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## **PRESS RELEASE**

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### **Fishy Business in Indian Country**

Minneapolis - Fish farming is fast emerging as one of the key development activities afoot across Indian country, but its often-disparate elements have yet to be widely recognized by tribes, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, foundations and the federal government. With this end in mind, a group of tribal aquaculturists and representatives from the Native food community convened on March 21-23<sup>rd</sup> in Minneapolis for the first Indigenous Aquaculture Network meeting. Activities are coordinated by the First Nations Development Institute and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

At this convening, participants discussed sustainable aquaculture development and the role it can play in Native communities. Talks from participants highlighted the diversity of aquaculture practiced by Indigenous Peoples.

Vivianne Barry, a biologist working for the Suquamish in Washington, told how the shellfish produced in the tribe's hatchery are used to seed beaches, providing food for ceremonies and revitalizing activities centered around the cultural practice of marine harvest. David Vanderhoop of the Wampanoag's highly successful shellfish operation on the island of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts fulfils a similar role while breaking new ground in the lucrative oyster market.

George Brooks, environmental scientist for the Gila River Indian Community of Arizona led a fascinating session on the tribe's efforts to incorporate aquaculture with agriculture; a situation made possible by return of the tribe's sovereign rights to water from the diverted Gila River. Conservation of water is paramount in this arid climate. Innovations employed by the tribe have made it possible to successfully raise tilapia and freshwater prawns in the same water used for crop irrigation, while revitalizing fish in the diet and re-establishing a historical connection to water.

Dick Hartmann and Barry Bassett of the St. Croix Tribal Fishery project, talked about their state of the art 170,000 square foot re-circulating system located in Danbury, Wisconsin, describing both the specifications of the facility, which rears yellow perch and hybrid striped bass, and the regulatory pitfalls they had encountered.

The diverse range of aquaculture practiced by participants revealed some common themes. One is that affirmation of treaty rights played an important role in the development of each operation. Another, that of institutional racism and general unfamiliarity with aquaculture have combined to

complicate the permitting and establishment of tribal aquaculture projects. When these barriers were overcome, aquaculture advanced in a sustainable fashion.

Fish has always been central to many North American indigenous cultures, and all the participants expressed a belief that aquaculture can not only contribute to tribal economic development, but also help tribes to reconnect with traditional food sources. The meeting also found that aquaculture has the capacity to rebuild these food systems and aid self-reliance. When practiced in a truly sustainable manner that conforms to community needs and local environments aquaculture can positively contribute as the above projects illustrated so well. Robert Shimek from the Indigenous Environmental Network, stressed the social elements involved in revitalizing Native food systems and diets including those involving fish.

All of the projects highlighted contained strong educational elements, and there was wide ranging discussion focused on using aquaculture as a tool to educate. The Pima-Maricopa Irrigation project in Arizona provided a shining example, having built a close relationship with tribal schools that culminated in sending four budding aquaculturalists to the finals of the national science fair in as many years.

Attention was also paid to attracting more tribal participation in the technical aspects of aquaculture itself, a move that would negate the need to employ outside consultants and managers to mediate between the tribal and scientific worlds, and promote a greater degree of independence for tribes. A note of caution was sounded by Paul Smith of Heifer International's Indian Nations Program, who stressed that a greater degree of education within Western based systems could also often equate to a greater degree of assimilation and loss of identity.

In sum, participants recommended the following items in terms of a strategic envisioning of how aquaculture development can unfold across diverse tribal landscapes:

- encourage tribal aquaculturists to participate in the World Aquaculture Society
- advise other tribes on the promises and pitfalls of aquaculture development
- conduct outreach by further developing mentoring programs, and working closely with Native Land Grant Colleges and other appropriate institutions
- investigate setting up bio-regional indigenous aquaculture demonstration projects
- establish an aquaculture presence at the next Native Food Summit
- build strategic planning and institutional capacity for sustainable aquaculture development

The conference was heralded both as an exciting “first of its kind”, and starting point for many promising new ventures, initiatives and the desire to move things from “paper to pond.”

For more details on the conference and Native Aquaculture, go to:  
<http://www.nativeaquaculture.org>.

*The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy promotes resilient family farms, rural communities and ecosystems around the world through research and education, science and technology, and advocacy.*