



December 19, 2025

OKA' DROP

THE OKA' INSTITUTE



WELCOME

As I reflect on the success of this year's John & Kay Hargrave Water Sustainability Conference, I am reminded of why we do what we do. Oka Con'25 brought together leaders, students, tribal partners, researchers, and community members united by one shared mission—to protect, value, and sustain our most vital resource: water. With over 300 attendees representing more than 40 organizations, this year's theme, "Honoring the Past, Innovating the Future," came to life through powerful discussions, meaningful partnerships, and on-the-ground demonstrations. From the rainfall simulator and prescribed burn field trip to the engaging panels on sustainable communities and water planning, participants saw firsthand how innovation and stewardship work hand-in-hand.

We were especially proud to celebrate the continued collaboration between tribal nations, municipalities, and higher education, demonstrating what's possible when we unite around water. The energy and momentum from this year's conference reaffirm the Oka' Institute's role as a bridge—connecting science, policy, and people. As we look ahead, we're already setting our sights on next year's gathering. But more importantly, we're continuing the work sparked by Oka Con'25—advancing research, supporting community resilience, and empowering the next generation of water leaders. Thank you to everyone who made this year's conference a success. Together, we're turning vision into value and ensuring that Oklahoma's water future remains strong, sustainable, and shared.

—Duane Smith, Executive Director

OKA CON '25

JOHN AND KAY HARGRAVE WATER SUSTAINABILITY CONFERENCE



The John & Kay Hargrave Water Sustainability Conference, held October 21–22 in Ada, Oklahoma, brought together more than 300 participants from across the state to explore how communities can unite around one shared mission—protecting and sustaining Oklahoma’s water resources. Hosted by the Oka’ Institute at East Central University, this year’s theme, “Honoring the Past, Innovating the Future,” reflected the Institute’s commitment to bridging traditional knowledge and modern innovation in water planning, land stewardship, and sustainability.

The event opened with remarks from Governor Bill Anoatubby of the Chickasaw Nation, who emphasized the importance of partnership, stewardship, and long-term water management. Throughout the week, attendees heard from tribal leaders, state and federal agencies, university researchers, and local officials, all sharing strategies to strengthen water resilience across the Southern Plains.

Conference sessions highlighted topics such as:

- Sustainable Communities and Economic Resilience
- Land Stewardship and Prescribed Fire Practices
- Water Research and Technology Innovations
- Collaborative Water Planning for Rural Oklahoma

Adding to the week’s success, the Oka’ Institute partnered with the Choctaw Nation, Chickasaw Nation, and the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ) to host a Water Operators Training. The workshop provided certified operators, municipal leaders, and technical staff with essential continuing education focused on best practices in water system operations, safety, and regulatory compliance. By providing opportunities for local operators to strengthen their expertise, Oka’ and its partners are helping communities build the technical capacity needed to sustain safe and reliable water systems.

Panels and workshops throughout Oka Con’25 underscored one consistent theme—working together works best. By fostering open dialogue and sharing lessons learned, the conference became more than just an event; it became a catalyst for collaboration, partnership, and renewed commitment to Oklahoma’s water future.



HANDS-ON LEARNING IN THE FIELD

Day two offered attendees a chance to step outside the classroom during the Field Experience, at the City of Ada property which featured a prescribed burn demonstration and a rainfall simulator presentation illustrating how soil health and land management directly affect water quality. Participants then visited Byrds Mill Springs, where they observed local water management efforts and discussed the city's ongoing investments in sustainable infrastructure and planning.

CELEBRATING PARTNERSHIPS

From start to finish, Oka Con'25 celebrated collaboration. The Oka' Institute recognized the invaluable contributions of the Chickasaw Nation, Choctaw Nation, Oklahoma Conservation Commission, East Central University, and countless local and federal partners whose work continues to shape Oklahoma's water future.

"The Oka' Institute's mission has always been to bring people together," said Duane Smith, Executive Director of the Oka' Institute. "Oka Con'25 was proof that when science, policy, and community unite around water, incredible things happen."



LOOKING AHEAD

As the Oka' Institute prepares for next year's conference, the energy and momentum from Oka Con'25 continue to flow into new partnerships and initiatives. Plans are already underway for Oka Con'26, with an even greater focus on community-driven solutions, student engagement, and applied research.

