

2021

# COVENANT TRIBAL SOLAR INITIATIVE

Empowering indigenous  
communities with  
solar energy.

GLOBAL GIVING ACCELERATOR



COVENANT  
TRIBAL SOLAR



[covenantsolar.org](https://covenantsolar.org)

# Mission

We support Native American tribes in their efforts to use clean energy as a regenerative tool to diminish poverty, mitigate climate change, and foster a return to economic self-reliance.

## Founding Story

Covenant Solar Initiative is a Native community-based effort. The Northern Cheyenne Tribe was the inspiration for founding the initiative. Members of our team have had a decades-long relationship with the Tribe. We were compelled to action by their long history of resisting fossil fuel development despite the financial rewards, their conviction to uphold their sacred covenants to protect and preserve the Earth, and their momentous Resolution passed in 2016 to pursue renewable energy over coal.

## Overview

The aim of the Covenant program is to ignite a systems-level change in economic and social conditions in indigenous communities in the U.S., resulting in a return to self-determination for Native people and restoration of hope. Strategic objectives of our first-of-its-kind approach will result in the establishment solar driven economies and tribal-owned utilities, with: Technical training and community outreach; Well-paying jobs; Native employee-owned solar co-ops providing services to their own reservations, and beyond; Revolving, solvent fund to support the financing of solar in perpetuity; Peer advising to other tribes seeking to implement the Covenant program in their communities.

**Our goal is to eliminate poverty and restore vitality to American Indian communities with Native-led solar energy development programs.**



# The Problem

14% of Native households don't have access to electricity. For those that do, discriminatory pricing practices by utilities result in rates roughly twice the amount paid by non-Natives. Because 1-in-3 American Indians live in poverty, these exorbitant energy costs force families of the Great Plains to choose between food or heat. Each winter, people resort to burning things to keep warm. When they run out of things to burn, some die of exposure to cold. Every winter. Right here in America.

## Problem Measurement

### Climate Change

American Indian tribes manage 95 million acres of land in the US (11 million more than the National Park Service!) with many reservations home to diverse natural habitats. More so than most communities, tribes in Indian Country rely heavily on natural resources and subsistence from plants and animals. Stewardship of so much land presents tribes with a complex array of challenges and opportunities as they confront a warming climate. Solar presents a solution in line with Native belief systems.

### Fossil Fuel Extraction / Use

Montana has the largest estimated recoverable coal reserve among all states, accounting for 30% of the U.S. total. In 2019, the state produced about 5% of the entire nation's coal from 6 operating mines, 5 of them large surface mines in the Powder River Basin in the southeastern corner of the state, where the Northern Cheyenne and other tribes' homelands are located. Many tribes are torn between capitalizing on the resource vs. destruction of their homelands and indigenous ways of life.

### Poverty

The percentage of American Indian and Alaska Natives currently living in poverty is estimated to be 26.8%. This compares to 14.6% for the nation as a whole. With 6.8 million American Indian/Alaska Natives currently living in the U.S., that means over 1.8 million are living in poverty. Discriminatory energy pricing by utilities exacerbates the poverty in Native American households. In a home grappling with poverty, the money saved with solar can be spent on food, clothing, and other essentials.

## Contributing Economic Factors

Violence, broken treaties, forced assimilation, and the lack of any tangible economy - since the deliberate extermination of the buffalo by colonists - have all taken their toll on the tribes of the Great Plains. As a result, these are among the poorest, most socially disadvantaged people in North America.



*"For eons my people were self-reliant. The earth provided for all of our needs. The devastating effects of colonization, westward expansion, manifest destiny, and the destruction of our economy by colonists stripped us of our ability to provide for ourselves, causing us to be reliant on outsiders for our survival. Blatant discrimination by utilities compounds the challenges we face. This Initiative provides us, and other tribes, a solar-powered path to regain our sovereignty and self-reliance."*

**- Otto Braided Hair (Co-Founder, Exec. Director, Covenant Solar Initiative, Co-Founder, ecoCheyenne)**



## Our Theory of Change

# If

we take a systems-based approach, building capacity for American Indian tribes to eliminate energy-related poverty in their communities by weaving together expertise in solar technology, economic, workforce, and systems development,

# Then

ultimately, tribal selfsufficiency is strengthened, sovereignty is preserved, and covenants to preserve and protect Mother Earth are fulfilled. It is possible to recreate thriving indigenous communities with the regenerative power of solar.

**\*Just announced: \$775,000 unrestricted grant from MacArthur Foundation. [Read More Here](#)**

## Strategy

This is a first-of-its-kind effort to partner solar expertise with Native leadership to establish robust and financially regenerative solar education/deployment ecosystems. Convene knowledge from broad disciplines to build the capacity of tribes to plan, build, and maintain solar. Assist tribes in facilitating beneficial collaborations and advocating against discriminatory utility practices. Establish new economies through Native-owned solar cooperatives and utilities, creating jobs for Native people - serving their own communities.

