternatives. Several agencies such as NRCS, Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), and BIA should be involved with water storage issues on the reservation. However, the tribe itself should be the major driving force.

Irrigation Efficiency and Technology

Irrigation efficiency and technology was identified as a very limiting factor for agricultural production. Farmers want the ability to be able to irrigate on time to raise their alfalfa and grass hay crops. While this is a problem, the tribe expressed the need to further explore the exact constraints and alternatives available to them. A request was made for assistance in water measurement (example: portable technology presented by Stewart Styles, Director of Irrigation Research Center, Cal Poly). Open communication is also needed between farmers and ditch riders concerning irrigation time frames while discussing techniques so that priorities can be identified. The three possible priorities mentioned were ditch lining, irrigation scheduling, and leveling of fields to improve efficiency. The last concern was funding options that are available to the farmers and the tribe to improve irrigation efficiency. The agencies listed that could provide assistance were UNCE, BIA, and NRCS.

Rangeland Water Development

While there are existing wells on the rangeland, there is no documentation or information on the wells that are currently being utilized. In their vision several agencies would be involved in seeding, fencing, and water development. The BIA would be held responsible for operating a "well sounder" to measure the depth of the existing wells and gather additional information. The BIA and the tribe will be responsible for working with the State of Nevada to create well logs. The cattlemen also felt that stock water development needed to be prioritized under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) of NRCS. Lastly, the cattlemen were interested in new technology, especially solar power technology. UNCE was identified as the organization best equipped to provide this service.

Water Quality

It was clear that clean and abundant water was needed to produce more profitable crops. The participants felt that upstream users on the Walker River should be held responsible for clean up of pollutants in the Walker River that reach the reservation. There was an identified concern regarding the Anaconda Mine site located outside the city of Yerington and near the Walker River. There was no agency support identified to help with this item.

Noxious Weeds

The reduction of the Tamarisk along the Walker River was the number one riparian weed concern cited along with reducing other noxious weeds such as Knapweed. The issue was not discussed in detail, but it was stated that noxious weeds were a problem. The agencies offering assistance would be UNCE, NRCS, BIA, and tribal leaders.

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. 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 Walker River Paiute Indian Reservation's agriculture and natural resource needs and issues are focused primarily around issues related to the quantity and quality of water available in the Walker River. Irrigation technology and efficiency are also important issues as well as the invasion of noxious weeds such as Tamarisk and Knapweed.

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