

The Wâwiyiyaw

National Circle Newsletter For Indigenous Agriculture & Food
October 2025

NEWS

UPDATE

Honouring the Harvest: The Importance of Wild Rice for Indigenous Agriculture in Northern Saskatchewan

In September, the NCIAF had the privilege of visiting northern Saskatchewan during the height of the wild rice harvest. What we witnessed was more than an agricultural activity - it was the continuation of a tradition that sustains communities, economies, and cultures across the region.

Wild rice, or manoomin, has long been a cornerstone of food sovereignty for Indigenous peoples. Grown in the clean waters of northern lakes, it provides a nutritious, locally harvested food source while supporting livelihoods rooted in stewardship of the land and water. For many northern communities, wild rice production is not only a pathway to economic independence but also an affirmation of cultural resilience.

The NCIAF is proud to support this essential sector. By amplifying Indigenous-led agricultural initiatives, such as wild rice harvesting in northern Saskatchewan, we work to strengthen community-driven food systems that honour both tradition and innovation.



*Photo: Top L to R: Mikwan Mistickokat, Kelly-Jo Mistickokat;
Bottom L to R: Alexander Mistickokat, Donna Lafrenière.*

Our visit underscored how integral wild rice remains to Indigenous agriculture. It represents:

- **Food Security:** Wild rice is nutrient-rich and locally available, reducing reliance on external food systems.
- **Economic Opportunity:** Harvesting, processing, and selling wild rice creates meaningful employment and entrepreneurship in remote communities.
- **Cultural Continuity:** The practice of cultivating and harvesting wild rice ties generations together, preserving traditional knowledge and ecological care.
- **Sustainability:** Wild rice thrives in natural ecosystems without the need for heavy inputs, embodying principles of ecological balance.

The harvest we witnessed was not just about gathering grain—it was about cultivating hope, resilience, and sovereignty. Supporting Indigenous agriculture means ensuring that crops like wild rice continue to nourish both people and culture for generations to come.



Photo: A table with different types of corn.

From Soil to Spirit: Lessons from the Indigenous Farm and Food Festival

As representatives of the NCIAC, Kate Fraser, Director of Capacity Development, and Monique Desjarlais, ReconciliAG Specialist, participated in the 2nd Indigenous Farm and Food Festival which took place at the Dumont Lodge in Batoche, Saskatchewan. The Farm and Food Festival event was co-hosted by [ĕ kanātahk askiy Soil and Agroecosystem \(SAGE\) Project](#) through the Department of Soil Science at the University of Saskatchewan program and by the [Bridge to Land Water Sky living lab](#), to work with First Nations across the prairies to share knowledge about soil and agroecosystem health from both Indigenous and western science perspectives. This event was truly an immersive experience that left Kate and Monique deeply inspired, as the event-team's passion in highlighting the vast strength that exists in our food systems, our relationships, and our shared vision for the future of Indigenous agriculture reclamation in Canada, was thoughtfully integrated all throughout each aspect of the event. Over the three-day event, NCIAC staff witnessed firsthand how knowledge can be passed across generations, how innovation can stand alongside tradition, and how food connects us not only to the land, but also to one another.



Photo: Attendees of the 2nd Indigenous Farm and Food Festival prepare lunch over an open flame.

The event break-out sessions took place as interactive discovery sessions, which ranged from soil health demonstrations and buffalo caretaking to storytelling circles and farm tours. Each activity highlighted the resilience and ingenuity of Indigenous producers, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers who are revitalizing practices that sustain both community and environment. Supporting Indigenous agriculture means amplifying community voices, honouring traditional knowledge, and building bridges that empower youth and community members alike; and what stood out most was the way that the group of youth members who were in attendance, were included in every conversation; seen not just as learners but as future leaders who will carry forward the work of establishing food sovereignty and food security in their home communities.

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From Soil to Spirit: Lessons from the Indigenous Farm and Food Festival - Con't

It was empowering to listen firsthand, to the community members who shared their experiences, challenges, and aspirations. Conversations ranged from building and sustaining buffalo networks to expanding food forests as living models of food sovereignty, and to designing training pathways for the next generation of Indigenous farmers and food leaders. Each dialogue revealed the determination present in communities across turtle island, and the importance of having support systems in place that respond directly to those visions.

