THE TRIBAL EXCHANGE NETWORK GROUP'S

# STRATEGIC PLAN FOR 2020-2025

*Revised October 5, 2021*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*This document outlines strategies for increasing tribal capacity to manage and share environmental information, improving communication and collaboration, and expanding access to funding and technology that help tribes address their environmental concerns.*

The **Environmental Information Exchange Network** ("Exchange Network" or "EN") is a partner-driven, collaborative information network that facilitates data sharing among tribes, states, territories, and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), through shared and reusable data services, tools, and networks. The goal of the Exchange Network is to foster better environmental management and decision-making through increased access to timely, high-quality environmental information.

The **Tribal Exchange Network Group (TXG)** (formerly the Tribal Governance Group) is an EPA-sponsored Tribal Partnership Group. The TXG's purpose is to advance and support tribal involvement in the Exchange Network (EN) through direct outreach to, support for, and engagement with tribal programs.  The TXG aims to inform the EPA and other EN partners about the unique considerations of environmental protection and natural resource management on tribal lands, and the importance of respecting tribal sovereignty. The TXG identifies issues regarding information technology and data management systems that impact tribal environmental programs to ensure tribal perspectives and concerns are considered when determining EN-related funding priorities and management decisions.

Through our on-going efforts engaging with tribal staff nationally, the TXG identified areas to work with EPA and other partners to strengthen and enhance tribal program support  for expanding their environmental data and information management capabilities. Though a few tribes regularly secure funding to develop Exchange Network and data management capacity, there continues to be a significant disparity in the amounts and distribution of funding to tribes compared to states. The TXG conducted a needs assessment on tribal capacity that identified specific challenges, including:

- A lack of appropriate training and technical support resources for tribes to manage environmental data and information technology systems,
- A lack of awareness among tribal staff as to the effective utilization of funding opportunities and specifically leveraging the technology solutions available through the EN, and
- Restrictions on the use of grant funds for maintaining costs of long-term, complex projects, as well as frequent changes to grant program priorities, which create disproportionate challenges for tribes with limited resources and access to technology.

Through it's  commitment to building tribal capacity, the TXG is currently focusing on strategies that enhance the skills, resources, and connections tribes need to develop and sustain robust data and information-sharing capabilities needed to participate in, and leverage the benefits of, the Exchange Network. ***The Tribal Exchange Network Group's (TXG) Strategic Plan for 2020-2025** ("Strategic Plan"),* outlines three goals  to further support tribes to as they work to protect the health of their environments and their communities:

- Increase tribal capacity to efficiently manage, analyze, and share environmental information by improving access to training and mentoring for tribal staff;
- Improve collaboration, coordination, and outreach that advances tribal participation in Exchange Network activities;

- Expand access to funding, tools, and resources that enhance equitability and opportunities for tribes and provide scalable, sustainable solutions that meet tribal needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the disparities faced by tribal agencies and the communities they serve, which often lack reliable access to broadband internet services and computing equipment needed to not only submit data electronically once a quarter, but suddenly tend to almost all of their work activities to be conducted remotely, which has been a challenge for many rural and underserved communities. These inequities created further burdens for tribal agency staff to meet reporting requirements, share crucial data with decision-makers, or conduct their work safely because they lack the tools required for remote access and online communication. With the reliance of Exchange Network systems on modern telecommunications infrastructure, it is imperative that these underlying access issues are addressed in order to make sufficient advancements in tribal participation.

The TXG believes these strategies can further support and sustain tribal environmental capacity by providing access to fundamental tools and essential resources that are crucial for increasing parity to tribal environmental protection activities supported by the EPA. We will work in cooperation with EPA and other EN partners to develop and assess our annual work plan of activities, which will help us work collaboratively towards these goals. Throughout the five-year period covered by this Plan, the TXG will review accomplishments, identify unresolved challenges, and redefine changes needed to better meet our goal of supporting tribal involvement in the Exchange Network.

The TXG is committed to expanding access to appropriate training and technical resources, increasing collaborations with partners, and advocating for equitable funding and support for tribes to implement, and sustain, technology projects. With improved access to adequate technical support, effective collaborations, and sustainable funding, the TXG envisions more tribes using the power of their data to protect their lands and lifeways for future generations.

## BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The Environmental Information Exchange Network ("Exchange Network" or "EN") is a partner-driven, collaborative information network that facilitates data sharing among tribes, states, territories, and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), through shared and reusable data services, tools, and networks. The goal of the Exchange Network is to foster better environmental management and decision-making through increased access to timely, high-quality environmental information. The shared governance principles and reusable technology solutions and standards of EN are fundamental to the E-Enterprise for the Environment (EE) initiative. EE is aimed at modernizing and streamlining environmental business processes and advancing collaborations among EN and EE partners. The shared governing structure allows for tribes, states, territories, and EPA to collectively address issues and constituents' concerns to improve environmental information access. The Tribal Governance Group (TGG) formed in 2008 as an ad hoc committee focused on supporting tribal involvement in the EN by advocating for adequate grant funding opportunities to build capacity for tribal programs.

The **Tribal Exchange Network Group (TXG)** (formerly the Tribal Governance Group) is a Tribal Partnership Group supported by the US EPA for the purpose of engaging and including tribes in Exchange Network opportunities. The TXG is guided by its mission to support tribes' management, analysis, and sharing of their environmental data, so they can use this data to advocate for their interests in order to preserve tribal lifeways, maintain cultural integrity, and enhance tribal members' sense of place. The activities of the TXG are conducted by volunteer members from tribes and tribal organizations, in accordance with the TXG Charter, and in cooperation with EPA and tribal partners. The work of the TXG is supported by funding from EPA's Office of Mission Support-Environmental Information (OMS-EI) under a 5-Year cooperative agreement awarded to the Northern Arizona University's Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals (ITEP). The TXG works with tribes nationally to share information about the Exchange Network and inform the EPA and other EN partners about the concerns and needs of tribal programs. The result is to support tribes in improving the management and communication of environmental data to meet their objectives.

## PURPOSE

This ***Strategic Plan for 2020-2025 ("Strategic Plan")*** identifies key steps that the TXG can take to better support tribal programs building capacity for data management, sharing, and use, so they can be better equipped to work towards implementing Exchange Network objectives. This document will inform the development of the TXG's work plan over the coming five years by outlining a path forward for increasing tribal capacity to manage and share environmental information, improving communication and collaboration between tribes and EPA, and expanding access to funding resources and technology solutions that help tribes address their environmental concerns and promote tribal sovereignty.

## CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

According to the TXG's 2018 Tribal Needs Assessment, respondents reported that sharing data (either with internal or external stakeholders) was important to their environmental programs, however, many reported being unfamiliar with the EPA's EN grant funding or other resources available to help tribes develop their data management capacity and decision-making. The respondents identified many challenges where their programs lacked sufficient capacity, knowledge, and resources that would enable them to take full advantage of solutions in meeting their environmental protection goals. Through our on-going efforts

engaging with tribal staff from across the nation, the TXG has identified areas to with EPA and other partners to improve the support available to tribal programs as they work to expand their environmental data and information management capabilities. The TXG has identified three focus areas to address these concerns and making progress towards improving tribal data management and sharing capabilities, collaboration opportunities, and enhancing technical solutions and strategies that strengthen tribal capacity.

**Training & Mentoring Support to Increase Tribal Capacity:** To understand the value of their data and how to leverage technology to transform it into meaningful information, tribes need relevant training and mentoring resources. These learning experiences can reinforce fundamental skills and build confidence to establish connections tribes need to grow and sustain their programs. Lack of resources to support training for tribes on data management concepts and tools negatively impacts tribes' ability to be adequately prepared to take full advantage of the EN. The TXG can conduct mentoring for tribal staff on available resources and strategies for implementing successful projects and engage with user communities that enhance tribal capacity to collect, manage, analyze, and share environmental data and information electronically. By coordinating with EPA and tribal partners, TXG can identify and communicate ways to improve existing training resources available to tribes and better meet tribal-specific training needs.

**Improvements to Collaboration and Coordination:** As the Exchange Network evolved to become integrated with the E-Enterprise initiative, tribes have a wider range of opportunities to contribute to collaborative project teams and technical workgroups, as well as the E-Enterprise Leadership Council (EELC). However, many of these activities focus on state and EPA priorities that are not always directly relevant to tribal programs. TXG's unique position of not being tied to specific media improves collaboration and coordination efforts among different media programs and partners working with environmental data and technology. The TXG can provide guidance and direction for a dedicated "TXG Coordinator" and develop communication and outreach strategies to further support tribal engagement in the TXG and the Exchange Network.

