



May 8, 2026

OKA' DROP

THE OKA' INSTITUTE



WELCOME

As we continue advancing the mission of the Oka' Institute, I am proud to share another edition of The Oka' Drop. Each quarter, this newsletter highlights the meaningful work taking place across our focus areas including sustainable communities, land stewardship, water planning, and water research.

At Oka', we believe strong partnerships, science-based solutions, and community driven collaboration are essential to building a more sustainable future for Oklahoma and beyond. From supporting rural and Tribal communities with infrastructure and resilience planning to engaging the next generation through education and outreach,

our team remains committed to creating lasting impact. This edition reflects the dedication of our staff, partners, researchers, students, and communities who continue to move this work forward every day. Thank you for your continued support and for being part of the Oka' network. We are excited to share these updates with you and look forward to the opportunities ahead.

Sincerely,

Duane Smith,
Executive Director

LAND

STEWARDSHIP



Prescribed Fire and Watershed Resilience

From January through April 2026, the Oka' Institute's Land Stewardship program was actively engaged across south central Oklahoma during the traditional dormant season burn window. In partnership with landowners and Prescribed Burn Associations, our team supported more than 60 prescribed fires and site visits to evaluate fuel loads, inspect firebreaks, and plan burn units. These efforts are rooted in a clear purpose: restoring balance to the landscape while strengthening the long-term health of our water resources. Across the region, eastern redcedar encroachment continues to threaten rangeland productivity, wildlife habitat, and watershed function.

Through prescribed fire and targeted land management, we are working alongside landowners to address these challenges in a way that benefits both the land and the communities that depend on it. Prescribed fire plays a critical role in this work. By reducing woody encroachment and excess fuel, these burns help restore native grasslands, improve forage availability, and create healthier habitats for wildlife. Just as importantly, they support soil health and water infiltration. When dense cedar is removed, less water is lost to evapotranspiration, allowing more rainfall to reach the soil and move through the watershed system more effectively.



Kevin Blackwood taking drone photos of a fire.

Blue River Watershed Stewardship in Action

Investing in people, practices, and partnerships to build healthier land and more sustainable water systems.

This work is closely connected to the Blue River watershed through the Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal Climate Resilience grant. In partnership with the Chickasaw Nation and the Oaks and Prairies Joint Venture, the Oka' Institute is helping advance land management practices that strengthen water sustainability while building long-term capacity within the region. A key part of this effort is supporting local Prescribed Burn Associations. Through collaboration with the Oklahoma Prescribed Burn Association, both the Johnston County and Pontotoc Ridge PBAs are receiving new equipment to expand their capabilities and improve safety.

Johnston County Prescribed Burn Association (PBA) has already begun implementing Phase 1 of this investment to strengthen prescribed fire capacity across the region. Current purchases include a UTV, three high-pressure sprayers, and a custom prescribed burn trailer currently under construction. The trailer will transport the UTV sprayers, drip torches, leaf blowers, and other essential prescribed fire equipment. Phase 1 will be completed in the coming weeks as both Johnston County PBA and Pontotoc Ridge PBA receive 800-gallon nurse trailers to provide water support on remote prescribed burn units.



Cole Fagen picturing a burn.

Through this work, the Oka' Institute continues to connect land stewardship with water sustainability, demonstrating that healthy landscapes are essential to resilient communities.

Phase 2 investments are also planned and will include additional prescribed fire equipment for Pontotoc Ridge PBA, including a UTV, sprayer, radios, and other tools to support prescribed fire operations and equipment maintenance.



Alan Peoples and Cole Fagen

Practical Stewardship on the Ground

Alongside capacity building, the program is also supporting landowners directly through incentive payments for on-the-ground practices. These include mechanical brush control, prescribed fire, and the construction and maintenance of firebreaks. Each of these practices contributes to healthier, more resilient landscapes by improving infiltration, reducing water loss, and supporting the long-term function of both rangeland and riparian systems. What makes this work especially impactful is the collaboration behind it. Landowners, PBAs, and partner organizations are working together to plan and implement safe, well-coordinated burns while building knowledge and confidence across the region. The result is not just individual projects, but a growing network of people committed to stewardship and sustainability. Photos from recent burn units, including the Fagen and Horton sites, capture these efforts in action. From active flame fronts and rising smoke columns to on the ground documentation of fire behavior, each image tells part of the story of how prescribed fire is being used as a tool to restore land and protect water resources.

