

First Nations National School Food Summit: *Growing Food Sovereignty*



Sommet national sur l'alimentation scolaire des Premières Nations : *Renforcer la souveraineté alimentaire*



May 27-28, 2026 • Les 27 et 28 mai 2026 • Wanuskewin Heritage Park • Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Agenda Descriptions

A Working Model of Universal School Food in Maskwacis, AB

Maskwacis Education Schools Commission (MESC)

9:45 am – Main Plenary: Beaver Deer Eagle Room

This session shares an overview of Nanâtohk Mîciwin, a comprehensive, community-driven universal school food program serving more than 2,300 students across ten schools in Maskwacis.

Brady Weiler (Director of Nanâtohk Mîciwin – MESC)

Brady is the Director of Nanâtohk Mîciwin Universal School Food Strategy in Maskwacis. Nanâtohk Mîciwin is responsible for providing nutrient-dense breakfast, lunch and snacks to more than 2300 students daily in 10 schools throughout the school year. Brady is in his seventh year with the organization. He came from the hospitality industry and brings decades of local and international experience in all levels of foodservice, logistics, training and management.

Vernon Sylvester (Food Sovereignty Facilitator – MESC)

Vernon is a long-time teacher, with a vast knowledge of Treaties and the land. He has a passion for indigenous food sovereignty and the teaching of traditional ways of respecting the land. And sharing the knowledge of Historic and culturally appropriate ways of harvesting and preparing the gifts from Mother Earth.

Advancing Indigenous Food Sovereignty Through School Food Programming: Learning from Indigenous Perspectives

Urban Indigenous Education Centre (Toronto District School Board & University of Toronto)

10:45 am – Main Plenary

This session presents ongoing work advancing Indigenous food sovereignty through school food programming led by the Urban Indigenous Education Centre (UIEC) at the Toronto District School Board, alongside emerging partnerships with University of Toronto entities. Founded by Tanya Senk in 2019 with Ontario Ministry of Education support, the Indigenous Food Sovereignty Program (IFSP) is one of the first of its kind within a publicly-funded school board in Ontario, demonstrating a strength-based, Indigenous-led approach grounded in community, culture, and relationship. Guided by the Elders Council, the UIEC/IFSP delivers culturally-centred programming across three schools, including the Indigenous-focused Kâpapâmachakwêw - Wandering Spirit School (K-12). Indigenous Food Sovereignty Chefs/Instructors at each site ensure Indigenous students have access to food prepared through Indigenous holistic perspectives on sustainability, the restoration of land-based curricular practices, and the

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protection and future of Indigenous food systems. This work is part of an ongoing journey of learning and transformation, including new collaborative opportunities for research, student engagement, and knowledge sharing grounded in Indigenous methodologies and principles. Participants will be invited into dialogue to reflect on how these promising practices can support and inform Indigenous school food programming across diverse contexts.

Tanya Senk (Director of Indigenous Initiatives and Indigenous House – University of Toronto Scarborough Campus; Chair of the Elders Council – Urban Indigenous Education Centre: Toronto District School Board)

Tanya Senk is a member of Cowessess First Nation, Treaty 4 and she is a highly respected educator and community leader. She is currently the Director of Indigenous Initiatives and Indigenous House at the University of Toronto Scarborough. She supports Indigenous education through her longstanding leadership in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), as the first and only Indigenous System Superintendent of Indigenous Education. She is now a Chair of the Elders Council of the Urban Indigenous Education Centre (UIEC) /TDSB. Tanya has played a foundational role in advancing Indigenous education through decades of her career. She led the UIEC and Kâpapâmachakwêw - Wandering Spirit School and founded the Indigenous Food Sovereignty Program as the first of its kind in the province in the system of public schooling. Her focus continues to be supporting Indigenous student well-being and success, and Indigenous land-based education, food sovereignty, language revitalizing and cultural resurgence.