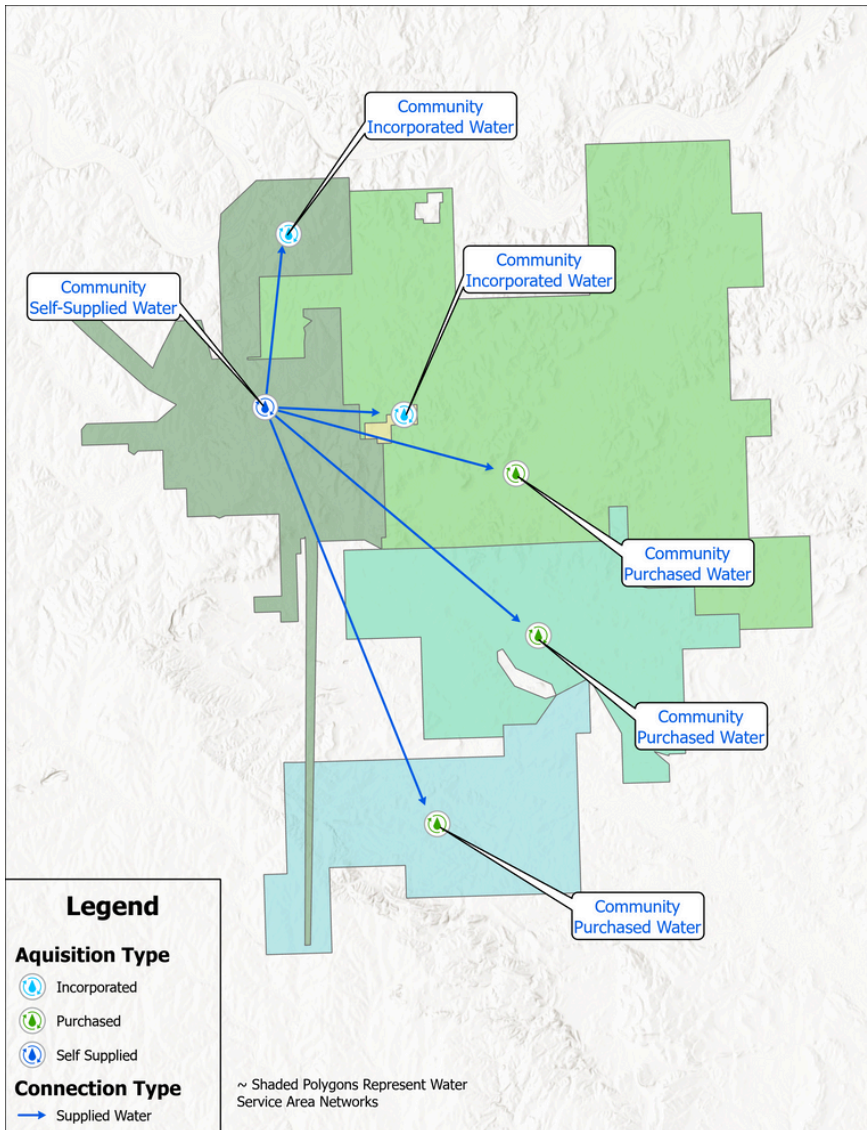
Oka Con'25 reminded everyone that Oka means water—and water means everything.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY

RESILIENCE THROUGH THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES HUB

The Oka' Institute is partnering with the Chickasaw Nation to strengthen resilience and sustainability across south-central Oklahoma. Together, through support from the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC) program, the two organizations are helping communities better prepare for challenges related to fire, flood, and drought.

This collaboration allows The Oka' Institute and the Chickasaw Nation to combine expertise in community planning, hazard assessment, and nature-based solutions. By working directly with local leaders, the project ensures that every participating community has the tools and data needed to plan for a more secure and sustainable future.



