

White Earth hopes food truck puts reservation on road to better health

Dan Gunderson Mahnomen, Minn. July 27, 2018 1:49 PM



Kelly Pesch, 70, of Mahnomen, Minn., samples a "Green Machine" smoothie at the White Earth Band of Ojibwe food truck during the White Earth Community farmers market in Mahnomen, Minn. Pesch, a local businesswoman, is a regular at the weekly market. Ann Arbor Miller for MPR News

White Earth Nation dietician Diane McArthur regularly urges tribal members to eat their vegetables. She also knows the long distances to grocery stores across northern Minnesota can make that an impossible task for many.

That's why she's hopeful a new food truck — the first of its kind on a Minnesota reservation — will make a major difference shifting tribal members' diets, getting vegetables and other fresh foods to people in need.

White Earth bought the truck, once owned by [famed Sioux Chef Sean Sherman](#), with a \$40,000 grant from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture through a program that targets food deserts — regions where grocery stores with fresh, healthy options simply don't exist.

"Kind of the idea behind the truck was a mobile grocery store, and to move the grocery store around from town to town in White Earth where there's not a lot of access to locally produced, healthy, traditional foods," tribal food sovereignty coordinator Zachary Paige said on a recent day as the truck worked a small farmers market in Mahnomen, serving free smoothies.

The truck also cooks up bison burgers and serves traditional swamp tea at tribal events.

There are about a half-dozen vendors at the market selling fresh produce, canned jams and jellies, maple syrup, honey and baked goods. A steady stream of customers browse and buy while musicians play in the corner and White Earth Public Health hands out free food samples and recipes.

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Free berry smoothies and good company fuel a lively conversation among Jackie Durant, 18, of Mahnomen, Minn., (center left) her niece Alexis Rendon, 12, of Moorhead, Minn., (center right) LuAnn Durant of Mahnomen, (far left) and Brenda Schoenborn of Mahnomen at the White Earth Community farmers market. Ann Arbor Miller for MPR News

John Novitsky lives in Mahnomen and he's a regular at the farmers market.

"I'd rather buy that then go to the grocery store and buy something that's been shipped in from Mexico or Florida or something," he said. "You got more flavor, friendly people and help support the local economy."

Merlin Deegan stopped to pick up a few things at the market and check out the new food truck. He lives about 15 minutes away in the village of Ogema, Minn. Many villages just have a convenience store, and that makes bad diet choices easy, he said.



An assortment of ground cherries were available to sample at the White Earth Band of Ojibwe food truck during the White Earth Community farmers market.

Ann Arbor Miller for MPR News

them, we keep coming back."

There will be more choices as the White Earth Food truck travels to reservation villages in the summer with fresh produce and in the winter with other foods like squash, wild rice and preserves made from summer crops.



The White Earth Band of Ojibwe food truck, which was purchased with grant dollars, makes regular appearances at the weekly White Earth Community farmers market.

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"It's too easy. Way too easy, buy a pizza or whatever throw it in the microwave or the oven and there you go 20 minutes later, even five minutes later there you go," he said.

Poor eating habits tied to generations of limited access to fresh foods can lead to chronic long-term health problems.

McArthur works with diabetes patients and sees first hand the effects of a poor diet. Thirty percent of American Indians on the White Earth Reservation have type two diabetes. That's three times the national average.

"Some people are very receptive and they're ready to make a change, other people, no I eat what I want and that's the way it's going to be," she said. "So, part of it is deciding that you don't want eat those foods anymore. And then not having them in your house so when you get those cravings, 'Hey I can go get that because I don't have it.'"

Processed foods, she said, "are specifically made to tickle our taste buds, to hit that happy spot in our brains, and so we keep eating

White Earth is starting a farm and plans to have much more healthy food available next summer. Tribal officials are also working on a set of food regulations, so it will be easier for tribal members to collect and sell food that grows on the reservation.

Changing generations of eating habits won't be easy or quick, but it's a long-term commitment by the tribal government, said Eva Brakefield, who works for White Earth Public Health and helps run this farmers market.

"It's educate, educate, educate and re-educate and you know, just keep encouraging," she said. "Get the food out there, get the word out there and hopefully just help everyone gain the knowledge."