

---

# After a Fraught History, Some Tribes Finally Have the Power to Rethink ‘Commodity Foods’

## Key vocabulary words

**Commodity (noun)** A raw material or primary agricultural product that can be bought and sold, such as grain, coffee, or oil.

*Example sentence: The price of commodities like oil and gold can fluctuate greatly.*

**Disparities (noun)** Inequalities or differences, especially in terms of social, economic, or health outcomes.

*Example sentence: There are significant disparities in access to healthcare between urban and rural areas.*

**Advocacy (noun)** Public support or recommendation of a particular cause or policy.

*Example sentence: She dedicated her life to advocacy for children’s rights.*

## Adapted reading passage

In 2020, Native festivities such as powwows were canceled because of the pandemic. However, a Yakama artist named Jon Shellenberger noticed that his t-shirts featuring old labels from cans of food were becoming popular. These labels reminded some Native people of the food from the U.S. government’s Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR). Many Native people grew up eating this food, which still provides food assistance to over 25 percent of Native Americans today. For some, the mostly canned goods—often called commodity foods—represented Native American culture.

However, some other artists, like Daniel McCoy, Jr. and John Hitchcock, saw commodity foods and the FDPIR program as symbols of an unfair relationship between Tribes and the U.S. government. They saw FDPIR’s commodity foods as a form of government control and a cause of health disparities, because the canned food isn’t as nutritious as fresh food and the program didn’t have the variety people need to stay healthy.

The FDPIR started in the 1970s as an alternative to the food stamp program for Native people living on rural reservations. In the past, the United States Department of Agriculture worked with companies to buy and package food specifically for the program. The Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975 allowed Tribes to operate government services for their own communities. A recent authorization under the 2018 Farm Bill allows Tribes to manage and buy food through the FDPIR program for their own communities. This is a big step towards recognizing Tribal sovereignty and the ability of Tribes to feed their own people.

---

## After a Fraught History, Some Tribes Finally Have the Power to Rethink ‘Commodity Foods’ *(Continued)*

Eight Tribes have been given contracts as part of the Self-Determination Demonstration Project, allowing them to choose and buy their own food from local and Tribally owned businesses. Tribes now have access to a wider variety of fresh and brand-name foods and can decide what foods are available through the program. These changes are supported by advocacy groups like the Indigenous Food and Agriculture Initiative and the National Association of Food Distribution Programs on Indian Reservations (NAFDPIR). Tribal initiatives like the Five Sandoval Indian Pueblos Food Distribution Program in New Mexico have seen the impact of this change firsthand, with fresh produce and frozen meats now available.

These changes to the FDPIR program could affect how Native American food activists view the program. Mary Greene-Trottier, president of NAFDPIR, emphasizes the importance of supporting Tribal communities while working towards changing the food system. While artists like Daniel McCoy, Jr. and John Hitchcock have criticized the program in the past, now there is an opportunity for Tribes to produce their own food and address the high poverty rates and lack of access to fresh food in Indian Country.

### Multiple choice questions

**According to the text, what is one change that has occurred in the FDPIR program?**

- a. Tribes now have more control over the types of food available through the program.
- b. The program no longer provides commodity foods.
- c. The program started in the 1970s.
- d. Over 25 percent of Native Americans receive federal food assistance through the program.

**What is the main purpose of the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975?**

- a. To provide fresh produce and frozen meats to Tribes.
- b. To allow Tribes to operate government services for their own communities.
- c. To buy and package food specifically for the FDPIR program.
- d. To support Tribal sovereignty and the ability of Tribes to feed their own people.

---

## After a Fraught History, Some Tribes Finally Have the Power to Rethink 'Commodity Foods' *(Continued)*

**Based on the text, what is one criticism of the FDPIR program?**

- a. It does not provide enough variety and brand-name foods.
- b. It does not allow Tribes to choose and buy their own food.
- c. It does not address the high poverty rates and lack of access to fresh food in Indian Country.
- d. It does not recognize Tribal sovereignty and the ability of Tribes to feed their own people.

### Short answer questions

1. What recent authorization allows Tribes to manage and buy food through the FDPIR program for their own communities?

2. How does the concept of Tribal sovereignty relate to your own understanding of government and power?