Water Service Area Map

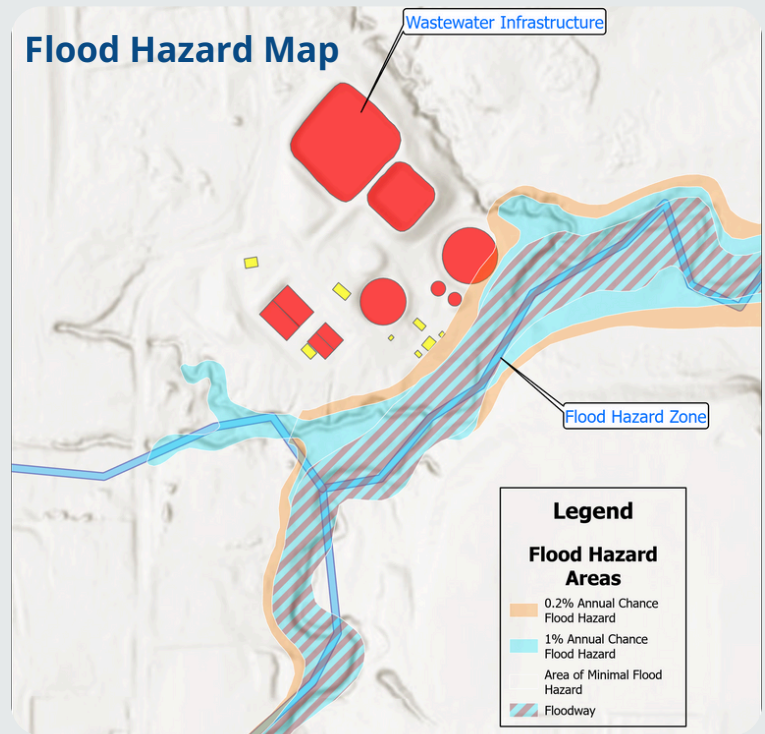
The Water Service Area Map highlights how communities across the region are connected through shared water systems. By showing providers, receivers, and service boundaries, the map helps planners identify where communities rely on one another and where potential vulnerabilities may exist. Understanding these networks is essential for long-term planning, helping communities strengthen partnerships and ensure sustainable water access for generations to come.



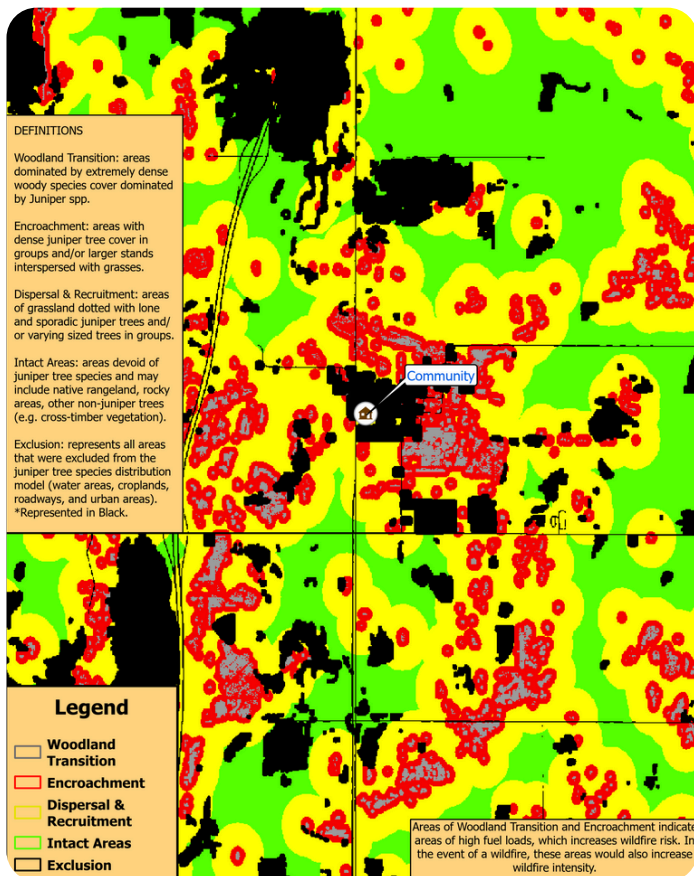
Supporting the Community Hub

The FEMA BRIC initiative builds on Oka's commitment to support locally driven, data-informed solutions that enhance resilience and sustainability. The findings from these assessments will be integrated into the Community Infrastructure Data Layer within the Sustainable Communities Hub, allowing other Oklahoma towns to identify their own risks and plan accordingly.

By joining forces, The Oka' Institute and the Chickasaw Nation are demonstrating the power of partnership — blending technical expertise, tribal leadership, and community collaboration to create stronger, more adaptable communities across the region.



The Flood Hazard Map helps communities identify critical infrastructure near flood zones so they can plan safety measures and strengthen long-term resilience.



Fire Hazard Map (Juniper Evaluation Tool)

The Fire Hazard Map was a product of the Juniper Evaluation Tool (JET), which helps identifies communities most at risk for wildfire through areas of encroachment. Juniperus trees deplete water and act as major fuel sources during fires. By mapping their coverage, this tool helps planners target high-risk areas and guide prevention efforts like prescribed burns and tree removal to protect community resilience.

Community Profiles

This initiative is also helping Oka' strengthen its internal capacity through the Sustainable Communities Hub, expanding the Institute's ability to provide technical assistance and long-term planning support. Over the past year, Oka' has added three new full-time staff members dedicated to advancing community engagement, GIS and data development, and project planning. These additions ensure that Oka' can continue to respond quickly and effectively to the growing needs of communities across the region.

