

SPOTLIGHT - Tsyunhehkw[^] Farm²²



Tsyunhehkw[^] (*joon-heh-kwa*, “life sustenance”) Farm was started on the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin in the 1950s, though its roots go back millennia.

“The Oneida are known as the first agriculturalists,” says Farm Supervisor Kyle Wisneski. “It is woven in our DNA to be connected to the ground. We lost a lot of old knowledge when the Oneida were forced to move from New York to Wisconsin.” Tsyunhehkw[^] is restoring that knowledge and the community’s traditional foods. It is best known for re-establishing high-protein Indigenous white corn, a traditional staple of the tribe’s diet that is made into over a dozen foods. White corn and other Oneida foods now grow not only at the farm but in more than 75 traditional gardens at people’s homes around the reservation as a result of the farm’s education programs.

Practices at Tsyunhehkw[^] include intensive rotational grazing with a Shorthorn cattle herd. “Although we don’t have the land base or animals, we are recreating the move of bison on the Great Plains, which created the richest soil in North America,” says Wisneski. “The closer we can mimic the bison roaming the prairies, even with cattle, the closer we can get to the Native ecosystem.”

Tsyunhehkw[^] has always been small in comparison to the Oneida Nation Farm, which grows conventional crops and beef, but it has been rapidly expanding, since Tsyunhehkw[^] staff were asked to remediate some land from a manure spill.

Wisneski outlines the process: “We put our cattle on it for the winter and put our native grasses on the 20 acres that were most affected. We let the environment do its thing. The recovery was amazing - we lowered the contamination from 100% to 7%.”

Since then, Tsyunhehkw[^] has recovered more acres that had been conventionally farmed; it is now stewarding over 400 acres. When they are asked to steward new land, Wisneski says, “We let the land rest for a year. The weeds that grow tell us everything we need to know – they show us the soil’s deficiencies.” They graze it in the second year, and then, “We plant sunflowers; when they’re 8-10”, we’ll throw a native grass in there to cover the ground. The sunflowers grow so fast that the grass doesn’t get more than half an inch to an inch tall all year, we’re just looking for cover. We do that for two years. At that point, the land is prime for food production or for our seed bank, that’s when we’ll get the best yield.”



Credit: Kyle Wisneski