



Environmental Job Training Allows Crow Indian Tribal Members to Soar

Montana Tech at the University of Montana

Residents of the Crow Indian Reservation in southeastern Montana were given the opportunity to receive environmental training that will not only lead to a better future for themselves, but for their surrounding environment as well. The training has not only affected the individual trainee, but has also served as one of the much needed building blocks to a healthier, safer, and more economically sound community. This was made possible by EPA, which selected Montana Tech of the University of Montana for a \$200,000 Brownfields Job Training and Development Demonstration Pilot in 2001. Through this grant, Montana Tech has trained more than 100 participants in three environmental tracks, increased communication among tribal entities, and heightened awareness of environmental issues on the Crow Reservation.

When the Big Horn Carpet Mill, located in Crow Agency, was closed and abandoned in 1974, the Tribal community not only lost jobs, but also believed that the effects from possible contamination on the property created a public health threat. In addition to environmental hazards, a major concern was the physical dangers associated with the abandoned property because children from a nearby residential area would play unsupervised in and around the mill. The closure of the mill also contributed to high unemployment rates, ranging from 60 percent to 85 percent over the past ten years among the 7,900 tribal members living on the reservation.

Through EPA's Job Training Program, Montana Tech and its partners, Little Big Horn College and the Crow Tribal Government, provided residents of the Crow Indian Reservation with the necessary environmental education to understand site assessment results at the Big Horn Carpet Mill and prepare them for future employment in the environmental field. The program began in March 2002 and was granted a no-cost extension until April 2006 in order to offer two more courses. The training included three, two-year simultaneous certification tracks: 1) a hazardous waste specialist certification track; 2) a remediation specialist certification track; and 3) an ecosystem management and policy certification track. All three tracks include a 40-hour initial and 8-hour refresher HAZWOPER (Hazardous Waste Operation and Emergency Response) course, health and safety courses, and training in the use of innovative assessment and cleanup technologies. To ensure continued success of the environmental technician training program, Montana Tech has implemented a "train-the-trainer" program with instructors from Little Big Horn College, who have continued to provide some these courses after the Job Training Program is completed.



The students of Montana Tech's Risk Communications class, Summer 2003.

JUST THE FACTS:

- Through the use of a \$200,000 EPA Brownfields Job Training and Development Demonstration Pilot, Montana Tech has trained more than 100 participants in three environmental tracks, increased communication among tribal entities, and heightened awareness of environmental issues on the Crow Reservation.
- Approximately thirty participants have obtained new employment in positions ranging from seasonal work on a road crew to a position as the Crow Tribal Brownfields Coordinator, with salaries ranging from \$8/hr to \$25/hr.
- The program has brought non-traditional students, such as the tribal elders, back into the classroom, providing them with opportunities to enhance skill sets, further their education, and provide input to tribal decision-makers.

"The Brownfields program has provided an opportunity to educate the community on issues that didn't have high levels of awareness. Just understanding the concerns surrounding the problems that arise have opened their eyes."

—Kevin Mellott
Montana Tech

Since the program's inception, 129 participants, all of whom are Native Americans, have completed at least one course in one of the three tracks. All participants who completed a course received academic credit through Little Big Horn College, where the courses are taught. Approximately thirty participants have obtained new employment in positions ranging from seasonal work on a road crew to a position as the Crow Tribal Brownfields Coordinator, with salaries ranging from \$8/hr to \$25/hr. Many participants who have not gone on to obtain employment have chosen to continue their education: more than half are in the process of completing their Associate, Bachelor, or Masters Degrees at a wide variety of schools from tribal colleges such as Little Big Horn College and Haskell Indian Nation University, to prestigious universities such as Stanford University. The program has also educated the tribal elders who comprise the 25 members of the "107 Committee" and serve as advisors to the Tribal Chairman. Their main goal in taking these courses was to further educate themselves in order to better advise and oversee the work done in and around the reservation. The courses offered through this program therefore not only benefit the individuals who take them, but the tribal community as a whole.

The Job Training Program has had a significant impact on the Crow Indian Reservation community, greatly increasing tribal communication. Montana Tech forged partnerships with various federal and state agencies and private companies, who have offered assistance by providing job and educational opportunities, and other in-kind services. The greatest impact can be felt in the lines of communication that have been opened up. Prior to the inception of the program, there was little communication between the Tribal Government and Little Big Horn College; however, several program participants are now employees of the Tribal Government, helping to bridge this former communication gap. The program has also brought non-traditional students, such as the tribal elders, back into the classroom, providing them with opportunities to enhance skill sets, further their education, and provide input to tribal decision-makers.

A notable example of the positive results of the Job Training Program concerns a former participant who moved on to become the Brownfields Coordinator for the Job Training Pilot, the Assessment Pilot, and the Tribal Response Program on the Crow Indian Reservation for approximately one year. During her term she worked to educate and improve living conditions for residents of the Crow Reservation and promote efforts to create more jobs. The coordinator also convened a workgroup that developed a priority list of environmental issues that needed to be addressed on the reservation as part of a brownfields inventory.

According to Kevin Mellott, the project contact at Montana Tech, the greatest future success of the program is a partnership between Montana Tech and the Crow Nation to develop a Ground and Surface Water Model for the entire Crow Indian Reservation. This partnership is in the early stages and is a direct result of the Job Training Program, which opened up lines of communication that did not exist before. This model will provide a basis for determining water rights on the reservation, which in the long run will serve as a powerful political and financial tool by providing income and job opportunities for the reservation community.

The success of this Job Training Program lies both in the number of individuals trained for employment and in the empowerment of the Crow Indian Reservation population through increased access to education. Kevin Mellott commented, "The Brownfields program has provided an opportunity to educate the community on issues that didn't have high levels of awareness. Just understanding the concerns surrounding the problems that arise have opened their eyes."

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