Through the Hub, Oka' is developing Community Risk Profiles that assess each community's vulnerabilities and opportunities for resilience. These profiles consider infrastructure, natural resources, and projected climate impacts, providing a foundation for informed decision-making and future investments. By incorporating local input through town halls and collaborative sessions, Oka' ensures each profile reflects the community's voice and priorities.

BUILDING *momentum* IN LAND STEWARDSHIP



The Oka' Institute's Land Stewardship focus area continues to make meaningful progress through the Blue River Restoration Project, with on-the-ground work ramping up across Pontotoc and Johnston Counties.

Land Stewardship Coordinator Clay Horton shared that much of the groundwork for the Blue River Restoration Project was laid before his arrival, noting that the one-on-one planning efforts by Cole Fagan and Alan Peoples with local landowners have been "truly monumental." Their efforts have built a strong foundation for continued collaboration and implementation.



Several participants have already begun implementing conservation practices across their properties—building fences, establishing firebreaks in preparation for prescribed burns, and deferring grazing to allow native vegetation to recover. Others are awaiting NEPA clearance or the right season to plant and restore.



"The coming year promises a great deal of activity and exciting progress across the upper Blue River watershed," Clay Horton said. "I'm excited to continue this work alongside landowners who are committed to long-term conservation and land health."

Soil tests have been collected in preparation for planting cover crops and diverse pollinator seed mixes, and work continues to expand local capacity through partnerships with Prescribed Burn Associations. These collaborations include strategic equipment purchases designed to meet the upcoming prescribed fire workload.



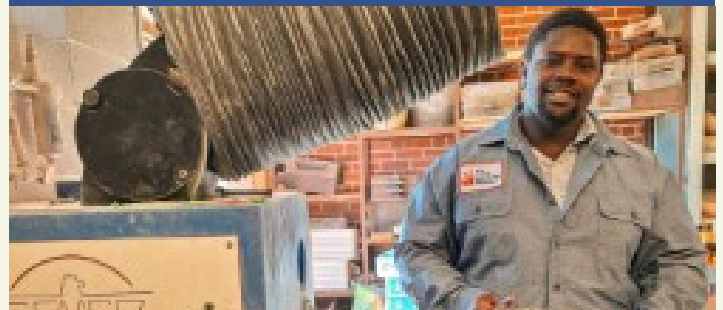
GOVERNORS WATER CONFERENCE

The Oka' Institute sent its largest delegation yet to the Oklahoma Governor's Water Conference, held December 3–4 in Norman. Hosted by the Oklahoma Water Resources Board, the event featured the unveiling of the updated Oklahoma Comprehensive Water Plan (OCWP)—a framework built around four focus areas: Infrastructure and Workforce, Water Supplies and Storage, Water Management and Policy, and Water Data and Information. Oka's ongoing work directly aligns with the priorities outlined in the OCWP, and the team looks forward to continued collaboration as more details are released in the coming weeks. Throughout the conference, Oka' staff heard from state and national water leaders on emerging topics such as artificial intelligence in water management and strategies for drought resilience.



CALEB BILES WINS HABITAT CONSERVATION AWARD

Caleb Biles, GIS Analyst for the Oka' Institute, was recently recognized by the Chickasaw Nation with the Habitat Conservation Award for his outstanding leadership and excellence in conservation data management and mapping applications. This honor highlights Caleb's instrumental role in advancing geospatial tools that support sustainable land and water planning across tribal and regional projects. His innovative approach to integrating mapping technologies continues to strengthen the Oka' Institute's mission of promoting data-driven conservation and long-term resource stewardship.



TURNING GLASS INTO OPPORTUNITY

Glass Recycling Director Adrian Odhiambo had an outstanding quarter. He and the ECU glass recycling team won the People's Choice Award at the GrowAda Pitch Competition for their business plan to turn post-consumer glass into valuable products, earning recognition from the local community and judges alike. Building on that momentum, Adrian collected and crushed thousands of discarded bottles into glass sand and used the material to manufacture hundreds of concrete paving stones, advancing both circular economy innovation and waste-to-resource solutions in our region.



ADVANCING WATER SCIENCE AT EAST CENTRAL UNIVERSITY

The Oka' Institute is helping shape a new era of environmental research at East Central University through strategic investments and collaboration with the Center for Undergraduate Research and Learning (CURL) Lab. Together, they are building a research-quality environmental laboratory that provides ECU students, faculty, and Oka' scientists with advanced tools to study soil and water health across southern Oklahoma.