## Differentiator

Currently in the U.S., there is much talk about, and investment in, developing solar on Indian Reservations. The positive economic benefits to tribal governments vary greatly by project, are contingent on myriad variables. The direct benefit to tribal members is often negligible and, sometimes, detrimental. Small, Native-built projects are becoming common, but these do not have the elements of our systemsbased approach to economic development, nor are they guided by a national team of experts. The Covenant approach is replicable, and can be deployed in virtually any tribal community. Our efforts are Native-led, focused on creating jobs and relocating energy economies, with the goal of recirculating 100% of tribal money spent on energy back into more solar and the community.

## Collaborations & Partnerships



*Indigenized Energy  
Standing Rock Sioux  
Community Outreach  
& Programs*



*EcoCheyenne  
Northern Cheyenne  
Community Outreach  
& Programs*



*Red Cloud Renewable  
Energy Center:  
Native-led Solar  
Training*



*Yale Center for Business  
& The Environment:  
Financial Modeling*



*UC Berkeley Master  
of Development Practice:  
Community Development  
Framework.*



# Results

## Short term outputs

Scope of work for 2021 includes the development of residential, commercial and utility scale demonstration projects totaling 3MW for the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Energy. In the process of this work, the Initiative will lay the groundwork for this Tribe and others to establish the organizational readiness and skilled workforce needed to pursue solar energy development, form tribal-led cooperative utilities, and make progress towards energy independence.

## Number of Megawatts (Kilowatts) Deployed

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## Long term outputs

Our overarching goal is to equip American Indian tribes with solutions to halt the destruction and exploitation caused by fossil-fuel extraction, replacing those activities and associated jobs with the sustainable and profitable alternatives that clean energy technologies provide. Our first-of-its-kind approach will result in the establishment of Native-created and owned utilities, enabling tribes and their members to reinvest 100% of the economic benefits of solar back into their communities.



*"My mother was the Elder who received the first solar system built on our reservation. It has been life changing for our family. The solar panels save us hundreds of dollars every month which we use for food, clothing and other needs. Covenant introduced solar to our Tribe and they are teaching us how to implement it on our own so we can break away from the exploitation of the utility and create our own solar based economy. They are training our people for good solar jobs here on the reservation."*

- Anna Weasel Bear Old Crane

**Lame Deer MT USA, Daughter of late Tribal Elder, Elsie WeaselBear, recipient of the first solar system at N.Cheyenne.**

## Dependency

Time & Money. Prior to commencing work, our Team spends significant time learning from, and forging relationships with, tribal colleges, governments, spiritual leaders, advocacy organizations, and individuals such as elders and youth groups, in order to understand their unique history, circumstances, perspective, and abilities. Only then are we able to empower these first nations with the knowledge, skills and resources to forego fossil fueled energy, and establish regenerative solar economies. Funding supports these efforts. The more funding we receive, the more tribes we can help.

## Progress

The Initiative builds upon a strong foundation of successful programs conducted by subsets of our team members, dating back to 2002, including green building, energy efficiency, and solar energy projects ranging in size from 6kW to 300kW on tribal lands within the last 5 years. The last 36 months have been focused on capacity building of our org, program development, financial modeling, and fundraising. 2020 was a tipping point, with \$250K in seed funding and bringing volunteers onto payroll. **In 2021, we have raised over \$775,000 in unrestricted funding from MacArthur Foundation.**



## Have more Questions?

### Contact us

Covenant Solar Initiative  
is a project of Earth  
Island Institute

2150 Allston Way,  
Suite 460  
Berkeley, CA 94704

(510)859-9100  
info@covenantsolar.org

www.covenantsolar.org

*"I believe, as most indigenous people do, that instead of bringing 'development,' the fossil fuel industries are destructive for ALL of society -- indigenous society, nonindigenous society, and for our entire planet. Tribal sovereignty has been consistently undermined by fossil-fuel development. Our program empowers tribes to implement renewable energy as a strategy for mitigating climate change AND fostering a return to self-reliance for Native people. The need is urgent. The time is now."*

**- Cody Two Bears, Co-Founder,  
Director of Development**

## LEADERSHIP TEAM



**OTTO BRAIDED HAIR  
(NORTHERN CHEYENNE)  
CO-FOUNDER,  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**



**CHERI SMITH  
(MI'KMAQ)  
FOUNDER, CEO**



**CODY TWO BEARS  
(STANDING ROCK SIOUX)  
CO-FOUNDER,  
DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT**