



NATIONAL TRIBAL WATER COUNCIL

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## Earth Day Celebration with the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska: Planting, Protecting, and Connecting Throughout April 2025

By Kayla Vondracek, Water Quality Coordinator, Ponca Tribe of Nebraska  
Environmental Protection Department

In celebration of Earth Day, the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska's Environmental Department hosted community events across five (5) tribal office locations—Lincoln, Omaha, Norfolk, Niobrara (Nebraska), and Sioux City, Iowa. These gatherings brought together tribal staff, elders, and community members to honor the shared responsibility of caring for the land and water.

Each site held a trash pickup around the tribal office grounds where volunteers worked to clean up litter and debris (*photo on the left*). After the cleanup, a ceremonial tree planting took place. At each location, a flat-leaf cedar tree—



a sacred plant to the Ponca people—was planted (*photo in the middle*). Once mature, these trees can be harvested for ceremonial use. They also serve as living reminders to care for the land and improve access to culturally significant plant species, especially in the Tribe's more urban locations.

Elders and other event volunteers were invited to add soil to the freshly planted tree (*photo on the right*) and take part in a group photo. These photos were later added to a mat board signed by all the volunteers, then framed and hung in each office as a tribute to the event.



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## Ponca Tribe of Nebraska's Earth Day Celebration (*continued*)

To thank volunteers and helpers, a grill-out lunch was hosted at each site, offering food and fellowship. The events were made possible with support from the Tribe's Community Health Workers, Tribal Council, Tribal Communications, and the Environmental Department staff, who traveled across the state to lead and participate in these meaningful Earth Day celebrations.



*Photos: Earth Day activities for Tribal youth including a planting seeds station and coloring books*

Later in the month, the Environmental Department was honored to participate in a Family Night in Norfolk, NE—an event centered on connecting with Ponca families. A table was set up with a small potted plant station that allowed kids to plant seeds and decorate pots to take home. Several different coloring books, word searches, and brochures were available as well.



The department's Water Quality Coordinator led an interactive pollution-awareness activity titled "What Doesn't Belong?", a hands-on game where children removed images of pollution from a natural scene to learn about

environmental stewardship. This activity was designed with the younger children in mind, giving them a simple and engaging way to connect with the concept of pollution.

Another activity, using simple household supplies, encouraged the older kids at the event to think critically about pollution. It began with a single question.

"When I say the word *pollution*, what comes to mind?"

"Trash!" someone called out.

"Bags?" added another.

"Cars that pollute?" offered an older kid in the group. "All great examples," I said, as a small group gathered around the table.

The following activity prompted the kids to help "clean up pollution." I explained that the four mason jars (see *photo below*) in front of them represented four different lakes.

- **Lake 1** was polluted with trash (torn pieces of paper). Using tweezers and spoons, the kids tried to remove the debris but quickly realized how time-consuming it was.
- **Lake 2** had heavy soil runoff (garden dirt), caused by a lack of trees and vegetation. As they tried to scoop out the soil, it stirred up sediment and clouded the water again.
- **Lake 3** had an oil spill (vegetable oil). Although they could scoop some out, much of it spilled or remained in the water.
- **Lake 4** held clean, clear water.



Holding up the final jar (Lake 4), I asked, "If you were at the lake and wanted to have a beach day, would you dip your toes in this water?" "Yes!" came the excited reply. "Would you go for a swim?"

Enthusiastic nods followed.

"Well, so would I!" I said.

"Because at this lake, we've picked up our trash, planted trees, and made sure no oil barrels were left nearby—so now we have a nice place to enjoy our beach day."



## Ponca Tribe of Nebraska's Earth Day Celebration *(continued)*



Photos: Stickers provided to Tribal members (top); Volunteers signed photo during Earth Day (right)



Photo: Tribal youth participating in the water quality activity (top)

After the activity, the children received custom Environmental Department stickers as a thank-you for their hard work cleaning up pollution. Working with a Ponca Language Department staff member, the Water Quality Coordinator designed special “Water is Sacred” stickers that also included the same words in the Ponca language: *Ni' aké' waxúbe*.

Additional giveaways included coloring pages of the water cycle, water filtration straws, purification tablets, and UV SteriPens. These supplies were provided by the Tribe’s Social Services Department to give families tools for emergency water preparedness.

These events reflect the Tribe’s ongoing commitment to environmental protection, cultural preservation, and community resilience. We are grateful to all who participated and helped make these celebrations of Earth and water so meaningful.



The American Water Works Association and its members use the Drinking Water Week as an opportunity for both water professionals and the communities they serve to recognize the vital role of water plays in our daily lives.

For more information:

- <https://www.awwa.org/communications-and-outreach/drinking-water-week/>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/drinking-water/event-name/drinking-water-week.html>

# NTWC ACTIVITIES & UPDATES

## 2025 Tribal Drinking Water Conference

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC) hosted the 2025 Tribal Drinking Water Conference in Reno, Nevada, April 21-24, 2025, which was sponsored by the Pechanga Band of Indians. The RCAC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that operates in 13 western states and Pacific Islands. RCAC serves Indigenous and rural communities through training, technical and financial assistance, and advocacy. To learn more about RCAC, you may visit <https://www.rcac.org>.

The theme of the conference was “Make Every Connection Matter.” Tribal Utilities are required to provide quality and ample supply of drinking water which is a tall order to meet in many rural areas. Tribal Utilities must possess financial stability, managerial competence, and technical expertise to meet immediate water needs while safeguarding community health sustainably.

Tribal water and wastewater operators, alongside EPA and RCAC staff, expanded their skills, gained insights, earned contact hours, networked and enjoyed engagement activities. This was a unique opportunity to build upon their network of water professionals.

This conference was an opportunity for the National Tribal Water Council (NTWC) to network with tribal water and wastewater operators as well. NTWC’s Program Manager Elaine Wilson hosted an exhibit table and water and wastewater operators stopped by to learn about the NTWC and its recruitment for an At-large representative with a focus on tribal water and wastewater professionals. Additionally, about two dozen attendees signed up to receive NTWC’s monthly newsletter. At least two tribal operators showed interest in applying for the NTWC At-large representative position.

Another partner of this conference was the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona’s Tribal Water Systems Department, which operates a federally approved water and wastewater training and certification program. The Tribal Water Systems program (TWS) is a tribally based drinking water and wastewater training, and assistance program initiated and operated by the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, Inc. to help address the specific needs of Tribes. The TWS program consists of two sub-programs (1) Tribal Operator Training and Certification, and (2) Tribal technical assistance. To learn more about the ITCA or the Tribal Water Systems Department, please visit <https://www.itcaonline.com>.

## National Tribal Water Council & National Tribal Caucus Comment Letter on WOTUS

On April 21, 2025, the National Tribal Water Council (NTWC) and the National Tribal Caucus (NTC) submitted a comment letter to Regulations.gov portal regarding the U.S. EPA and the U.S. Department of the Army’s (agencies) upcoming efforts to revise the definition of “Waters of the United States” (WOTUS).

In collaboration, the NTWC and the NTC offered early feedback on the impacts of the *Sackett* decision on Tribes, the inclusion of tribal boundaries in the definition of Interstate Waters, and two categories of water – tributaries and adjacent wetlands. To learn more and to read the joint comment letter, please visit <https://www.nau.edu/ntwc>.



*Photo: Elaine Wilson, NTWC Program Manager, at the Tribal Drinking Water Conference*

# CONSIDER JOINING OUR WATER COUNCIL



**SCAN HERE**  
for the application

## WHO WE ARE

The National Tribal Water Council is a technical and scientific body established to advocate for the best interests of federally-recognized Indian and Alaska Native Tribes in matters pertaining to water quality.

## WHAT WE DO

- **Policy Response:** Conducts analysis of water policies and initiatives that impact Tribes and responds by preparing comment letters, white papers, or briefs.
- **Information Exchange:** Engage and collaborate with national, regional, tribal organizations, or working groups.
- **Set Priorities:** Publish a biennial “Tribal Water Priorities” document that identifies Clean Water Act (CWA) and Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) priorities.

## OPEN POSITIONS: AT-LARGE REPRESENTATIVE

The Council is accepting applications from tribal water professionals employed by a federally recognized Tribe or tribally authorized organization from Regions 1 to 10 to fill two (2) vacancies for the At-Large positions.

Tribal water professionals with knowledge in the CWA and SDWA are encouraged to apply. Also, an applicant with a background in water infrastructure, drinking water, wastewater, and operations and maintenance, is a plus but not required.