**Enhance Resources that Support Tribes:** Tribal participation in the Exchange Network has long been impacted by disparities in resource access for implementing environmental programs across the US EPA, in particular when compared to funds allocated for state programs. Tribes often lack access to general revenue funds and may be reliant on grant funds for establishing and managing their environmental programs. Imbalanced and inequitable funding has long-term and wide-spread consequences as Tribes continue to develop their EN efforts, which typically have high cost to establish and maintain. Restrictions on the use and applicability of EN grant funds for operations & maintenance (O&M) costs create persistent challenges for tribal programs, which typically operate on very limited resources. These conditions have resulted in discontinued or abandoned projects once EN funding supportends. The rapidly changing world of information technology and data management solutions offers immense opportunity to tribes to support their environmental programs and decision-making using their own data. Yet, grant program funds which tribes rely upon to establish, maintain, and grow their programs, have either decreased or remained static over the span of TXG's existence. Tribes need real, practical solutions and sufficient resources to help them continue to build and expand their data management capabilities. By advocating for more balanced funding support and working with EPA partners to identify and leverage existing resources that enhance tribal programs, the TXG can help promote tribal equity and Exchange Network inclusion.

**GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The following goals and objectives set forth imperative issues for the TXG to continue to address in carrying out its mission of supporting tribes. The TXG will use these goals and objectives to guide the development of the TXG's annual work plans and prioritize activities to help accomplish these goals. The TXG will work in cooperation with the US EPA (Office of Mission Support) to improve support for environmental data management and sharing activities that meet tribal needs and respect tribal sovereignty.

**Goal 1: Enhance Tribal Capacity to Collect, Manage, Analyze, and Share Environmental Data and Information Electronically**

Objectives:

1) Identify skills and competencies needed by tribal programs by seeking input from tribal and EPA partners.
2) Serve as an incubator for tribal training and technical assistance activities by identifying ways to improve existing training resources for tribal staff.
3) Engage regularly with EPA staff and leadership by sharing feedback on how EPA can better meet tribal-specific training needs.
4) Participate in communities of practice that support tribal professionals by serving as a mentor and sharing knowledge with other tribes.
5) Expand workforce development opportunities for tribes by identifying appropriate internships that support tribal Exchange Network projects.

**Goal 2: Improve Collaboration and Coordination between Tribal Program Officials and EPA Partners to Support Tribal Involvement in the EN**

Objectives:

1) Provide clear direction and guidance for a "Tribal EN Coordinator/Liaison" position to support the communication and collaboration needs by identifying outcomes.
2) Communicate TXG priorities to tribal Programs, EPA, EN, and EE partners to inform joint action planning efforts through regular coordination activities.
3) Promote engagement in the TXG, Exchange Network, and E-Enterprise through outreach activities that highlight the importance of tribal participation.
4) Educate federal and state partners represented in EN and EE activities and inform them of unique challenges of the Tribal Environmental Programs.

**Goal 3: Expand Access to Resources for Tribes that Enhance and Sustain Tribal Participation in the Exchange Network**

Objectives:

1) Advocate for increases to the amount and types of funding available to tribes through EPA grant programs and other initiatives.
2) Promote EN resources that support tribal decision-making activities and are accessible to tribes operating programs with varying levels of capacity, by identifying solutions for the development and integration of open-source tools and Enterprise License Agreements (ELAs) for tribal programs.
3) Communicate information to tribes on the variety of options and considerations for interfacing with the EN, including funding constraints.
4) Engage with tribal and EPA partners to identify strategies to address on-going needs and emerging issues relevant to tribes.

## IMPLEMENTATION AND ASSESSMENT

The TXG will use this Strategic Plan as a guide for developing annual work plans and action plans to help identify specific activities and associated resources needed to achieve the goals outlined above. The TXG considers this Strategic Plan, including the goals and objectives identified, to be a "living document," the contents of which will be reassessed regularly to allow for flexible and responsive approaches that meet the ever-changing needs of tribes. Work planning will be conducted in cooperation with EPA partners, under the cooperative agreement that supports TXG, to ensure adequate resources and administrative support are provided to accomplish the goals of this plan. Whenever possible, activities will be identified that leverage or contribute to related existing EPA and TXG efforts with complementary objectives. Annually, and at the conclusion of the five-year term of this plan, the TXG will evaluate the overall effectiveness of their strategies in meeting the goals identified. Metrics and measures for each goal will be identified as part of the work plan development process and reported on in annual accomplishments reports.

## CONCLUSION

The TXG aims to use these strategies to improve the types and amount of support available to tribes to ensure they can effectively access and benefit from the technology solutions offered by EPA and the Exchange Network. By providing equitable access to the funding resources and tools available to states, and improving coordination and communication around tribal opportunities, needs, and concerns, the TXG aims to expand tribal capacity for managing and sharing environmental data to support decision-making. The TXG will work with tribal, EPA, and other partners to identify solutions that provide adequate support, information, and resources relevant to tribes, and advocate for equity and inclusion for tribes to participate in the EN. Through these activities, the TXG will continue its work enabling tribes to use the power of their data to protect their lands and lifeways for future generations.

