

Corps Addresses Water Resource Challenges with Assistance From Native American Tribes

By Kristen Skopeck, Public Affairs

In Albuquerque District's area of responsibility, Native American Tribes or Pueblos control 80 percent of the land in the middle Rio Grande Valley. For the Corps to be successful in addressing any water resource challenge in the valley, be it endangered species or drought, tribes must be intimately involved in developing potential solutions.

The District employed Dr. Ron Kneebone as an outreach coordinator in 2001. Around 2003, he became known as "Tribal Liaison," as the Corps came to understand the importance of a close working relationship with tribes. Now, working with tribes is Kneebone's full-time job.

"The District works with tribes to be successful in our mission to serve the nation," Kneebone said. "Tribes can be powerful proponents or opponents to any undertaking. By working closely with them, we can help our undertakings be more successful by putting tribes in the position of being advocates rather than blockers of projects. The geographic location of tribes, especially in the West, makes them important partners in any effort."

According to Kneebone, federal recognition of an Indian Tribe constitutes designation of a Native community as a political sovereign within the U.S. federalist system. As a result, the Corps, as part of the federal government, has a unique 'Trust relationship' with each tribe based on the U.S. Constitution, treaties, statutes, court decisions and executive orders. That 'Trust relationship' requires the Corps to protect and preserve tribal resources to the greatest extent possible. Simply put, working with tribes fulfills that Trust responsibility.

When Kneebone started, there were no projects of any kind with tribal governments. Today, the District has a diverse working relationship with numerous tribes that involves cost-shared civil works projects, including



District Commander Lt. Col. Jason Williams presents Dr. Ron Kneebone with an Army Achievement Medal for his tribal liaison work.

construction, feasibility and watershed studies, as well as partnered co-management at a couple of the District's operating projects (dams).

"Within the past seven years we've done approximately \$27 million worth of work with tribes, with another \$20 million in potential work that could take place during the next three to four years," Kneebone said.

Interestingly, Kneebone said language differences are a big hurdle. He often sees one of his main functions as that of translator. This may seem odd, he said, because both sides speak English, but it can be common for people who think they're speaking the same language to get tied up in misunderstandings.

"Few tribes have any history of working with the Corps, and the Corps has unique (among federal agencies) authorization and funding processes with which tribes are completely unfamiliar," he said. "Add to that the Corps' innumerable acronyms, programs and regulations and it's common to have people look at you like you're speaking gibberish."

On the other hand, Kneebone has a big challenge when conveying to the Corps the unique structure of Native American governments and their equally unique relationship with the federal government. Tribes are subject to federal law, but operate under their own constitutions, administer their own judicial

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This activity supports our Operations Plan: Action 5 (Develop collaborative approaches to address watershed-based, multi-stakeholder and multi-benefit water resource challenges).

District Happenings

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systems and administer self-managed tax and regulatory regimes. Furthermore, tribes are culturally unique with different languages, beliefs and origins. With more than 565 federally recognized tribes in the United States, the Corps' Tribal Nations community of practice is kept busy by keeping up with the diversity.

"When I started to work with the District there were tribes who refused to be in a room with Corps representatives for longer than 10 minutes," Kneebone said. "It would literally take years to get responses to proposed actions, if ever. Today, we meet on a regular basis with those same tribes, and we've established efficient working relationships. We often are

able to conduct business in a matter of hours that previously would have taken years.

These kinds of relationships are good for the country and Native American communities."

Dr. Georgeie Reynolds is the Senior Tribal Liaison at the Corps' headquarters, and she took the position about the same time Kneebone came into the position in Albuquerque.

"Because of Dr. Reynolds dedication at headquarters, coupled with the successes of those of us in the districts, we've progressed from a handful of people wondering what our involvement with tribes should be to a couple of hundred multi-disciplinary specialists in intergovernmental relations and intercultural communications," Kneebone said.

District Hosts Meeting for Newly Elected Tribal Leaders

Tribal leadership in New Mexico changes fairly regularly, with most tribes changing annually, and New Mexico Senator Jeff Bingaman's office approached the District to see if the Corps could help provide a location for new tribal leadership to meet and exchange information with representatives from local federal agencies.

District leadership thought it was a great idea, so the senator's staff reached out to multiple federal agencies for a list of presenters and sent an invitation to the 19 pueblo governors inviting them to attend a meeting March 27.



Photo by Lisa Lockyear

"Our local Senate offices are not big enough to have a meeting of this size," said Janelle Frederick, field representative in the senator's office.

"Luckily, the Corps had a large conference room that was available, and the Corps also

agreed to present its programs to the tribal leaders. I know how having a face that goes with a name makes for much easier communication between the tribal leaders and the federal agencies when issues arise," Frederick said.