## WHAT WE ASK OF YOU

Member duties include, but not limited to:

- Participating in monthly virtual calls;
- Attending two in-person meetings annually; and
- Creating and participating in crafting response documents to policy and/or rulemaking actions.

To express your interest or obtain more information, please contact Elaine Wilson at [elaine.wilson@nau.edu](mailto:elaine.wilson@nau.edu).

<https://www7.nau.edu/itep/main/ntwc/>



# UPDATES & ANNOUNCEMENTS

## **2025 Native American Fish and Wildlife Society Annual National Conference, May 12-15, 2025**

The 2025 Native American Fish and Wildlife Society Annual National Conference, being hosted by the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho Tribes of the Wind River Reservation, will be held from May 12-15, 2025, in Riverton, Wyoming. The registration fee for non-members is \$600. For more information, please visit: <https://www.nafws.org/product/2025-annual-national-conference/>

## **EPA Region 9 2025 Tribal Clean Water Act Workshop, May 19-23, 2025**

Workshop co-sponsors EPA Region 9 and the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe are inviting Tribal water quality/resource staff to attend the EPA Region 9 2025 Tribal Clean Water Act (CWA) Workshop in Fallon, Nevada, also known as “the Oasis of Nevada.” Attendees will gather in-person to share knowledge, resources, and experiences to better implement Tribal CWA programs and to protect Tribal water resources for future generations. For more information, please visit: <https://www.epa.gov/tribal-pacific-sw/r9-2025-tribal-cwa-workshop>

## **Tribal Water Summit for Tribal Water & Wastewater Utilities Personnel in the New Mexico/Rio Grande Basin Area, May 28-30, 2025**

This Tribal Water Summit is a forum for personnel of Tribal drinking water and wastewater utilities located in the New Mexico / Rio Grande Basin area to share ideas with peers, attend short training sessions, earn training contact hours for continuing education, and contribute to the ongoing development and planning of the National Tribal Water Systems Program services provided by the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, Inc. (ITCA). The regional Tribal Water Summit will feature short training seminars provided by subject-matter experts and guest speakers on topics that include updates on federal regulations, water utility management, and resiliency of water / wastewater utilities. For more information, please visit: <https://itcaonline.com/regional-tribal-water-summit-in-santa-fe-new-mexico-may-28-30-2025-id-25006/>

## **Native American Fish and Wildlife Society – Invasive Species Management Planning and Field Techniques Workshop, June 10-12, 2025**

The Native American Fish and Wildlife Society and Oneida Nation are excited to announce the Invasive Species Management and Field Techniques in-person training. This training will take place at the Oneida Casino Hotel on June 10-12, 2025. In this training, participants will learn the basics and elements needed in management planning; the importance of protecting cultural resources from invasive species like Phragmites and Eurasian Water Milfoil; there will be both classroom and field elements while integrating ID and Impact Assessment. The registration fee for non-members is \$150. For more information, please visit: <https://www.nafws.org/product/invasive-species-management-planning-and-field-techniques-workshop-2025/>

## **EPA Pacific Northwest Tribal Clean Water Act Training, November 17-20, 2025**

The training will address Clean Water Act (CWA) programs including Section 106, Section 319, Section 303(d), water quality standards, and wetlands and will be useful to Tribes who work on these programs or are interested in pursuing Treatment in a similar manner as a State (TAS) status for one or more programs. The training workshop is targeted to Tribes who conduct water quality monitoring, issue water quality certifications, and address water quality issues, nonpoint source pollution, and impaired waters/TMDLs. Tribal staff from across the country are invited, although there will be a focus on examples and applications for Tribes in the Pacific Northwest.

The training workshop is free to attend, and registration is open! For more information, please visit: <https://nawm.org/trainings/pacific-northwest-tribal-clean-water-act-training>

# TRIBAL CONSULTATION OPPORTUNITIES

## Upcoming Efforts to Revise the Definition of “Waters of the United States”

**Deadline: May 20, 2025**

The EPA and the U.S. Department of the Army (agencies) initiated consultation with federally recognized Indian Tribes on certain key topics related to the implementation of the definition of “waters of the United States.” On March 12, 2025, the agencies announced their intent to undertake a rulemaking to revise this definition in light of the Supreme Court’s decision in *Sackett v. Environmental Protection Agency*, 598 U.S. 651 (2023) with a focus on clarity, simplicity and improvements that will stand the test of time.

