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Indians' Water Rights Give Hope for Better Health

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GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY, Ariz. — More than a hundred years ago, the Gila River, siphoned off by farmers upstream, all but dried up here in the parched flats south of Phoenix, plunging an Indian community that had depended on it for centuries of farming into starvation and poverty.

If that was not bad enough, food rations sent by the federal government — white flour, lard, canned meats and other sugary, processed foods — conspired with the genetic anomalies of the Indians to sow an [obesity](#) epidemic that has left the reservation with among the highest rates of [diabetes](#) in the world.

Now, after decades of litigation that produced the largest water-rights settlement ever in Indian country, the Indians here are getting some of their water back. And with it has come the question: Can a healthier lifestyle lost generations ago be restored?

Reviving the farming tradition will prove difficult, many tribal members say, because the tribes, who number 20,000, including about 12,000 on the reservation, have not farmed on a big scale for generations. Fast food is a powerful lure particularly for the young, and the trend of late has been to move off the reservation, to work or live.

“Nobody wants to get out and get dirt under their fingernails,” said Pancratious Harvey, one of a handful of tribal members who began a community garden a couple of years ago.

Still, the garden, which is filled with vegetables that were once staples in the tribe’s [diet](#), is a sign of enthusiasm for farming that members believe could spread as the water arrives.

On the reservation, the sound of earthmovers fills the air as workers repair dilapidated and abandoned irrigation canals and ditches and dig new ones to distribute billions of gallons of water that the community will soon be receiving.

The water settlement, involving the two principal tribes on the Gila River reservation — the Pima, who call themselves Akimel O’otham, or “river people,” and the Maricopa — as well as a related band, the Tohono O’odham Nation on the Mexican border, took effect this year, after being approved by Congress in 2004.

It will take several more years to complete the irrigation and related projects here, at a cost to the federal government of about \$680 million, but when done it will allow the community to double the amount of farming, both an economic and cultural boon.

For the time being, the community garden, with squash, beans and other vegetables is just over two acres. “We’re relearning how to grow them,” said Ed Mendoza, one of the founders of the garden, the Vah-Ki

Cooperative Garden. "People get sick with diabetes, they're obese, and there are heart attacks and stress because we eat an American diet now. Beans regulate the highs and lows of sugar. Okra makes you healthy. You can eat this food and feel the spirit immediately."

Elsewhere, several members are acquiring plots in hopes of growing traditional crops as well as more profitable ones like alfalfa. Gila River Farms, the largest tribal agriculture outfit, plans to double its farming, to some 35,000 acres, once the water begins flowing again.

Most of the water was diverted in the late 19th century, slowing the Gila River to a trickle. It was a startling turn of events for a tribe whose ancestors had thrived on the river for generations through an elaborate system of ditches and laterals, some of them still visible today.

The construction of the Coolidge Dam, completed in 1928, by the federal government was intended to restore some of the lost water, but the reservation never received enough to bring back farming in any big way. Later diversions also depleted the Salt River, which runs north of the reservation and helped support farming as well.

As the water disappeared and the Pima switched to government rations as their staple, obesity, [alcoholism](#) and diabetes exploded.

Where adult-onset diabetes was hardly present a century ago, it is now everywhere and has been the subject of decades of research by government scientists. More than half of the population over 25 has it, and a rising number of children are getting it.

Scientists have found the genetic makeup of the tribe leaves it predisposed to weight gain from sugary foods. That, coupled with the decline in activity from farming and the drop in the consumption of natural foods, probably explains the high rate of the disease, said Leonard Sanders, a diabetes specialist on the reservation.

He said the Pima's sister tribe in Mexico, which has kept up farming and eating off the land, has normal rates of the disease.

The Pima had long wanted the water back and by the late 1980s, buoyed by trends in water-rights laws and a new brand of reservation-born negotiators, serious talks began.

Water claims are usually complicated, hotly disputed affairs in the warm, dry West. Add in issues of Indian rights and sovereignty and it is perhaps not surprising that it took more than 30 years to reach the settlement.

It provides the reservation 653,500 acre-feet of water a year (an acre-foot is equivalent to about one family's water use annually) coming from a mix of sources, with the Central Arizona Project tapping the Colorado River providing the biggest share. It also includes the \$680 million to rebuild the irrigation system and to provide drainage, water monitoring and other benefits.

It may seem a staggering amount of water, but federal and state officials said the reservation might have gained much more had it prevailed in court. It had asked for two million acre-feet, for one thing, based in

part on documented use of the river going back to the 16th century.

"It wasn't a matter of if the tribes would win at trial," said Gregg Houtz, the lead lawyer for the state's Department of Water Resources in the settlement agreement. "It was a matter of how much."

A big reason for settling, federal and state officials said, was to provide all sides certainty and clarity over how much water they will have now and in the coming decades. The reservation had already received or been promised about two-thirds of the water in the settlement, but, Mr. Houtz said, the additional water makes the Gila River Indians major water brokers as they lease some of it to cities and could vault the tribe to the top of farming in the state as well.

The reservation has discussed farming some 150,000 acres, 40 percent of its 372,000 acres, but it is planning to avoid large housing developments.

Said Rodney B. Lewis, the community's former general counsel who helped negotiate the settlement, "we will be an island" amid suburban Phoenix's sea of subdivisions.

The Gila River itself will remain largely dry; the water from the settlement will be delivered and distributed through a system of culverts and canals.

And it will take much effort to reverse the legacy of poor health, though programs abound, intended for the young and the old, to combat diabetes. Medical officials are particularly alarmed at a rise in the rate of the disease among the young.

Georgina Charles, 74, a diabetes sufferer, attends a regular exercise class for the elderly and says she watches what she eats, but acknowledges that she and others find it difficult to ignore detrimental food. One recent night she prepared traditional fry bread for a community event, substituting vegetable oil for the usual lard but laughing at the obvious.

"It's not too good for us, but we eat it," Ms. Charles said.

Just a few miles away, the community gardeners adjusted hoses as the weekly delivery of water arrived and took stock of their crops. The water they use comes from an underground aquifer, but they are contemplating how they might tap into the settlement water and promote natural foods.

Schoolchildren visit the garden and some of its produce ends up on tables at community functions but, members said, more needs to be done to take full advantage of the water.

"When we lost that water, we lost generations of farming," said Janet Haskie, a community gardener. "Then people had the attitude like, 'They owe us. I'm going to take these rations.' So now we have to start over again, a little at a time."

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