

## ISSUE BRIEF: BACKGROUND ON THE TOHONO O'ODHAM NATION

The Tohono O'odham Nation is a federally recognized, indigenous sovereign Tribe located in Southern and Central Arizona. The Nation has the second largest reservation in the United States, with a land base of 2.8 million acres (roughly the size of the state of Connecticut), but this is much reduced from the Nation's ancestral lands, which extend from what is now central Arizona into Sonora, Mexico.

The O'odham have lived and thrived in the Sonoran Desert since time immemorial. The O'odham are descendants of the Hohokam, who settled along the Salt, Gila, and Santa Cruz Rivers thousands of years ago. The Hohokam were master dwellers of the desert, creating sophisticated canal systems to irrigate their crops of cotton, tobacco, corn, beans, and squash. They built vast ball courts and huge ceremonial mounds and left behind fine red-on-buff pottery and exquisite jewelry of stone, shell, and clay.

Following that ancestral heritage, the O'odham used and continue to use meteorological principles to establish planting, harvesting, ceremonial cycles and we developed complex water storage and delivery systems. The historical O'odham learned to make the best of the desert environment, migrating with the seasons from homes in the valleys to cooler mountain dwellings. O'odham farmers raised a tapestry of crops, including tepary beans, squash, melon, and sugar cane. The ancestral O'odham gathered wild plants such as saguaro fruit, cholla buds, and mesquite bean pods, and hunted for only the meat that they needed from the plentiful wildlife, including deer, rabbit, and javelina

Today, there are over 37,000 enrolled Tribal members, with approximately half living on the Nation's reservation lands. The majority of these members live in 60 small and often remote communities that are spread throughout the Nation's lands. The center of the Nation's government is located in Sells, Arizona, which houses its Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches of government. The Nation also has eleven duly elected district governments.

Approximately 62 miles of the Nation's lands are contiguous to the US-Mexico international border. The 1854 Gadsden Purchase established a boundary designation between the U.S. and Mexico that divided the Nation's ancestral lands, and many of its families. Approximately 3,000 enrolled Tribal members continue to reside on ancestral lands in Sonora, Mexico to this day.

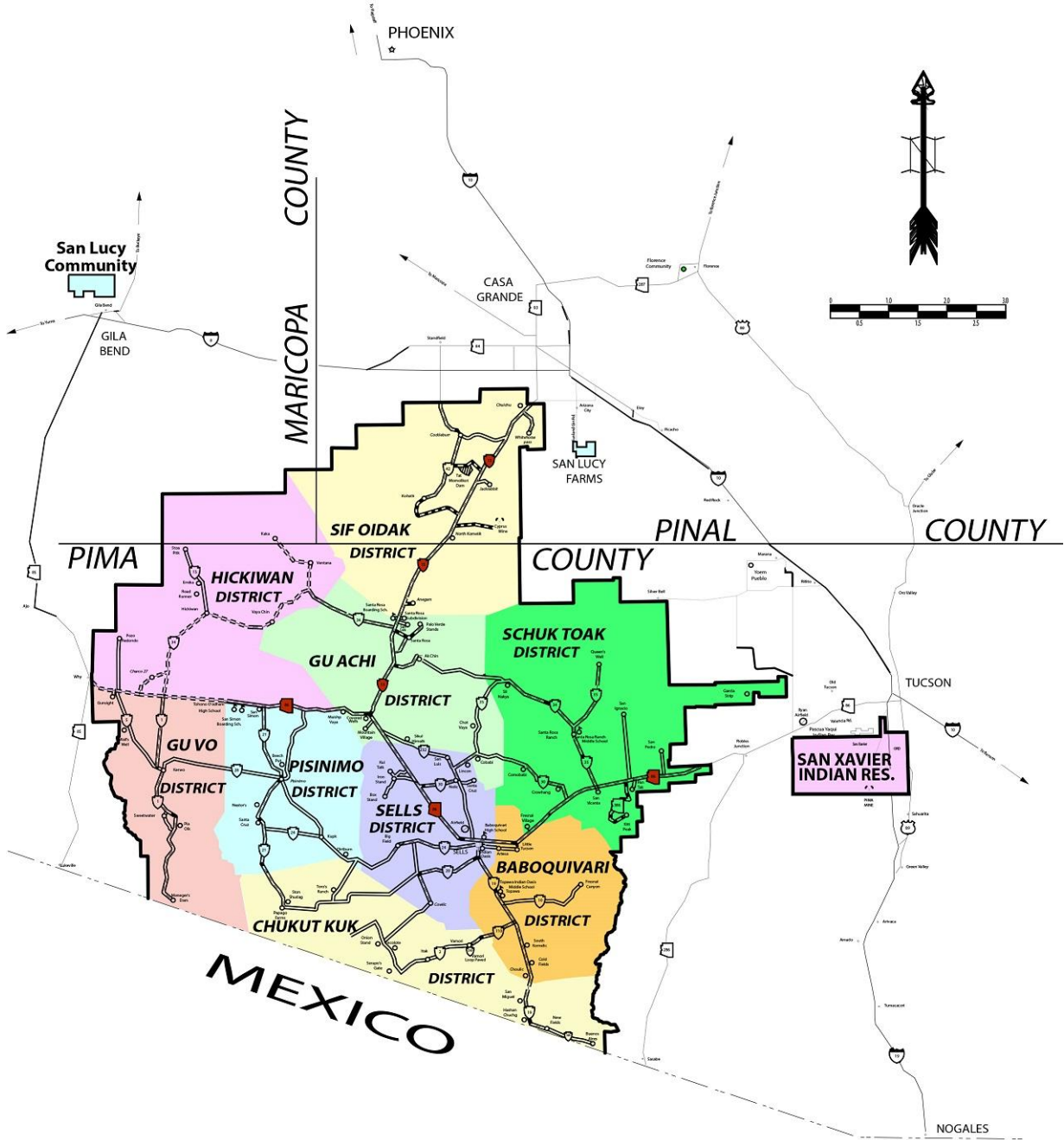
Tribal members make frequent, sometimes daily, trips across the international border to visit family, conduct business, access services, visit sacred cultural sites, and perform religious ceremonies. Members of the Nation also continue to practice salt pilgrimages, traveling by foot from the interior desert to the coast of the Gulf of California to collect salt and seashells and pray at the site of the sacred waters. Tribal members make regular visits to other sacred sites throughout the Nation's ancestral and reservation lands, including to the Quitobaquito Springs in the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, which traditionally served as a waypoint for pilgrimages.

Gaming revenues have enabled the Nation to make great strides in addressing health care, law enforcement, education, job creation and other areas. But much work still needs to be done to meet the significant needs that exist, even as millions of dollars in Nation funds are spent each year on border security impacts.

**Verlon M. Jose**  
Chairman

**Carla L. Johnson**  
Vice Chairwoman

# TOHONO O'ODHAM NATION



Map showing the 11 Districts of the Tohono O'odham Nation and its border with Mexico