The agencies held a Tribal listening session on April 30, 2025. The agencies specifically seek feedback on defining “continuous surface connection,” including what it means to “abut” a jurisdictional water; defining “relatively permanent” and identifying relatively permanent tributaries in the field; and which characteristics can provide clear and implementable distinctions between jurisdictional and non-jurisdictional ditches.

Tribes may submit written consultation comments at any time during the Tribal consultation and coordination process via email to [CWAwotus@epa.gov](mailto:CWAwotus@epa.gov). If you would like to request government-to-government consultation with the agencies on this action, please have your staff contact Laura Shumway at [CWAwotus@epa.gov](mailto:CWAwotus@epa.gov) and Elliott Carman, Water Resources Regulation and Policy Advisor, at [elliott.n.carman.civ@army.mil](mailto:elliott.n.carman.civ@army.mil) by May 20, 2025. The EPA and the Army would like to conclude consultation meetings by June 2, 2025.

## EPA’s Draft Sewage Sludge Risk Assessment for PFOA and PFOS

**Deadline: August 15, 2025 (extended date)**

The EPA released the Draft Sewage Sludge Risk Assessment for Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA) and Perfluorooctane Sulfonic Acid (PFOS) for public comment. The draft risk assessment reflects the agency’s latest scientific understanding of the potential risks to human health and the environment posed by the presence of [PFOA and PFOS in sewage sludge](#) that is land applied as a soil conditioner or fertilizer (on agricultural, forested, and other lands), surface disposed (e.g., placed in a sewage sludge-only landfill called a monofill), or incinerated.

The EPA will accept written comments on the draft risk assessment through August 15, 2025, via Regulations.gov (Docket ID no. EPA-HQ-OW-2024-0504). For more information, please visit: <https://www.epa.gov/biosolids/draft-sewage-sludge-risk-assessment-perfluorooctanoic-acid-pfoa-and-perfluorooctane>

# GRANT OPPORTUNITY

## U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service FY 2025 Tribal Wildlife Grant

**Deadline: June 20, 2025**

The Tribal Wildlife Grants Program provides technical and financial assistance to federally recognized Tribes for the development and implementation of programs that benefit fish and wildlife and their habitats. Funding may be used for conserving any plant or animal species of interest to a Tribe, including those of Native American cultural or traditional importance. Activities may include, but are not limited to:

- planning for wildlife and habitat conservation
- fish and wildlife conservation and management actions
- fish and wildlife related laboratory and field research
- habitat preservation

For more information, please visit: <https://www.fws.gov/service/tribal-wildlife-grants>

# EVENTS & WEBINARS

## Contaminated Site Clean-Up Information Training & Events

- May 15, 2025: ITRC – Contaminants of Emerging Concern Identification Framework
- May 20, 2025: ITRC PFAS Beyond the Basics – Topics on PFAS Biosolids (Sources, Transport, and Management of PFAS Surface Releases)
- June 3, 2025: ITRC PFAS Beyond the Basics – PFAS Treatment Technologies Training

To register: <https://clu-in.org/training/>

## EPA Small Drinking Water Systems Webinar Series

- May 20, 2025: Funding Resources for Lead Service Line Replacement and PFAS

To register: <https://www.epa.gov/water-research/small-drinking-water-systems-webinar-series>

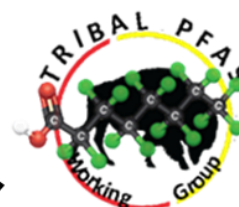
## EPA Water Utility Resilience Workshops and Webinars

- May 27, 2025: Addressing Contamination Incidents in RRAs and ERPs
- May 28, 2025: Cybersecurity Refresher
- May 29, 2025: Cybersecurity 102

To register: <https://www.epa.gov/waterresilience/register-epa-water-utility-resilience-events>

**SAVE THE DATE**

# PFAS IN PRODUCTS



**Thursday, June 12th**  
**11 AM (PDT)/2 PM (EDT)**

During this Tribal PFAS Working Group webinar, presenters will provide information on PFAS that may be found in your personal care products, household items, etc., and ways we can minimize our exposure.

Join via Zoom by clicking **HERE**

Meeting ID: 860 9712 2226 | Password: 368789



# NTWC MEMBERS

For more information on our members, visit [Meet the Council](#).

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