Nicole Weber (Research Officer – University of Toronto, Joannah and Brian Lawson Centre for Child Nutrition)

Nicole Weber is a registered dietitian, public health researcher, and 3rd-generation French-German settler based at the Joannah and Brian Lawson Centre for Child Nutrition at the University of Toronto. She has contributed to national research initiatives with the Coalition for Healthy School Food, George Brown College, and the Lawson Centre, learning from and contributing to work informing Canada's emerging National School Food Program (SFP). Her current work is part of a collaborative partnership between the Urban Indigenous Education Centre at the Toronto District School Board, the UofT Scarborough Campus, and the Lawson Centre. This partnership supports Indigenous-led research that learns from promising practices of Indigenous-focused SFPs. Her work emphasizes culturally grounded approaches and seeks to strengthen food sovereignty for Indigenous students. She is committed to advancing Truth and Reconciliation through relational accountability and working in good ways with Indigenous partners and communities, guided by the principles of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility.

Nourishing Nations, Empowering Generations

National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture and Food (NCIAF)

11:30 am – Main Plenary



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Nourishing Nations, Empowering Generations is a community-driven First Nations school food program designed to strengthen food literacy, food security, and pathways toward Indigenous food sovereignty through early, hands-on learning. Led by the National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture & Food, the program integrates indoor hydroponic growing and seasonal soil-based gardening with locally guided Indigenous knowledge, cultural teachings, and land-based education.

This interactive session will share lessons from the development of a phased pilot to be implemented in First Nations communities in Saskatchewan, with relevance for diverse regional contexts across Canada. Using Slido for real-time audience participation, participants will be invited to share insights on community readiness, school infrastructure, cultural considerations, and program priorities. Polls and open-ended questions will help identify common opportunities and challenges facing First Nations school food initiatives, informing how programs can be piloted respectfully and scaled sustainably.

The session emphasizes co-design, flexibility, and OCAP-aligned evaluation, centring Elders, educators, and community leadership in program design and delivery. Participants will leave with practical considerations for phased implementation, strategies for community engagement, and a collective understanding of how school food programming can support long-term Indigenous food sovereignty across regions.

Monique Desjarlais (ReconcilAG Specialist – NCIAF)

Monique Desjarlais is a proud member of Muskowekwan First Nation (Treaty 4) and serves as ReconciliAG Specialist with the National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture and Food (NCIAF), an Indigenous-led organization advancing food sovereignty through Indigenous food systems and community-driven agriculture. With a background in nursing, Monique brings a strong health lens to her work, recognizing access to nutritious, culturally relevant food as a fundamental determinant of health. Her experience spans working alongside Indigenous communities and supporting Indigenous-led initiatives, strengthening her skills in capacity development, program delivery, and community engagement. At NCIAF, she supports Nations, educators, and partners in building capacity through land-based learning, school food programming, and agriculture education initiatives. Monique is committed to advancing Indigenous food sovereignty as a pathway to improved health outcomes, youth empowerment, and sustainable, community-led food systems.

Kate Fraser (Director, Capacity Development – NCIAF)

Kate Fraser is the Director of Capacity Development with the National Circle for Indigenous Agriculture and Food (NCIAF), where she leads initiatives that strengthen knowledge sharing, training, and education in Indigenous agriculture and food systems. Raised on a farm in southwestern Ontario, Kate brings a lifelong connection to agriculture and a deep understanding of the sector across multiple regions and disciplines. With a background

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spanning several areas of the Canadian agriculture industry, she is passionate about advancing capacity development through youth engagement, public education, and community-based programming. Kate holds a degree from the University of Western Ontario and is a Certified Agile Project Manager, supporting her work in designing and delivering impactful, collaborative initiatives. She is committed to supporting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities through respectful partnership, education, and the advancement of sustainable, culturally grounded food systems.

