



# OKA' DROP

## THE OKA' INSTITUTE



### WELCOME

Spring in Oklahoma never fails to keep us on our toes— this year was no exception. With severe storms sweeping across the state and some unexpected shifts in federal grant programs, the season came with its share of challenges. But at the Oka' Institute, we've seen firsthand how resilience, collaboration, and creativity can carry us forward.

Despite headwinds, this quarter has been full of progress. From supporting rural communities advance infrastructure planning to receiving national recognition through the Pulaski Award, our work—and the work of our partners—is making an impact where it matters most.

One of the season's highlights was the inaugural Southern Plains Land Stewardship Summit, where producers, professionals, and tribal partners came together to share knowledge and strengthen connections across our region. It's proof that when we unite around shared goals, we spark momentum that lasts far beyond a single event.

As we look ahead, we remain committed to supporting Oklahoma communities through sustainable water planning, strategic partnerships, and strong local leadership. Thank you for walking alongside us. Together, we're building something that lasts.

– Duane Smith, Executive Director

# blue river

**“THIS PROJECT BRINGS TOGETHER LANDOWNERS, TRIBAL LEADERSHIP, SCIENTISTS, AND CONSERVATIONISTS WITH A SHARED GOAL: TO RESTORE THE HEALTH OF THE BLUE RIVER THROUGH GRASSROOTS ACTION AND LASTING PARTNERSHIPS.”**

## **Restoring the Blue River through Collaborative Conservation**

The Oka’ Institute, in partnership with the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and the Pontotoc County Conservation District, has been awarded a multi-year grant from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to restore 15,000 acres of impaired habitat along the culturally and ecologically significant Blue River. This effort, funded through the BIA’s Tribal Climate Resilience program, will run from FY 2024 to FY 2026 and directly supports regional goals for water quality improvement, habitat restoration, and climate resilience. Through this project, the Oka’ Institute and its partners will work directly with landowners to implement best management practices such as native plantings, riparian fencing, prescribed fire, and grazing plans. Landowners will receive technical support and financial incentives based on acreage or practice type.



Conservation outcomes will be tracked using an ESRI dashboard developed by Oka, while ABC will lead monitoring efforts, including pre- and post-restoration bird surveys. By combining Indigenous knowledge, science-based practices, and local partnerships, this initiative aims to safeguard the Blue River’s ecological health and cultural importance for future generations.





## HONORED WITH PULASKI AWARD

### Oka' Institute and Partners Receive Pulaski Award for Advancing Community Resilience

This spring, the Oka' Institute was honored to receive the U.S. Forest Service Pulaski Award—an esteemed national recognition for excellence in fire management and community collaboration. Named after Edward Pulaski, a legendary Forest Service ranger known for his heroic leadership during the Great Fire of 1910, the award is given to groups or individuals who demonstrate outstanding performance in the advancement of wildland fire operations. The recognition was awarded for the Oka' Institute's work alongside a diverse coalition of partners including the Oklahoma Prescribed Burn Association, Oklahoma Conservation Commission,



Lake of the Arbuckles Watershed Association, and the Chickasaw Nation. Together, the team has supported landowners in building a healthy fire culture that improves ecological health, protects property, and strengthens watershed resilience across south-central Oklahoma. "This award is not just a reflection of one group's efforts—it's a celebration of what's possible when community leaders, conservationists, and landowners come together," said Duane Smith, Executive Director of the Oka' Institute.

"We're proud to support prescribed fire as a proven land stewardship tool, and even more proud of the people who make it happen." From strategic planning and training to community outreach and on-the-ground support, the Oka' Institute has played a key role in advancing sustainable fire practices that reduce wildfire risk, restore native grasslands, and promote long-term water security. The Pulaski Award shines a national spotlight on this locally-driven work—and affirms that rural Oklahoma is leading the way in innovative land and water solutions.





Defending America's Grasslands

# SOUTHERN PLAINS

LAND STEWARDSHIP SUMMIT

## STEWARDING LAND, SUSTAINING LEGACY

On May 28–29, more than 50 landowners, producers, tribal leaders, conservationists, and students gathered at Lake Murray Lodge in Ardmore, Oklahoma, for a first-of-its-kind event—the Southern Plains Land Stewardship Summit. Co-hosted by the Oka’ Institute and the Chickasaw Nation, the summit spotlighted collaborative, science-based approaches to land management rooted in respect for tradition, sustainability, and community resilience.