Another key takeaway Monique and Kate highlighted, we're the ways in which ceremony and cultural practice were woven throughout the festival. Beginning the gathering with prayer and a pipe ceremony set a tone of respect, grounding the festivals work in tradition, responsibility, and spiritual connection to the land. Equally meaningful was the closing experience of touring Muskeg Lake's Food Forest and Beneficial Management Practices site. This demonstration offered participants a tangible example of how culture, community leadership, and innovative approaches to land management and stewardship can come together to strengthen Canada's food sovereign and food secure future.

Kate and Monique carry forward the relationships and insights at the Farm and Food Festival with inspiration and optimism. The festival reinforced that Indigenous agriculture and food systems are not only central to community well-being, but also vital to the future of Canada's food landscape. By continuing to nurture relationships, share knowledge, and foster opportunities, the NCI AF hopes to walk alongside nations to contribute to a future where Indigenous food sovereignty thrives; nourishing people culturally, spiritually, and physically for generations to come.



Photo: A tomato plant.

New Podcast Episode: Summer Student Spotlight

The NCI AF is excited to share the newest episode of our podcast, hosted by our very own Communications Specialist, Justice Acoose. In this episode, we sit down with our summer students Tianna Peepeetch, Jordyn Lovas, and Michael Burechailo for an engaging conversation about their experiences working with the NCI AF and their perspectives on Indigenous food, agriculture, and community.

Throughout the discussion, our students share what they've learned during their time with us, their reflections on the importance of Indigenous voices in agriculture, and how this work has shaped their personal and professional goals. Their stories highlight the value of investing in young leaders and the future of food sovereignty.

[Tune in now](#) to hear their insights, laughs, and unique perspectives.

We're proud of the contributions Tianna, Jordyn, and Michael have made this summer, and we look forward to seeing the meaningful impact they will continue to have in their careers and communities.



Photo: Luke Dinan, an ally farmer working with the Ininew Friendship Centre, walking through a garden.

Northern Ontario Road Trip: Connecting with Indigenous Food Producers and Innovators

This September, Emily Nanne (NCIAF) and Lorraine Pitawanakwat (CareersNOW!) hit the road for a week-long trip across Northern Ontario. The goal? To connect with Indigenous food producers, processors, and community programs that are strengthening local food systems — and to spark conversations about careers in the food and beverage sector.

Through the NCIAF's partnership with CareersNOW! and Food and Beverage Ontario, we're working together to shine a light on the incredible diversity and innovation happening in Northern Ontario's agri-food space. Over the course of the trip, Emily and Lorraine made ten stops across the far Northeast — visiting community programs, businesses, entrepreneurs, social enterprises, academic institutions, innovation hubs, and economic development agencies — all playing a role in growing a more resilient, community-led food system.

Each stop was inspiring in its own way, but here are a few that capture the diversity of what's happening in far Northeastern Ontario's Indigenous Food System:

Grey Wolf Gardens & the Ininew Friendship Centre (Cochrane, ON)

Grey Wolf Gardens is a small but mighty farm run by first-generation farmers Luke Dinan and Eva Bonjour, who are passionate about growing food that nourishes both people and the planet. Their partnership with the Ininew Friendship Centre's "Let's Eat: Meechum" Program began in 2020, right as communities were feeling the strain of pandemic-related supply chain challenges. Together, they've built a thriving 4,000-square-foot garden that grows fresh, organic produce for Indigenous families in the area. Beyond food boxes, the collaboration has blossomed into something much deeper — a community-led effort to reconnect people with growing, harvesting, and sharing food.