Clearwater River Dene Nation School Food Program and Economic Impact Analysis

Clearwater River Dene Nation School Food Program

1:00 pm – Main Plenary

Barb Hannah (Principal/Director – Clearwater River Dene School)

Dr. Omid Mirzaei (Professor – University of Regina)

Workshops A

1:30 pm

A1: Bison Walk

Explore one of the methods of bison hunting through the nēwo asiniyak Bison Jump. Participants will learn about the spiritual relationship between Northern Plains Indigenous peoples and bison, and how the Wanuskewin bison herd is revitalizing culture and the environment.

A2: Native Plant Walk

Learn about the medicinal and edible plants in the opimihāw Valley that Indigenous peoples use for sustenance, shelter, and tools. This program emphasizes the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land, our role as stewards of the ecosystems we live in, and past and present resource use and survival. In accordance with our Trail Rules participants will not be allowed to harvest, gather, pick, or consume any plants, trees, or natural objects while on this program.

A3: Nourishing Indigenous Foodways: School Food Through the Seasons

Main Plenary

The Indigenous School Food Circle is co-hosted by the Coalition for Healthy School Food, Farm to Cafeteria Canada, and Kinvia. It was established to inform advocacy for funding for school food programs in Indigenous communities and for Indigenous students, and to support replication, networking and sharing of best practices. In this

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presentation, we will walk through the work of the Circle as well as the different aspects of Farm to Cafeteria Canada's Indigenous Foods and Foodways in Schools initiative. This includes our dedicated grant stream, the development of a course curriculum to decolonize K-12 school food systems, the school food Power Flower, the 13 Moons workbook creation, the school food solutions conversations and resources, and seasonal school food lessons/resources. We will include time for discussion, brainstorming and knowledge sharing about what people would like to see in future training, knowledge sharing and resource development to ensure Indigenous students see their cultures and stories reflected in the foods served at school.

Sue-Anne Banks (Coordinator – Indigenous School Food Circle)

Sue-Anne is a passionate advocate for Indigenous school food and food systems and co-hosts the national Indigenous School Food Circle. She is a multidisciplinary student in tech, art and academia, and pursuing her thesis on storytelling and phenomenology in the MA in Leadership program at Royal Roads University. In her various roles, she emphasizes the importance of decolonizing and Indigenizing the spaces she sits in. She likes to write poetry, bead, garden, and cook when she is not working, and spends time having fun with her family.

Jeffrey Ross (Indigenous Programs Manager – Farm to Cafeteria Canada)

Jeffrey is Anishinaabe of the Marten Clan and a member of Walpole Island Unceded First Nation. He is passionate about strengthening Indigenous foodways, land-based education, and culturally grounded learning through relationships with Land, community, and story. Jeffrey has experience teaching in First Nation communities and facilitating learning with educators, healthcare professionals, and organizations on Indigenous knowledge, equity, and cultural competency. His work focuses on Indigenous food systems, food sovereignty, and community-led approaches to education. Jeffrey is the Indigenous Programs Manager at Farm to Cafeteria Canada and an active member of All Our Relations Land Trust, where he supports Indigenous farming education and land-based practices.

Carolyn Webb (Program Director – Farm to Cafeteria Canada)

Since 2018 Carolyn has worked for the Coalition for Healthy School Food, a network of over 450 non-profit member and endorsing organizations from every province and territory advocating for the creation of a universal cost-shared school food program for Canada. Carolyn currently works as Program Director for Farm to Cafeteria Canada, where she has initiated grant streams, led the development of the Farm to School Evaluation Framework for Canada, and supported the launch the Nourishing Indigenous Foods and Foodways in Schools initiative. She helped bring to life and continues to support the Indigenous School Food Circle, a shared space for conversation about strengthening school food programs in Indigenous communities and for Indigenous students. In all of her roles Carolyn works to support individuals and organizations to share resources, ideas, and experience, work together on advocacy, and

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facilitate efforts to support children and youth in eating, growing, cooking, celebrating, and learning about healthy, local and sustainably produced food.