## HIGHLIGHTS INCLUDED:

- **Hands-On Learning:** Attendees participated in breakout sessions focused on regenerative grazing, prescribed fire, riparian health, carbon markets, and federal and tribal cost-share opportunities.
- **Tribal Ecological Knowledge:** Presenters emphasized the importance of Indigenous land stewardship practices and the integration of traditional knowledge into modern conservation.
- **Evening Networking:** A chuckwagon dinner and social hour gave participants time to connect, share stories, and build lasting relationships across sectors.

**“COLLABORATION—  
FROM TRIBAL  
COMMUNITIES AND  
PRODUCERS TO  
RESEARCHERS AND  
POLICY ADVOCATES.”**

“This summit brought together voices that often work in parallel and rarely in the same room,” said Duane Smith, Executive Director of the Oka’ Institute. “It’s a powerful reminder that sustainable land management starts with collaboration—from tribal communities and producers to researchers and policy advocates.” As land and water challenges grow more complex across the region, the Oka’ Institute remains committed to advancing stewardship practices that strengthen both ecosystems and economies.



# ROOTED IN RESILIENCE

## Ravia's Journey Toward Strong Water Infrastructure

In Ravia, Oklahoma, identifying the problem was never the hard part — the real challenge was figuring out how to move forward. For years, floodwaters have compromised the town's municipal water system, threatening service reliability and straining limited resources. Like many rural communities, Ravia faced aging infrastructure, a lean staff, and an uphill climb toward lasting solutions.

That's where the Sustainable Communities Hub stepped in — not as a quick fix, but as a steady partner. Over the past year, Ravia's community leaders and public works staff have worked hand-in-hand with the Hub team to assess vulnerabilities, prioritize needs, and develop a realistic plan of action. Through regular check-ins and trusted collaboration, the town secured more than \$1.5 million in funding for critical water system upgrades.

“When the flood hit, we didn't have the option to wait — we just got to work. I'm proud of how our team handled it, kept the water system operational, and stayed focused under pressure.

This time, though, there's a real difference: we've got funding on the table, and a plan to fix the recurring issues we've faced. That's thanks to the support from the Community Hub and the organizations backing this work. We've still got a lot ahead, but for the first time in a long time, I think we're on track to get this right.”

— JW Rogers, Public Works Director



### Planned Improvements:

- Elevating flood-prone infrastructure
- Modernizing system controls
- Investing in long-term resilience strategies

The Hub's role has been one of support — offering technical guidance, navigating funding pathways, and connecting local leaders with key partners. But the real driving force behind the progress? Ravia's people. Local leaders didn't just participate — they led. They showed up, asked the hard questions, and stayed committed through every twist and turn. Their persistence laid the groundwork for real change.

Then, just as momentum began to build, another flood hit. Emergency response was swift. The Chickasaw Nation and other partners provided key support. But it was Ravia's own public works team — led by Public Works Director JW Rogers — who rose to the occasion. They worked around the clock to protect vital infrastructure and keep the water system online, even as floodwaters pushed the system to its limits.