Photo: Ininew Friendship Centre's "Let's Eat: Meechum" Program began in 2020

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Northern Ontario Road Trip: Connecting with Indigenous Food Producers and Innovators - Con't

Waxwing Commons (Timmins, ON)

Next up was Waxwing Commons, a Métis co-owned ecological farmstead that embodies what happens when traditional knowledge meets modern entrepreneurship. Owners Mike and Rachel started their journey by growing food to address their family's health concerns — and it evolved into a business producing farm-raised meats, healing salves made from traditional medicines, and their signature fire cider tonic. Their creativity doesn't stop there: Waxwing Commons has partnered with Mikro Tek to produce oyster mushroom logs, inoculated with a strain they collected from their own forest and sealed with beeswax rendered right on the farm. The team is now launching a collaborative retail store to showcase local and Indigenous-made products — a testament to how innovation and collaboration can take root in Northern Ontario.



Photo: Waxwing Commons owners, Mike (left) and Rachel (right).



Photo: A medicinal garden at Collège Boréal's First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Learners Centre.

Collège Boréal (Sudbury, ON)

Emily and Lorraine also toured Collège Boréal's commercial kitchens, which are in high demand by Indigenous communities looking to develop training programs and value-added food products that reflect local food sovereignty.

Collège Boréal is emerging as a leader in agri-food innovation, helping Northern producers scale up and create new opportunities in food processing and entrepreneurship.

We also met with the team at their First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Educational Centre, who shared how they're embedding Indigenous perspectives into programming and helping students build meaningful careers close to home.

From farms and friendship centres to innovation labs and colleges, this trip reminded us how vibrant and interconnected the Northern food system really is. Every community we visited is finding creative ways to grow, share, and sustain food — and people — in the North.

It's exactly the kind of work that shows why collaboration between the NCIAF, CareersNOW!, and Food and Beverage Ontario matters: together, we're helping build pathways for Indigenous youth and communities to take their place in shaping the future of food.

Meet Monique Desjarlais: Bringing Health, Healing, and Food Security to ReconciliAG

Monique Desjarlais, a member of the Muskowekwan First Nation in Treaty 4, serves as the ReconciliAG Specialist with the NCI AF. With a background in nursing and years of experience working alongside Indigenous communities, she brings a holistic perspective to her role. Her foundation in health sciences has deepened her understanding of the connections between food security, nutrition, and overall wellness—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Guided by this knowledge, Monique approaches food sovereignty as both a public health priority and an expression of Indigenous rights, emphasizing its role in healing, cultural reclamation, and intergenerational well-being.

Before joining the NCI AF, Monique supported Indigenous-led clean energy initiatives, where she strengthened her skills in stakeholder engagement, infrastructure planning, and partnership building—expertise she now applies at the intersection of food systems, climate action, and sustainable development. In her current role, she works with Indigenous Nations, agribusinesses, and community leaders to advance food system revitalization by reclaiming land-based knowledge, developing local food infrastructure, and improving access to resources, training, and policy advocacy. Grounded in a belief in self-determination and cultural continuity, Monique is committed to building strong, sustainable futures where Indigenous communities have the sovereignty, tools, and support to steward their lands, nourish their people, and lead with resilience.



Photo: Monique (right) and her younger cousin (left) in front of a group of tipis.

Can you share a bit about your background and what led you to your current role as Indigenous Engagement and Program Consultant with the NCI AF?

My journey into the work I do today has been shaped by both my professional background and my lived experiences working directly with Indigenous communities in ways that support the collective health, wellness, and long-term sustainability. My professional journey began in nursing, where I witnessed firsthand how deeply food security and nutrition impact physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Over time, I began to see food not only as nourishment but as medicine and a critical determinant of health for our people. This understanding, paired with my work supporting Indigenous-led clean energy initiatives, gave me a broader perspective on the interconnectedness of food systems, environmental stewardship, and community development. These experiences prepared me for my role with the NCI AF, where I now serve as the ReconciliAG Specialist. Food sovereignty is a pathway to healing, self-determination, and cultural continuity and this role gives me the chance to support Nations and Indigenous entrepreneurs in creating sustainable food systems that not only feed our people, but also heal, empower, and strengthen our communities.

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Meet Monique Desjarlais: Bringing Health, Healing, and Food Security to ReconciliAG

What inspired you to join the NCIAF?