Meadow Lake Tribal Council

2:45 pm – Main Plenary

Patricia St. Denis (Senior Director of Education – Meadow Lake Tribal Council)

Tammy Shakotko (Dietician – Meadow Lake Tribal Council)

Day 2

Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey / Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq

9:00 am Main plenary

This presentation will share lessons learned from a provincial engagement and asset mapping project on Indigenous food systems in Nova Scotia, led in partnership with the 13 First Nation communities in the province. The work explored existing community food strengths, values, infrastructure, and leadership already supporting Mi'kmaw food systems. The presentation will draw from this work to reflect on how school food investments create opportunities to strengthen local Indigenous food systems, and how this work is feeding into further engagement with First Nation school food communities to help inform and support school food investment provincially.

Chelsey Purdy (Dietitian – Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey)

Chelsey Purdy, MSc, RD (she/her) is a member of Wasoqopa'q First Nation. She grew up in Kespu'kwitk, Mi'kma'ki (Southwest Nova Scotia) and currently lives in Kjiptuk (Halifax). Chelsey is a Registered Dietitian and works with the Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq (UNSM), where she supports province-wide food systems strategy, research, engagement, and policy with the 13 Mi'kmaw communities in Nova Scotia. Her work focuses on Mi'kmaw-led food systems, school food, food sovereignty, community engagement, and cross-sector coordination. Chelsey works closely with Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey, Nova Scotia Health, Indigenous Services Canada, and community partners to support Mi'kmaw-led approaches to food systems and school food development in the region.

Yukon First Nation Education Directorate (YFNED) Food Program

9:45 am Main plenary

This presentation will provide an overview of the YFNED Food Program, including its integration in the YFNED wrap-around service model and with the National School Food Program.

Melanie Bennett (Executive Director – YFNED)



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Melanie Bennett is the executive director with the Yukon First Nations Education Directorate and is from the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation. In her 30 education career, she has served as a First Nation liaison, teacher and administrator in First Nation schools and Ministry operated schools in British Columbia and Yukon. Melanie takes pride in our Yukon First Nations ways of knowing, traditional knowledge and strongly advocates that First Nations culturally relevant learning should happen for students every day in every school.

Bill Bennett (Educator and Administrator – YFNED)

Workshops B

10:45 am

B1: First Nations Agriculture for Seven Generations Program

Main Plenary

First Nations communities have always played an integral role in the history of farming and agriculture which has shaped the industry around the world. The goal of First Nations Agriculture and Finance Ontario (FNAFO) is to engage First Nation Youth's interest in farming and agribusiness possibilities and opportunities. For First Nation high school students, 4-seventy-five minute curriculum based lessons have been created and a fully trained Seven Generation instructor will lead students through each lesson.

Lessons include;

- Local and Global Food Impacts,
- Past, Present and Future of First Nations Agriculture
- Honouring Our Relationship with Mother Earth
- Food Sovereignty, Where Traditional Ecological Knowledge Meets 21st Century Agriculture

FNAFO are of First Nation background with a passion for sharing topics in agriculture, food, health and environment with your students. All workshops are linked to the Ontario curriculum and are science-based, balanced and accurate. All lessons are modified accordingly for the appropriate grade level.

Annette Peltier-Flamand (Food Security Coordinator – FNAFO)

Jen Hunter-O'Brien (Seven Generations Lead – FNAFO)

B2: Nourishing Communities: A Guide to School Food Program Development

Rabbit Room



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Rachel and Stefanie will present their community-driven School Food Development Guides (<https://spheru.ca/research-projects/projects/individual-project/school-food-program-resources.php#SchoolFoodHowToGuides>). The guides include: 15 Promising Cases, a Needs Assessment Guide, a Food Literacy Guide that includes a focus on Indigenous food literacy and integration with school cultural programming, an Operations and Costing Guide and an Evaluation and Monitoring Guide. These guides have been developed in partnership with communities and community organizations and are meant to be practical tools that can support anyone who is working to establish or further develop their school food programming.