# APPENDIX

## TXG 5-YEAR WORK PLANNING OVERVIEW

*The TXG works in cooperation with the US EPA to provide input, guidance, and general support for the ITEP cooperative agreement activities as appropriate and aligns its annual work plan activities to accomplish the goals and objectives of the TXG's 5-year Strategic Plan (2020-2025). Collectively, these activities fall into four general categories:*

- *TXG Operations*
- *Mentorship & Training*
- *Outreach & Promotion*
- *Coordination & Communication*

1. **TXG Operations (Strategic Plan Goals #1, #2, #3)**
   a. Conduct standing TXG calls (monthly, with additional calls as needed)
   b. Conduct TXG's Annual Review and Work Planning Meetings
   c. Implement 5-year strategic plan, including annual review and evaluation
2. **Training & Mentoring support for tribal staff (Strategic Plan Goal #1)**
   a. Collaborate with ITEP and EPA partners to identify training and mentoring support options for tribal staff
      i. Evaluate tribal needs for training and mentoring support
      ii. Identify appropriate trainers and technical experts
      iii. Provide input on training standards, delivery methods, and scheduling
   b. Contribute to training and mentorship activities, webinars, workshops, etc. to share experiences with other tribal staff
      i. Advise development of Tribal Data Academy & other training activities such as workshops and mentoring sessions
      ii. Serve as facilitators, helpers, or content experts, where appropriate
      iii. Engage with Communities of Practice that foster professional connections for tribes
   c. Participate in professional development activities that expand TXG's ability to provide support
   d. Share recommendations for tribal internship opportunities, including identifying prospective interns, projects, and support needs
3. **Outreach & Promotion to Tribes (Strategic Plan Goals #2 / #3)**
   a. Actively promote membership opportunities and value to prospective TXG members
   b. Contribute to bi-annual (?) Tribal EN Conference planning activities, and attend event
      i. Define event goals and describe key activities and/or features needed
      ii. Identify and recruit prospective speakers, collaborators, outside vendors, and event hosts
      iii. Contribute to developing sessions or activities, including panel presentations, posters, mini-workshops, etc.
      iv. Serve as a session moderator or volunteer to assist tribal attendees
      v. Contribute to debriefing and evaluation activities to provide feedback to event organizers and EPA partners
   c. Refine strategies to improve outreach and communication activities
      i. Identify content relevant to tribal audiences for website, social media, and general outreach materials
      ii. Contribute to developing messaging for TXG promotional materials

# APPENDIX

        iii. Contribute to conducting outreach and communication with tribal audiences, including videos, webinars, presentations, poster sessions, networking events.

    d. Conduct outreach to tribal environment and natural resource program audiences on current and emerging initiatives related to the Exchange Network, including:

        i. Assist in promotion of Annual EN Grant solicitation (project examples, mentors, collaborators)

        ii. Sharing Tribal EN and TXG member stories (webinars/presentations/story maps)

        iii. Engaging with tribal program partners and collaborators to stay informed of tribal needs and concerns

4. **Coordination & Engagement with EN partners, including tribes, states, & EPA (Strategic Plan Goals #2 / #3)**

    a. Refine coordination and engagement strategy that focuses on tribal priorities and needs

        i. Define scope of work for Tribal Liaison/Coordinator to support EN & tribes

        ii. Identify target audiences and key messaging

        iii. Identify methods and activities needed for successful implementation

    b. Respond to EPA's annual EN grant solicitation stakeholder feedback opportunities

    c. Participate in regular coordination calls and activities with EPA OMS and other offices as needed

    d. Communicate TXG priorities and input to the National Tribal Caucus recommendations for EPA budget considerations for tribes

    e. Review and respond to relevant notices for tribal consultation or requests for public comment

    f. Participate in planning committee for and attend bi-annual National EE/EN meetings

    g. Participate in designated EE governance groups and/or project teams, including MB, IOT, and/or EELC, as appropriate.*

    h. Support EE governance tribal members with technical expertise and input, as needed*

*Official EE governance activities are determined by the EELC, and membership duties are performed only by approved tribal representatives. The activities of tribal members serving on the EELC, Management Board, and EE project teams are supported by EPA OCFO; activities of tribal members on the IOT are supported by EPA OMS. The work of the TXG is supported by EPA OMS, and is not considered part of the formal EELC governance structure.*