VISION

The vision behind this partnership is to expand ECU's scientific capacity and strengthen its role in addressing regional water challenges. With the addition of new analytical equipment capable of measuring key nutrients and metals in water and soil samples, ECU can now offer real-world research opportunities that were previously out of reach. This growing capacity positions the university as a regional hub for water science, innovation, and workforce development.

MISSION

The mission driving this effort reflects Oka's commitment to building sustainable communities through collaboration, research, and education. By equipping students and researchers with the tools and data they need, the Oka' Institute and ECU are empowering local communities to make informed decisions about water planning, conservation, and stewardship, ensuring a resilient water future for Oklahoma.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE FOR MORE

SEASONS OF PROGRESS



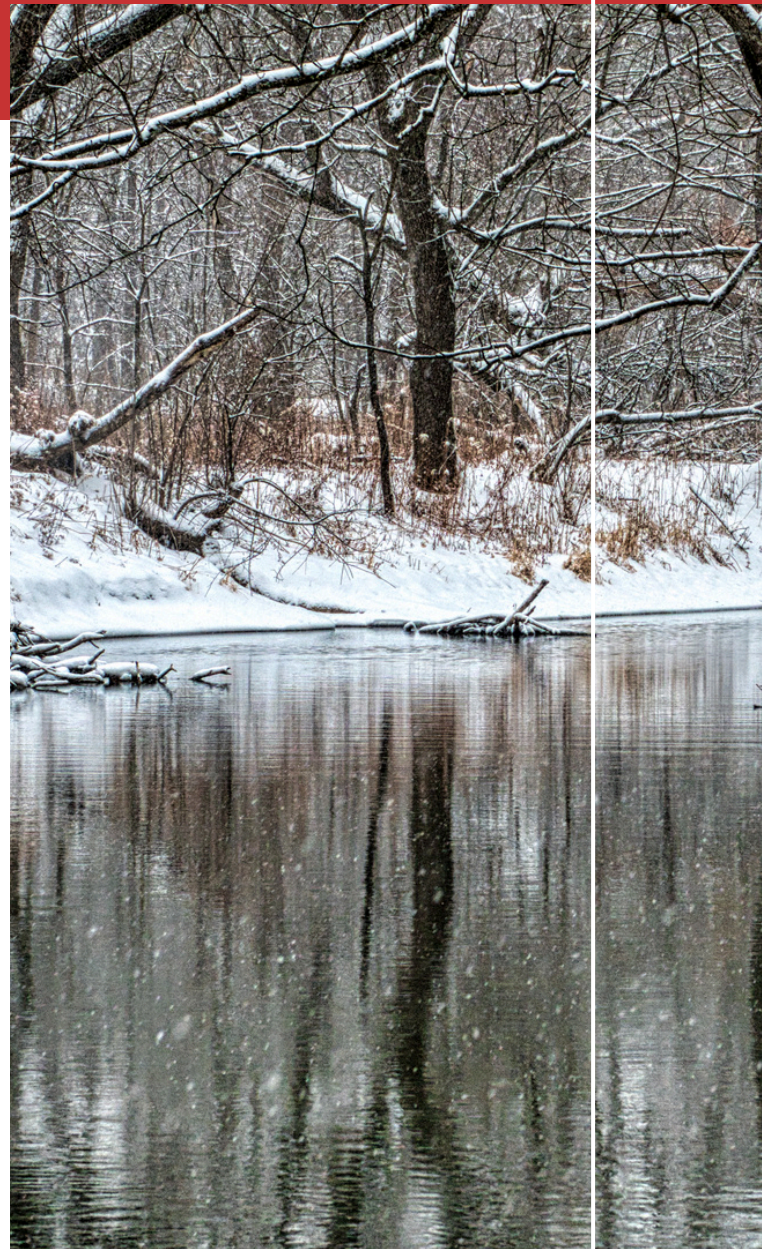
CLOSING THE YEAR, AND
OPENING THE DOOR TO 2026

Looking ahead with gratitude and purpose.

As we close out 2025, The Oka' Institute extends heartfelt gratitude to our partners, colleagues, and friends who continue to share in our mission of creating resilient, sustainable communities. This season reminds us of the importance of connection—between people, place, and purpose—and we're thankful for everyone who plays a role in advancing that vision.

The year ahead brings new opportunities to strengthen collaboration through initiatives like the Sustainable Communities Hub, expand watershed and land stewardship efforts, and continue building relationships that move Oklahoma forward. With 2026 on the horizon, we look forward to another year of progress, innovation, and partnership—guided by the shared belief that water connects us all.

From all of us at The Oka' Institute, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!



*MAY THE NEW YEAR
FLOW WITH PURPOSE
AND POSSIBILITY.*