S U S T A I N A B L E

COMMUNITIES



Building Lasting Relationships Through the Hub

Across Oklahoma, many rural and Tribal communities face similar challenges when it comes to infrastructure and resilience planning. There is competitive funding opportunities to state and federal programs, many communities lack the technical capacity, planning resources, and coordination needed to move projects from ideas to implementation.

Oka' Institute's Sustainable Communities Hub was developed to help fill that gap.

Through structured community engagement, data collection, planning support, and project coordination, the Hub helps communities move from early discussions to shovel-ready projects prepared to compete for funding opportunities. Oka's work focuses on creating long-term readiness by helping communities identify needs, organize priorities, strengthen partnerships, and build the documentation often required for infrastructure and resilience funding applications.

This work reinforces a growing reality across rural development efforts that communities do not just need funding. They need a system that enables funding readiness. The Sustainable Communities Hub provides communities with technical support and coordination that can be difficult to access locally. From infrastructure mapping and risk assessments to funding navigation and stakeholder engagement, Oka' works alongside communities to help position projects for long-term success.

As resilience and infrastructure funding programs continue to evolve, trusted technical partnerships are becoming increasingly important. Oka' Institute remains committed to serving as that partner by helping rural and Tribal communities strengthen capacity, improve readiness, and compete more effectively for opportunities that support sustainable growth and long-term community resilience.



WATER FEST

INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION

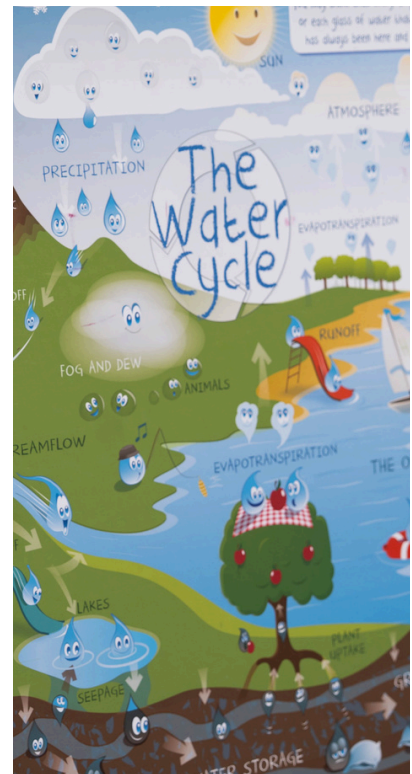


SUPPORTING WATER EDUCATION AT WATER FEST

Oka' Institute was proud to participate in Water Fest at East Central University with joining partners from EPA, Chickasaw Nation, Choctaw Nation, ODEQ, ECU BES, OSU Extension, OSU Geology Dept, OWRB who helped deliver hands-on water education to hundreds of local fifth-grade students.

Throughout the day, over 300 students from Ada and Byng elementary schools were in attendance. Students rotated through interactive stations designed to introduce key water concepts in a way that was both engaging and easy to understand. From exploring how groundwater moves beneath the surface to learning about conservation practices and water quality, each activity helped connect classroom knowledge to real-world systems. Oka' staff contributed by helping facilitate learning experiences that highlighted the importance of water in Oklahoma communities. These conversations not only reinforced scientific concepts, but also helped students begin to understand the role water plays in supporting public health,

agriculture, and economic development. Events like Water Fest demonstrate the impact of collaboration among Federal, State, Tribal and local agencies on creating a meaningful educational experience, emphasizing the shared responsibility of protecting and managing water resources. By participating in efforts like this, Oka' continues to support early education and outreach by teaching the next generation to understand the importance of water.



Protecting What Matters:

WETLAND STEWARDSHIP



Caleb Calhoun, Jennie Mosley, and Andrew Whitaker



Matt Bailey taking GPS coordinates where water samples are being taken.