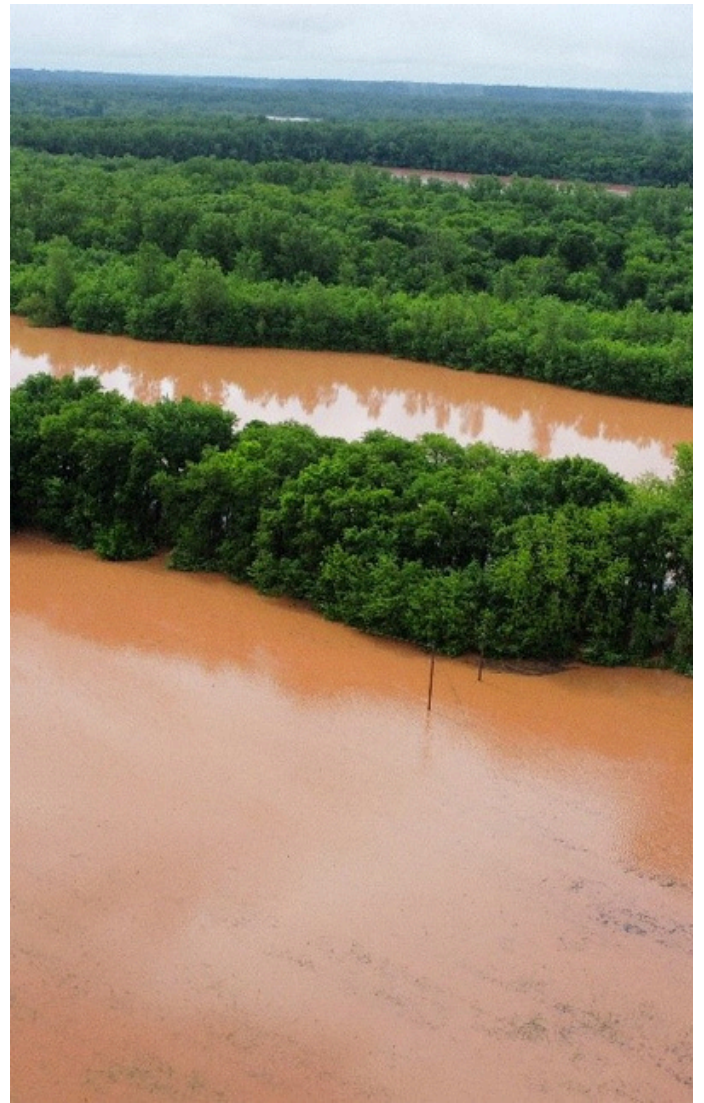
# FROM FLOOD TO FUTURE

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## Ravia Charts a New Course with Support from the Community Hub

This kind of resilience isn't just built on funding or technical expertise — though both are essential. It's built on people. It's built on local leadership, deep commitment, and the kind of steady partnerships that show up not only in times of crisis, but in the day-to-day work of building capacity, trust, and forward momentum.

Ravia will face future storms — that's inevitable. But now, the town is better prepared. With a clear plan, secured resources, and a growing network of support through the Community Hub, Ravia is no longer just reacting to problems — it's building toward solutions that last.



# SAVE THE DATE

JOHN AND KAY HARGRAVE WATER  
SUSTAINABILITY CONFERENCE

10.21 — 10.23



# Turning Trash Into Treasure: Oka' Institute Sponsors Glass Recycling Program at ECU



## Why Recycling Matters    What Can Be Recycled?    How to Recycle Properly

Glass is a material that can endlessly reused without losing purity or strength. By keeping glass out of landfills, we reduce long-term environmental impact, lower energy use in manufacturing, and conserve raw materials like sand and limestone.

### **Glass bottles:**

- Clear, green, and brown beverage bottles
- Wine bottles
- Beer bottles
- Juice bottles
- Glass condiment bottles (like hot sauce or soy sauce)

To recycle glass properly, rinse out bottles, remove caps or corks, and drop them off clean and label-free —no ceramics, mirrors, or light bulbs.

To learn more, follow the ECU Glass Recycling Program Facebook page or stop by the Ada Farmers Market.



# FIRE ON THE PRAIRE

## ARRA LEADS THE CHARGE IN RESTORING THE ARBUCKLES

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### 21 HISTORIC **BURNS** IN MURRAY COUNTY

This spring, the Arbuckle Rangeland Restoration Association (ARRA) treated more than 16,000 acres across Murray County and the surrounding region through 21 prescribed burns—making 2025 one of their busiest and most impactful seasons to date.

ARRA, a local Prescribed Burn Association (PBA), operates under a “neighbor helping neighbor” model, uniting landowners and agency personnel to restore Oklahoma’s native landscapes. These efforts combat invasive eastern red cedar, reduce wildfire risk, and improve water recharge—all while supporting biodiversity and ecosystem health.



In collaboration with partners like the Lake of the Arbuckles Watershed Association, Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture, and the Oklahoma Conservation Commission, ARRA’s work is building a lasting fire culture in the Arbuckles. In two notable burns this spring, the team consumed so much biomass that pyro-cumulus clouds formed—a rare visual marker of significant ecological restoration. Prescribed fire is one of the most effective and affordable tools to combat cedar encroachment, and ARRA continues to lead by example. Interested in getting involved or learning more about fire on the landscape? Visit the Oklahoma Prescribed Burn Association (OPBA) website to find a PBA.