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For more information:

Caddo Nation: Leslie Halfmoon
lhalfmoon@mycaddonation.com

U of Oklahoma: Katerina Tsetsura
tsetsura@ou.edu

Caddo Nation and RANGE Collaborate to Benefit Native American Tribes in Oklahoma

NORMAN, Okla. – Members of 36 Native American tribes gathered to discuss Oklahoma renewable energy initiatives at the Native Renewable Energy Symposium on Sept. 12 and 13 on the University of Oklahoma campus. Organized by the Caddo Nation and hosted by several organizations at OU, the first-ever tribe-initiated event at the University of Oklahoma attracted more than 160 people, including tribal leaders, researchers, federal government officials and corporate representatives.

The National Science Foundation-supported multidisciplinary research team “Transition to Green Energy in Gas Producing Regions (RANGE)”, the Institute for Community and Society Transformation (ICAST), and the Office of Tribal Relations hosted the event, with support from the Office of the Vice President for Research and Partnerships at OU.

ICAST director Shane Connelly highlighted the importance of tribal nations in energy and community transformations in Oklahoma and elsewhere. “Tribes have a long history of balancing responsible land use with energy needs through both traditional and renewable energy development. We can learn a lot from their successes,” Connelly said.

Tomás Díaz de la Rubia, OU vice president for research and partnerships, addressed several key issues, including climate change, renewable energy initiatives, collaboration and cooperation and the university’s commitment to advancing energy technology, energy systems and environmental sustainability.

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“We [OU] are actively trying to leverage opportunities with the federal government, with the state government, to implement and advance new technologies so that they can be implemented for the benefit of the Tribal Nations in Oklahoma and society more generally,” Díaz de la Rubia said.

Stressing the symposium's significance, Bobby Gonzalez, Caddo Nation Chairman, said it will strengthen the relationships among key players, including the industry, government and academia.

“The whole idea about the symposium and OU participation came as part of the relationship building. It is a partnership. This is our homeland, and it’s great to be able to partner and to see other agencies and tribes come together... It’s just planting that seed, watering it a little, and waiting for what grows,” Gonzalez said.

During this two-day symposium, tribal representatives shared their achievements and listened to experts from academia, energy, financial and legal sectors.

Zackeree Kelin, Caddo National Economic Development Authority vice-chairman, underscored the importance of cooperation to utilize the benefits available for the economic, infrastructure and resiliency development. “We’re marshaling the resources available both from the federal government and through strategic partnerships, like with the University of Oklahoma, ICAST and RANGE.”

As the end-of-the-year deadline to obligate American Resue Plan Act (ARPA) dollars is quickly approaching, tribes throughout the Indian Country have the opportunity to deploy available capital and tax credits for renewable energy projects. ARPA offered approximately \$1.9 trillion through the COVID-19 relief bill. Native Renewable Energy Symposium participants agreed that academic and industry partnership and collaboration are vital to utilize what is left of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds.

Reminding the participants that the remaining unobligated ARPA money will have to be returned by the end of this year if not obligated, Baker Tilly manager Trent Schwartz said that while there is still money left to spend, it is important for the tribal leadership to determine the priorities along with keeping the deadlines in mind.

“We’re still going to have environmental constraints and concerns publicly at large and within our communities,’ Gonzalez said.

On the question of how energy projects fit into ARPA funding, Stephen Ward, Conner & Winters partner and attorney, said, “I think there are many possible ways—investments in tribal energy projects, solar restoring, oil and gas enterprises, replacement staff, all easily could be justified for a particular tribe’s situation.” Ward further said, “I think some key considerations are long-term priorities and strategic plans. What is the maximum benefit that the tribal government can get for the remaining funds?”

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Paul Dearhouse discussed financing opportunities for tribal nations, particularly through the Department of Energy's Loan Program Office (LPO). His focus was on helping tribes access capital for energy projects, such as renewable energy and infrastructure while ensuring privacy and tailoring solutions to tribal needs.

Adam Luck, EightTwenty Chief Sales Officer, introduced an enterprise of Caddo Nation Economic Development Author (CNEDA) SAKU. Named after a Caddo word for "sun," SAKU is a joint venture with the Caddo Nation and EightTwenty that offers solar energy solutions in the Indian Country. One of the first SAKU projects is a childcare center that is currently being built by the Caddo Nation.

Dimitrios V. Papavassiliou, a professor of chemical engineering at OU and the RANGE project principal investigator, provided an overview of the RANGE project and RANGE collaboration with the Caddo Nation. Papavassiliou also emphasized the importance of collaborating with other tribal leaders to look for future energy-transformative solutions that fit the needs of each tribe. The panel generated great interest among attendees, and several tribal representatives invited the RANGE team to visit them to continue the conversation.

"The University of Oklahoma programs and the partnership add visibility to the tribe, and it helps get more people involved... Having the technical expertise of the university really helps create a collaborative environment," Kelin said.

To learn more about RANGE, please visit: <https://www.oucheps.org/range>

To learn more about the Caddo Nation, please visit:
<https://mycaddonation.com/community-news>

To learn more about OU ICAST, please visit: <https://www.ou.edu/icast>

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