Native shrub growing on the Brunk wetland property.

Partnership with the Chickasaw Nation

Wetlands are some of the most valuable and often overlooked biological ecosystems in the environment. They play a critical role in improving water quality, reducing flood impacts, supporting wildlife habitat, and maintaining the overall health of watersheds. In regions like south-central Oklahoma, where water resources are closely tied to both environmental and community well-being, understanding and protecting wetlands is essential.

That importance is driving a collaborative effort between the Oka' Institute and the Chickasaw Nation's Department of Land Sustainability and Services. Through this partnership, and alongside broader grant partners working toward shared land and water stewardship goals, the project aims to strengthen ecological resilience while supporting informed, long-term decision-making on tribal lands.

This project is built on close coordination with Chickasaw Nation staff to ensure the work reflects both ecological priorities and cultural values. Throughout the process, data, maps, and reports will be shared securely and managed in accordance with the Nation's data stewardship practices.

OKA CON'26

OCT. 14-16

Celebrating the Oka Institute's 10-year anniversary, Oka Con'26 will bring together leaders, professionals, and communities from across the region for the John and Kay Hargrave Water Sustainability Conference at East Central University. The free, three-day conference will feature community training, expert speakers, technical sessions, networking opportunities, poster presentations, and a field experience focused on land stewardship and water sustainability. The celebration will also include Oka' Fest, a family-friendly community event at Centennial Plaza with BBQ, live music, and activities for all ages.



SAVE THE DATE

- Celebrating the Oka' Institute's 10-year anniversary
- Free conference at East Central University
- Expert speakers, panels, and technical sessions
- Topics in water sustainability and land stewardship
- Networking opportunities and poster presentations
- Oka' Fest community celebration with BBQ and live music
- Hands-on field experience highlighting best land management practices



WATER RESOURCE POLICY AND MANAGEMENT



The Advanced Watershed Management class welcomed Sara Gibson and Jessica Correll from the Oklahoma Water Resources Board and the Oka' Institute staff for an informative discussion on water permitting and metering issues across Oklahoma. The presentations provided valuable insight into water regulations, resource management, and the importance of accurate water use monitoring.

Ahndria Ablett with Choctaw Nation recently spoke to students in the Advanced Watershed Management Water Resource Policy and Management class, sharing insight into the interaction between surface water and groundwater systems, particularly in relation to mining activities. Her presentation highlighted the impacts mining can have on water quality and watershed health, while emphasizing the importance of sustainable water management and Tribal stewardship of natural resources.



Water Resources Policy and Management student Adrian Odhiambo demonstrated his experimental apparatus as part of his thesis research focused on the use of crushed glass as a permeable barrier for protection against oil spills. His work explores innovative approaches to environmental protection and is being supported in collaboration with scientists from the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

Federal Conversations

LOCAL IMPACT

OKA' ON THE HILL

At the end of April, Oka' Institute Executive Director Duane Smith and Water Policy Specialist Josh McClintock traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with members and staff of the Oklahoma Congressional Delegation and provide updates on the recent work and growing impact of the Oka' Institute. A major focus of the meetings was highlighting the success stories and momentum

being created through the Oka' Community Services Hub, particularly in supporting critical infrastructure and resilience efforts in rural and Tribal communities across Oklahoma. Discussions centered on the importance of community readiness, technical assistance, and long-term planning in helping communities compete for and implement infrastructure investments.

CONTINUED PARTNERSHIP

During the visit, Smith and McClintock met with 4th District Congressman and House Appropriations Committee Chairman Tom Cole, along with Chief of Staff Will McPherson and Legislative Director Sofia Deiro. Congressman Cole has been a strong supporter of both East Central University and the Oka' Institute and played an important role in protecting the EPA's Kerr Lab in Ada during recent federal budget discussions.



Additional meetings were held with staff representing James Lankford, Frank Lucas, and Kevin Hern. Throughout the visit, congressional staff expressed strong interest in learning more about the Oka' Institute's work and its growing role in supporting sustainable communities, water resources, and infrastructure planning across the state.