

Feeding People, Reviving Culture: A South Dakota Success Story



PHOTO: JENN ZELLER

For millennia, the grasslands-to-the-horizon roll of South Dakota's Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation gave sustenance to millions of buffalo. They grazed scattered across the landscape, or, during migration, streamed like a brown-black river over the prairie.

"Our history goes hand in hand with the buffalo," says Jayme Murray, a tribal member, sixth-generation cattle rancher, and CEO of Cheyenne River Buffalo Company. "They're part of our creation stories, and they provided everything for us. They were our economy for thousands and thousands of years." And when the buffalo faced ex-

tingtion, down to about 100 animals at their lowest point, "our people faced extinction right along with them."

These days, that connection between the buffalo and tribal members remains alive but weakened. As Jayme sees it, a central part of his job is strengthening that bond through food—meat from healthy, locally raised buffalo. Supporting that mission was the USDA Local Food Purchase Assistance Program (LFPA), which provided funds during 2023–2025 to purchase locally produced food and distribute that food to people who need it.

FEEDING COMMUNITIES AND REBUILDING CULTURAL CONNECTION THROUGH BUFFALO

The tribal-owned company that Jayme runs manages a buffalo herd of 2,500 head that swells to 3,500 after spring calving. The company butchers and processes the animals in its own processing plant. Much of the meat from the herd is distributed free to tribal families in the tiny, remote towns of the reservation that covers 4,267 square miles. The reservation has one of the highest rates of poverty in the nation, and one recent study reported an unemployment rate of over 80%.

"We applied for LFPA to get good food into people's homes," Jayme says. The program paid Cheyenne River Buffalo Company and others for the locally raised



PHOTO: JAYME MURRAY



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foods—which also included beef and produce—and the tribe distributed it to the reservation's 13 communities on a rotation, visiting each community once every three months.

LFPA was so valuable for the Cheyenne River Sioux because it brought about several important changes, not just one narrow outcome. The program created a market for local food in the rural community. It fed hungry people. It created jobs. And the buffalo meat in particular kindled community cohesion and cultural pride.



PHOTO: JAYME MURRAY

LOCAL INVESTMENT, JOBS, AND FOOD SOVEREIGNTY IN ACTION

Proceeds from the food purchases enabled Cheyenne River Buffalo Company to invest in a second store. The company's original store and processing plant are in Mobridge, which is off the reservation, but the new store will be near the center of the reservation, in Eagle Butte. The store will sell locally raised buffalo and beef, which is not available there currently. "We're turning that money back into our local economy, and that's very cool," Jayme says.

With just 12,000 residents spread across an area nearly the size of Connecticut, (Brooklyn has an equal number in one third of a square mile), the communities stand remote and spare on the vast plain. Their populations range from a few hundred people to around 10 families. During deliveries, the temperature might rise to over 100 degrees or drop to the single digits.

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We set up and then the people show up," Jayme says. Sometimes they are waiting in line. "They bring their laundry baskets or whatever they have available, and we fill them up with good, good, local food."



PHOTO: JAYME MURRAY

The single biggest day of distribution happened recently, following disruptions in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and Electronic Benefits Transfer funding, when the tribe distributed 20,000 pounds of meat in one day.

On distribution days, Jayme sees an encouraging happiness in the people. "I've gotten more hugs from grandmas at those deals. It just really leaves you with a good feeling," he says. And he sees that joy as evidence of the spiritual power of bringing buffalo back to his community and into more homes.

The faded connection between buffalo and his people resulted from relocation programs and residential schools that turned children against buffalo meat, Jayme believes. "Buffalo was taken out of our diets for a few generations," he says. As a result, elders are often more resistant to buffalo than younger people, who readily take it home. But more and more elders are reaching for packages of ground buffalo.

Jayme also sees the locally raised food distributions having spiritual value in a plain sense of human connection. When a program like this stops by a community, "it can break the monotony of poverty," he says. "I hope it gives people a new kind of view on their situation, that there are people out there who care, and this can be something that can pick somebody up and maybe help their lives, make their lives easier."

All the benefits of the local food purchasing program—the jobs, the business development, the nutritional value, the cultural connections, the spiritual lift—all tie to building food sovereignty, Jayme says.

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To me, that's what it's all about, us being able to raise the raw products and harvest them and give it back to our people.”

Food supply interruptions during COVID helped tribal members realize how dependent they were on long distance supply chains. "We thought, Why are we in this situation? You know, we have cattle, we have buffalo, we should be able to take care of ourselves."



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Interview with Jayme Murray, tribal member, sixth-generation cattle rancher, and CEO of Cheyenne River Buffalo Company

BY THE NUMBERS

In August of 2024, in partnership with the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Veterans Food Pantry, The Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Buffalo Authority Corporation began sourcing and distributing food through the LFPA program, generating the following impact:

\$3 million in local food sales

25 underserved community sites received local, healthy food

Children and households received nutritious, culturally relevant locally raised and processed buffalo meat

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