Rachel Engler-Stringer (Professor – University of Saskatchewan)

Dr. Rachel Engler-Stringer is a settler community-engaged scholar and Professor in the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology in the College of Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan and a researcher with the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit. She is one of Canada's leading experts on school food programs and currently leads several school food studies including Indigenous school food program development projects. She recently co-edited the first book on school food from a Canadian perspective called *School Food Programs in Canada: Models for Success*.

Stefanie Foster (Project Manager – University of Saskatchewan)

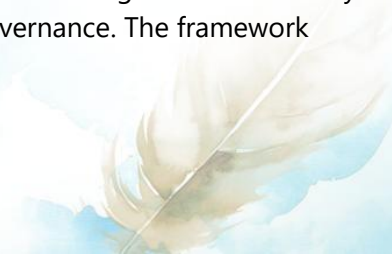
Stefanie Foster, B.A., B.Ed., is passionate about school food. Currently a project manager at the University of Saskatchewan, Stef has over 10 years of experience designing, implementing, and evaluating school food programming in a variety of professional capacities including as an elementary school principal, a non-profit manager and a researcher. Her expertise includes program development, qualitative research and community engagement.

B3: Strengthening Food Security: Building a Sovereign Indigenous Future

Coyote Room

This session introduces a new structural framework for Indigenous food sovereignty grounded in Plant Psychology, a new scientific discipline that examines how plants interpret meaning, select behavior, and respond to coherent environments. The presentation outlines a systems-level approach to food security that moves beyond program-based models toward long-term, community-run infrastructure capable of providing year-round, nutrient-dense food access.

Participants will learn about the Regional Food Engine (RFE), a scalable model designed to strengthen food security through behavior-aligned environments, regional cooperation, and Indigenous-led governance. The framework



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integrates environmental science, cultural continuity, and youth training to support Nations in building sovereign food systems that listen to the land and serve future generations.

This session offers a forward-looking perspective on food sovereignty, emphasizing stability, meaning, and nation-building. It is intended for leaders, educators, and communities seeking structural solutions that align with Indigenous identity, governance, and long-term self-determination.

Connor Zaichkowski (Member – Algonquins of Pikwakanagan; Founder – Life Cycle Horticulture Corp.; Researcher – Plant Behavior & Environmental Meaning)

Connor Zaichkowski is the Founder and Lead Architect of Life Cycle Horticulture Corp., and the author of *Plant Psychology: A Behavioral Framework for Perception-Driven Horticulture*. With a decade of experience developing sovereign food systems using behaviour-based growing techniques, his work focuses on aligning human technologies with plant perception to create resilient, local food infrastructures. Connor's Regional Food Engine (RFE) model provides a scalable approach for communities and institutions to grow fruits, vegetables, and herbs year-round, reducing reliance on fragile supply chains. His practice bridges scientific research, land-based knowledge, and practical system design to support long-term food sovereignty across diverse environments. Life Cycle Horticulture Corp. continues to advance this emerging discipline through research, publication, and community-aligned system development.

Workshops C

11:30 am

C1: Revitalizing Language and Culture on the Land, Instilling Identity and Promoting Learning and Wellness Through Traditional Foods

Main Plenary

Presentation on the use of traditional foods to support First Nation Students through the revitalization of language, culture and traditions of the Walpole Island First Nation community based on the Kinomaagewin concept of learning on the Land and Water. The identity and wellness of the students is showcased in this learning format as ties to Elders, Knowledge Keepers and Community Resources are used in all activities to strengthen the learning across the curriculum. The positive outcome of this learning format will be discussed with strategies for implementation in your school as a support for First Nation students.

