

Wisconsin tribes doing their part to keep air clean

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CRANDON, Wis. — In the 1970s, Forest County Potawatomi Community elders noticed something strange in their northeast Wisconsin ecosystem.

Plant leaves changed sizes, animals moved to new habitats, medicines the tribe gathered became less potent or disappeared altogether.

“The Earth is trying to tell us something,” tribal elder Jim Thunder said at a climate change conference in the early 2000s.

Heeding the elders’ concerns, tribal researchers discovered that lakes on the reservation were tainted with mercury. They traced the mercury to a coal-burning power plant nearby. The element

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was emitted into the atmosphere during the combustion process, and fell on the reservation via rain.

Mercury can have irreversible, toxic health effects. The discovery was possible because elders listened to the land and spoke up.

“The clean air efforts of the tribe go back to the tribal elders,” said Jeff Crawford, the tribe’s attorney general. “They are the protectors of our cultural beliefs.”

The Potawatomi, and many of the more than 500 tribal nations in the U.S., believe that stewardship of the environment is essential. That includes air quality, and many tribes in the Great Lakes region have developed innovative ways to protect that resource.

But the Potawatomi cannot clean the atmosphere single-handedly. Climate change — largely driven by global reliance on fossil fuels — is expected to make pollution worse, and air currents don’t stop at reservation borders.

Tribe leaders at the table

After identifying the mercury-emitting power plant, Forest County Potawatomi leaders took a big step. In the 1990s, they applied for a heightened classification under the federal Clean Air Act to help them protect their atmosphere: Class I, the designation for large national parks and wilderness areas, places where the air is pristine and must stay that way.

Class I status would mean the tribe would get a chance to weigh in when developers proposed a project that would pollute air in the area.

Reclassification is a “stringent and rigorous process,” said Ben Giwojna, tribal air coordinator for the Environmental Protection Agency’s upper Midwest region. “It’s quite an endeavor.”

In the tribe’s application, officials explained that in Potawatomi cultural and spiritual practices, natural resources “must be drawn from spiritually pure natural environments.” Concern about access to those culture-sustaining, pure resources “occupies the thoughts and prayers of the community,” they wrote.

“We are abusing our Mother Earth,” Thunder wrote in the application. “I pray to our Creator that we look back so that we may see ahead ... Let us respect our children and, above all, let us live our lives in accordance with our beliefs.”

Tribal officials also said that clean air was essential to the economy of the tribe and northern Wisconsin, which relies on recreation and tourism.

It wasn’t easy. For more than a decade, industry lobbyists and developers fought the redesignation. Crawford recalled the state of Michigan opposing the change vigorously.

But in 2008, the tribal lands gained Class I status. Today, the tribe is one of just six across the U.S. to accomplish that. When a development with the potential to pollute air as far as 186 miles from the reservation applies for a permit, tribal officials have a voice.



Menominee Tribal Enterprises manages the Menominee Forest. The 200,000-acre forest removes pollutants from the air and stores more carbon than other forested lands in the area.

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It isn’t the only way tribes can exert influence on air quality. Eight of 35 tribes in the region hold “treatment as a state” status, Giwojna explained, meaning they get to operate their own air monitoring programs.

Under that status, the tribes have additional benefits, like the opportunity to review air pollution permits. Those reviews can provide an important way for tribes to share Indigenous knowledge of local flora and fauna and how they might be affected by air pollution, Giwojna said.

“They have their own perspective on things that we don’t have working from the regional office in Chicago. They’re on the ground and know the lay of the land,” he said.

If credits are given out, shouldn’t tribes get some?

Tribal communities have been able to weigh in on other air quality issues as well.

Keshena, northwest of Green Bay, is home to what scientists call one of the healthiest primeval forests in North America.

The more than 200,000-acre Menominee Forest, managed by the Menominee Nation, removes pollutants from the air and reduces greenhouse gas emissions by storing carbon. A 2018 study found that tribal forests such as the Menominee were able to store more carbon than other forested lands in the area, particularly because the trees have been growing for centuries.

Communities downwind benefit “because they have less pollution, less carbon and better air quality,” said Michael Skenadore, president of Menominee Tribal Enterprises, which runs the tribe’s sustainable forestry operations.

Nikki Cooley, co-director of the Institute for Tribal

Environmental Professionals, called the forest an “amazing example” of traditional knowledge preserving a longstanding natural resource and helping others thrive.

Cooley said she’s happy that traditional knowledge is gaining appreciation, but wary that tribes won’t be recognized for their work. If profit is produced, she said, it needs to go back to the tribes.

That’s where organizations like the National Indian Carbon Coalition come in. It helps tribal nations and individual Indigenous landowners take advantage of carbon credits.

Carbon capture or sequestration projects reduce emissions by capturing carbon dioxide gas from where it is produced before it’s released into the atmosphere. Carbon credit projects allow a person or group that stores carbon — like in a tribally managed forest — to benefit financially by selling “credits” for the storage to a company that wants to reduce its emissions.

Bryan Van Stippen, a member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin and the carbon coalition’s program director, wants to make sure the tribes get their fair share. They should benefit from their longstanding care for natural resources as new industries spring up to mitigate climate change, he said.

For a long time, Van Stippen said, tribes had to make money by cutting trees down. “Now we have another mechanism to derive this revenue,” he said.

Climate change hastens air quality urgency

Climate change adds a layer of concern to air pollution mitigation, especially in urban areas. Hotter summers are making stagnant air days more frequent, according to an analysis from the nonprofit Climate Central. On such days, pollutants like ozone get trapped and make breathing more difficult.

The situation is particularly concerning in Wisconsin, which has the third-largest air pollution racial disparity in the country, according to a recent University of Illinois study. The disparity is most pronounced in Milwaukee, which has the highest concentration of Indigenous residents in the state.

In addition, outdoor air pollution is forcing people to spend more time indoors — making indoor air quality a greater concern, the National Tribal Air Association wrote in a 2022 report.

Almost all tribes surveyed said mold was a concern, followed by asthma and allergy triggers. Outdated appliances and worn-out air ducts leave elders and people with respiratory issues particularly vulnerable.

Crawford, with the Forest County Potawatomi, called mitigating climate change a “constant battle” and said the tribe is trying to do its part by producing more of its own renewable energy, particularly with solar panels.

Since solar energy does not produce air pollution or greenhouse gas, it can have an indirect but positive effect on the environment when it replaces more-polluting energy sources.

“Everyone, governments and individuals collectively, has to do their part to start healing the world,” Crawford said. “We’re trying to lead by example.”