

# Choctaw Fresh Produce Case Study



***“Choctaw Fresh Produce is helping link the Choctaw Tribe to our agricultural roots”.***

*- Gilbert Thompson, MBCI  
Natural Resources Director*

## **Overview**

Choctaw Fresh Produce is a certified-organic produce business owned by the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. The Mississippi Choctaw Reservation is scattered across 5 counties and includes 8 separate tribal communities. Each community is unique, and many are rural and remote. As such, 5 mini farms have been developed by Choctaw Fresh Produce to serve the distinct community needs in each area. The organization’s mission is to supply as much healthy, fresh produce to the Choctaw community as possible in a financially self-sustainable manner. The Certified Organic produce grown on their five mini farms is sold in local grocery stores, farmers markets, and through their Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program. Since starting in 2012, the aim of the farming operation was to improve the health of the Choctaw community while generating economic activity. Community Food Project funds allowed the tribe to improve their growing operation, which has increased production capacity and opened up new opportunities for sales, outreach, and education.

## **Community Food Project**

In 2015, the tribe utilized the funds to 1) install 3 high tunnels measuring 30' x 96' each; 2) install an irrigation system to supply water to the high tunnels; 3) hire a consultant to prepare the farm for compliance with Good Agricultural Practices (GAP); and 4) install a greenhouse to grow certified-organic transplants. The produce grown on the farms was sold through a CSA program, at farmers markets, to restaurants, to local schools, and 281 lbs. of surplus was donated to the Choctaw Elderly Program. Their programming also involved job training for disadvantaged farmers, farm tours for school children, and curriculum collaboration with local teachers.

## **Impact**

*“Diabetes and obesity are major problems in our community, so getting the kids involved early and helping them make the connection between food and health is very important.”*

*- John Hendrix, Choctaw Fresh Produce General Manager*

The installation of high tunnels has allowed the Choctaw Fresh Produce team to expand production while maintaining organic status, increasing the efficiency of harvesting, washing, and packing, thus maintaining product freshness even as the operation scales up.

Three of the five farms are located in close proximity to community schools and daycare centers. Over time, this proximity evolved into greater interaction between students and teachers and the commercial farming operations near them. Teachers have brought their students to the farm to learn about high tunnels, irrigation systems, and to try fresh food right out of the field. For example, in 2015, 5 student tours brought 283 Choctaw students to the farm to learn about their local food system and eat a meal using fresh produce grown right on the farm. During these interactions, students have the opportunity to learn how to grow food efficiently at a scale much larger than a typical school garden would allow. Providing students the opportunity to eat Certified Organic food right from the source is helping to increase healthy eating patterns throughout the community.

Partnerships have allowed for expanded impacts throughout the community, as well as benefits back to the farm. In 2015, multiple CSA subscriptions were provided to Choctaw Diabetes Prevention Program and Choctaw Social Services Program, as part of a pilot program to find creative ways to get more fresh, local produce into low-income tribal households. Choctaw Fresh Produce partnered with the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service to provide technical support, soil tests and disease identification, and the National Resource Conservation Service provided erosion control assistance, which can benefit the farm and community long-term. On-farm trainings have also been conducted to inform more than 250 rural, disadvantaged farmers about high-tunnel production methods and sustainable irrigation practices. Through such collaborations, Choctaw Fresh Produce is improving their community on all levels by reviving tribal self-sufficiency from within.