Paulette Wrightman (Vice Principal – Bkejwanong Kinomaagewgamig)

Paulette Wrightman is an Anishinaabe Kwe with 25+ years experience as an Educator from Early Years to Grade 8. She has worked in both a child care setting and an Elementary school on her First Nation. Roles include Classroom

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Teacher, Land and Water Teacher, Culture and Immersion Support, Computer Teacher and most currently Vice Principal, all within her community First Nation school. Paulette is a life long learner and has completed both the Kindergarten Specialist and Special Education Specialist AQ designations along with Autism & Behavioural Science program to ensure the needs of her students were met. Paulette believes strongly in building strong relationships with Elders and Knowledge Keepers in the community to strengthen her education programming.

C2: Wild Game in Schools

Rabbit Room

At KTC Education, we negotiated with both the Federal and Provincial governments to offer traditional foods in our schools from K5 through Grade 12. We gained a certificate from the governments that states we can serve, store and cook wildgame in our school kitchens. We mostly serve moose for our traditional meals and we do call outs for hunters. I had this vision to bring in wild game in schools and we started negotiating with governments in 2018. We partnered with both ISC dietitians and Health Inspectors to make this program a reality. In 2019, we got the green light to do it as a pilot project to offer once a month, and 2 years later, we went full force and offered it 4-6 times a month.

Clifford Gladue (Food Services Manager – KTC Education Authority)

I am the food service manager for KTC education in northern Alberta, I am a member of Whitefish Lake First Nation 459.

C3: Impact of Changing Laws on Food Sovereignty and Tradition

Ron Desjardin (Hunter – Turnor Lake & Birch Narrows)

Ron Desjardin (Hunter – Turnor Lake & Birch Narrows)

Workshops D

1:00 pm

D1: Bush to table

For the past five years, I have advocated for Indigenous culinary traditions, sharing the history and techniques of our regional foodways. I recently had the profound honor of presenting at the Elders Gathering for the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs. The response from the 300 Elders—concluding in a standing ovation—reinforced the vital need to share our culinary stories on a larger stage.



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As a professional chef with over 20 years of experience and a member of the Culinary Federation, I am dedicated to preserving these traditions through storytelling and mentorship.

Justin Brown (Chef – Bush to Table)

With over 25 years of experience in the hospitality industry, Chef Jahé Parenteaux has cultivated a distinguished career defined by culinary excellence and community advocacy. Known professionally as "The Wandering Chef," he specializes in restorative culinary systems that seamlessly fuse heritage-based traditions with modern French techniques and Italian freshness. Based in Winnipeg, his work transcends the kitchen, focusing on food sovereignty and intergenerational mentorship.

As a member of the Canadian Culinary Federation, Chef Jahé is dedicated to empowering youth and families through nutritional education and skill-building. His "Bush to Table" initiative reflects a deep commitment to preserving cultural identity while innovating within the modern gastronomic landscape. Whether presenting to community elders or designing sophisticated menus, he approaches every project with the precision of a seasoned professional and the soul of a poet. Outside the kitchen, he is a devoted father of six and a fitness enthusiast.

D2: Teach Our People to Grow Food

Heather will discuss the importance of teaching young people to grow their own food.

Heather Brailean (Gardener and Coordinator – Pasqua First Nation)

I am from Pasqua First Nation, grew up there and went to school there till grade 8. I later went to Lebret Residential School for grade 9 and then finished at Fort Qu'appelle. I am a mother and grandmother of 5 grandsons. I have a degree in Education from FNUC and an intro certification for Organic Gardening and soil from Gaia College in BC. I have been gardening for more than 20 years altogether. My goal is to try to bring gardening to First Nations schools.

D3: Strengthening School Nutrition Environments in First Nations Schools: A URIS-Led Initiative – Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre

This initiative aims to improve student health in First Nations schools by reducing sugary and processed foods and increasing access to healthy, culturally appropriate options. It promotes community-driven, sustainable changes to support lifelong healthy eating and reduce chronic disease risk.

