


# How Cherilyn Spears Moved Red Lake Nation to Food Sovereignty

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Cherilyn Spears grew up at the Red Lake Nation in north central Minnesota. An enrolled member of the Nation, she has early memories of her family practicing food sovereignty. “My parents and grandparents, aunts, uncles, and neighbors all had gardens. My parents had all

of us out there weeding and harvesting. I didn't think of it as food sovereignty — it was [just] what we did every summer. All my grandparents' grandkids spent a lot of time at their fish camp. We ate deer meat, fish, wild rice, and plenty of vegetables all year."

Then Spears moved to the Twin Cities to seek employment and attend college. "I tried to feed my kids healthy food, but with all the fast food available and the limited amount of time [I had] while working and going to college, I didn't always cook good food." After ten years in the city, she moved back to Red Lake to be close to family.



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Spears worked as the tribe’s project coordinator for economic development for nine years. In 2015, the tribe held a community engagement meeting. Questions raised included: “Why are we transporting food here when we have all this land [to grow it]?”

Spears was tasked by her supervisor to bring bison to the tribe and to grow hemp and food for the people. For Spears, it was like a dream come true; she had always envisioned a project like this.

In 2015, she began Red Lake’s food initiative, Gitigaanike, and in 2017 she moved on to oversee the building of two community centers.

But when the pandemic hit in 2020, Spears says Red Lake’s food system was “unprepared for it.” The foodshelf was distributing “TV dinners,” Spears says, which were filling, but not healthy.

Tribal leadership asked Spears if she could grow healthier food to feed Red Lake during the shutdown, and to quicken the timeline for becoming a food sovereign nation.

“We were fast tracked to become a food hub,” Spears says.

In 2020, Spears became director of agriculture for the Red Lake Nation.

As the food movement grew, so did the amount of grant money Spears was able to apply for. The program received three Native American Agriculture Fund grants to help build infrastructure and training capacity. A First Nations Development Institute grant allowed them to build an eight-foot-high fence surrounding their produce to protect it from wildlife. They received grants from the Inter-Tribal Buffalo Council to build and secure a 280-acre pasture with a six-foot-high fence. The Tribal Council also allocated money from the American Rescue Plan to purchase farming tools and commercial-grade kitchen equipment for the new community kitchen, to use for cooking classes and preserving vegetables.



Spears now oversees a farm manager, a bison manager, an agriculture coordinator, two harvesters, and several youth who work during the summer. The team does not use any herbicides or pesticides.



Photo Whitney Ru Photography LLC

The first bison arrived at Red Lake on September 2, 2020. The program currently provides meat to tribal members who want to try it for the first time, to tribal weddings, and to those who want to eat it for health benefits.

The bison herd is also helping restore the ecosystem. The area that is now the bison ranch was once a grazing pasture for cattle, who ate the grass to the ground. Now the pasture is home to an ecosystem of wildlife.

The Red Lake Food Initiative plan includes selling vegetables to casinos, schools, and stores to become financially sustainable.

Spears says, “We are starting an Elder Box program [delivering homegrown food to elders] and want to make our own baby food. We grow tomatoes and cukes for the school district’s salad bar. We donate fresh strawberries and produce to the extended care facility. We have donated bison roasts, burgers, and stew meat to various events. We fed 600 people at our



annual fair and powwow. For the first time in recent history, we had Red Lake bison, walleye, cultivated wild rice, hominy, brussel sprouts, and squash grown by local members served at the annual elder Christmas party.”



Photo Whitney Ru Photography LLC

The first year Red Lake attempted a large-scale garden, there was a severe drought and smoke from fires nearby. The next year saw lots of water in the spring, which gave them a short window to plant. In order to become resilient in the face of unpredictable weather challenges, Spears has plans to build a year-round grow house and tunnels.



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Spears is also leading the growth of agricultural hemp. The team originally planned on pressing oil from the seed of grain hemp for medicinal purposes and to feed the hemp cake to the bison. Now Red Lake produces hempcrete, a construction building material, from the stock. Spears envisions replacing plastic products the tribe uses, such as forks and spoons, with compostable products made of hemp. She also sees hemp as a way to clean the air and land.

“Hemp takes carbon from the air, and can clean soil of chemicals in a few years,” Spears explains. “This is really a good thing. We hope to grow the hemp and sell to other processors and keep some for ourselves to insulate our houses.”

Food sovereignty, as a Red Lake tribal and community effort, is alive and well under the direction of Cherilyn Spears.