What drew me most to the NCIAF was its vision, which recognizes food sovereignty as both an inherent right of Indigenous Peoples and a responsibility we hold collectively to care for the land, our food systems, and future generations. It does not separate food from identity, community, or wellness, but instead weaves these threads together through business development, training, and advocacy that are grounded in Indigenous knowledge and emphasize cultural revitalization. The NCIAF approaches this work holistically.

What also drew me to the NCIAF is its national scope and strong foundation in Indigenous-led governance. Working with communities across every province and territory, the NCIAF creates opportunities to learn from the diversity of Indigenous experiences and to support initiatives that are locally driven but connected through a shared vision. Being part of an Indigenous-led, national organization means that I can contribute to a movement that uplifts Indigenous voices at every level while at the same time respecting that each community carries its own unique priorities, histories, and strengths. For me, this is more than professional work; it is personal and rooted in the belief that food sovereignty is a pathway to intergenerational healing and strength.



Photo: Monique in a field.

What have you found to be the best part about working with the NCIAF so far?

The most rewarding part of my work has been walking alongside communities as they reclaim and revitalize local food systems. Every conversation with community leaders, Elders, and youth reminds me of the strength that exists within our Nations and the resilience of our foodways. One of the most meaningful aspects has been the opportunity to support youth. Young people are eager to reclaim traditional knowledge, explore careers in agriculture, and create innovative solutions to food security challenges. To see their excitement and leadership grow reminds me that this work is not only about today but about ensuring the longevity and sustainability of our Nations for the next generations to come.

I also find significant meaning in helping to bridge connections; whether that's linking communities to funding opportunities, supporting land-based learning programs, or creating space for youth to explore careers in agriculture and food. To me, these moments are powerful because they show that food sovereignty is about fostering intergenerational wellness, strengthening cultural identity, and empowering our people to lead in ways that honour both tradition and innovation. It is incredible to see how food sovereignty connects across sectors; from health to education, from clean energy to economic development. Every project becomes a reminder that food is at the heart of community well-being. Being part of the NCIAF allows me to contribute to this larger movement of community empowerment and self-determination.

Events We're Attending

Stay connected with us at events we are attending! We're excited to engage with communities and support Indigenous agriculture.

NL Young Farmers 2025 Leadership Summit- Oct 17-18, 2025

Location: Clarenville, NL

Arrell Food Summit - Oct 21, 2025

Location: Guelph, ON

Resolution Summit - Oct 27-28, 2025

Location: Vancouver, BC

Indigenous Ag Summit, presented by FCC - Nov 27-28, 2025

Location: Regina, SK

Events We're Sharing

While we won't be attending these events, we encourage you to explore opportunities to learn and network.

Weaving Knowledge: Indigenous Research Gathering - Oct 22, 2025

Location: Online

Royal Agricultural Winter Fair - Nov 7-16, 2025

Location: Toronto, ON

Indigenous Ag Summit

Tickets available now!

We are excited to welcome you back for the 12th Annual Indigenous Agriculture Summit (IAS), presented by FCC and co-hosted by the NCI AF, taking place November 2025 in Regina, Saskatchewan.

The IAS is a two-day conference dedicated to exploring opportunities in Indigenous agriculture and food. Each day, participants will gain knowledge, resources, and inspiration to strengthen food security, build community resilience, and foster sustainability through agriculture.

From small-scale to large-scale operations, the IAS offers valuable insights to spark new ideas and approaches that meet the diverse needs of Indigenous communities.

The program is designed to highlight shared successes, best practices, leadership development, and economic opportunities, while fostering meaningful connections across Nations and industries.

As an added benefit, your summit registration includes access to the wider Canadian Western Agribition grounds during the event.

Stay informed on updates and registration details here: [Indigenous Agriculture Summit](#)

Featured Quote

Here is our featured quote of the month:

“

We are proud to walk alongside NCI AF in amplifying Indigenous food stories, knowledge, and success. By collaborating and sharing video content and community stories, we're building a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences and empowering everyone to make more confident, informed food choices. Together, our work is rooted in respect, learning, and meaningful progress.

”

Dorothy Long

Managing Director, Canadian Food Focus

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Stay Informed



Please reach out to info@nciaf.ca if you would like to list an event.