Hilda Garson (RNBN, URIS Nurse Educator – MFNERC)



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Hilda Garson is a Registered Nurse of 10 years and a URIS Nurse Educator with the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre. She is from Tataskweyak Cree Nation and is committed to supporting student health through culturally responsive, community-driven approaches.

Marissa Guimond (RNBN, URIS Nurse Educator – MFNERC)

Marissa Guimond is a Registered Nurse with 9 years of experience and a URIS Nurse Educator. She is from Sagkeeng First Nation and is dedicated to promoting student wellness and advancing health equity in First Nations communities.

Workshops E

1:30 pm

E1: Bison Walk

Description in Workshop A

E2: Native Plant Walk

Description in Workshop A

E3: In this World, You Live a Life on the Land You Live the Life

Rabbit Room

Rebecca will share her work making moose dry meat and incorporating traditional food practices.

Rebecca Sylvestre (Manager, Turnor Lake & Birch Narrows Community Food Centre)

Rebecca Sylvester is a trailblazing Program Manager at the Turnor Lake and Birch Narrows Community Food Centre, where her unwavering dedication and passion have been instrumental in driving community growth and development. With a remarkable drive, heart, and tenacity, Rebecca has spearheaded large-scale projects, overcoming obstacles and pushing boundaries to make a meaningful impact. A woman of unshakeable resolve, Rebecca refuses to take "no" for an answer, fueled by her conviction that her work is vital to the community. Her focus and determination have earned her recognition in northern communities, inspiring awe and admiration from those who witness her in action. Rebecca's journey is marked by a deep desire to learn, grow, and enhance her skills, all driven by a profound commitment to empowering her peers in Birch Narrows and Turnor Lake. Her tireless volunteer efforts, spanning hundreds of hours, ultimately led to her appointment as full-time Program Manager. As she pours her heart into every endeavor, Rebecca radiates pride, satisfaction, and love, leaving an indelible mark on

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her community. Her initiative has garnered widespread recognition, cementing her position as a respected leader in her field.

Rematriating Bison

2:45 pm– Main Plenary: Beaver Deer Eagle Room

The rematriation of bison is a land-based, women-led governance and health initiative that restores both a keystone species and the systems of care, responsibility, and authority that have long been disrupted by colonial policy. Grounded in Indigenous law and matriarchal leadership, this project positions bison not simply as wildlife or agricultural commodity, but as relatives central to food systems, ecological balance, and community wellbeing. By returning bison to Indigenous lands under the guidance of women and knowledge holders, the project re-establishes relationships between land, body, and governance—what can be understood as umbilical consciousness: a living system of interdependence across generations.

The initiative integrates community-led stewardship, youth engagement, and local economic development, including training and employment in herd management, land restoration, and food processing. It directly addresses maternal and child health by increasing access to nutrient-dense traditional foods, reducing reliance on costly and disruptive external food systems, and strengthening cultural continuity. As a demonstration of Indigenous-led infrastructure sovereignty, the project generates policy-relevant evidence on sustainable food systems, health outcomes, and cost savings. Rematriating bison is therefore not symbolic—it is a structural intervention that reclaims jurisdiction, restores life-sustaining systems, and models a scalable pathway for Indigenous health and governance renewal.

Jennifer Leason (Founder and President – Rematriating Bison Project)

Dr. Jennifer Leason is an off-reserve member of Minegoziibe Anishinaabe Nation, Manitoba and the proud mother of Lucas and Lucy. Dr. Leason is a Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR), Canada Research Chair, Tier II, Indigenous Maternal Child Wellness and an Associate Professor at the University of Calgary. She is the Founder and President of the Rematriating Bison Project. Her research and work aim to address perinatal and maternal-child health disparities and inequities by examining healthcare access and social-cultural contexts of First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Indigenous maternal child health and wellness.

