Despite efforts to the contrary, neighbors of the closing 7,354-acre Badger Army Ammunition Plant are fighting to build solidarity in their community. By working in partnership with their Ho-Chunk neighbors, rural Wisconsin residents have worked to heal the land and their community by working together toward a common goal – restoring the integrity and beauty of the Sauk Prairie landscape.

In 1990, Citizens for Safe Water Around Badger (CSWAB) began as a "kitchen table" organization when rural neighbors discovered their drinking water wells were polluted with high levels of carcinogenic solvents. Carbon tetrachloride, trichloroethylene, and chloroform were detected in the water supplies of three farm families at levels 15 times the safe standard. Toxins resulting from 50 years of weapons manufacturing from the nearby Badger Army Ammunition Plant had moved undetected through the groundwater, poisoning drinking water wells more than a mile away.

In a heroic David vs. Goliath struggle, rural residents took on the US Army, international chemical companies, and county, state and federal governments. CSWAB said the base shouldn’t be allowed to operate because it was unable to do business without polluting the water and air. Multi-ton chemical spills continued to plague the facility even though active production had ceased decades earlier. Community members decided cleaning up the plant was not enough and that the best solution would be to get the facility closed altogether and converted to peaceful purposes. “Restore the prairie, not the ammo plant” became our slogan and our goal.

Throughout the 90’s, CSWAB held public hearings, did research, mounted publicity campaigns, and organized citizens throughout the state. Along the way, the group blocked dozens of initiatives that threatened public health and the environment including hazardous waste incineration and a federal program to reindustrialize idle ammunition plants.

In 1997, the hard-won news finally came – Badger Army Ammunition Plant (BAAP) would be closing. Two federal agencies, the U.S. Department of Agriculture on behalf of the Dairy Forage Research Center and the U.S. Department of the Interior on behalf of the Ho-Chunk Nation, requested portions of the property.

Through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Ho-Chunk Nation made a formal request to the U.S. General Services Administration that approximately 3,050 acres of the Badger property be transferred in trust for the benefit of the Nation. The land lies within the heart of Ho-Chunk’s aboriginal territory, including villages located within present-day Sauk County, and in particular, along the Wisconsin River where Badger is located.
The Nation’s request emphasized protection and enhancement of natural resources and wildlife habitat through restoration of significant portions of property to its original prairie and the reintroduction of bison and other native plants and animals.

In the fall of 1998, CSWAB began organizing statewide support for the Nation’s sustainable use proposal – a plan that would allow the land to heal from the environmental damage caused by more than 50 years of munitions production. More than 130 individuals and organizations co-signed CSWAB’s letter of support.

Intolerant legislators, however, took a public stance and deliberate steps to block the Nation’s interest in acquiring these lands for the benefit of the tribe. On September 10, 1998, then-Congressman Scott Klug proposed federal legislation that would have crushed the Nation’s interests by ensuring that the State of Wisconsin gained ownership of these lands and further, that the Governor’s office would be empowered to unilaterally dictate land-use decisions. Land use, the draft legislation said, would be at the Governor’s “sole discretion”.

If successful, the new legislation would set a dangerous national precedent by undermining the legal rights of tribes applying for ownership of surplus federal property.

Even with substantial support from state legislators including State Senators Steve Freese and Robert Welch, CSWAB organized opposition and the draft legislation quickly became so controversial that Klug was unable to even get it off the ground. Newsletters, press releases, media, and pressure from tribal and community members withered Klug’s scheme in its tracks. Unable to find a willing sponsor for committee consideration, Klug’s proposal failed.

In a 1999 letter, retired Congressman Klug wrote to a constituent: “During my tenure in Congress I introduced legislation that would have turned the whole plant over to the state immediately to be used as a park.” Klug’s legislation was introduced subsequent to the Nation’s claim, initially filed 7 months prior on March 2, 1998.

Opposition to the Nation’s interest in Badger, however, was far from over. The first indication came following a meeting in downtown Madison in April of 1999. A long-time employee of a national conservancy organization approached CSWAB’s Executive Director. “Are you willing to give up the prairie for those Indians?” he charged. The meaning behind this unexpected confrontation soon became clear.

Momentum within a coalition of professional conservationists and university faculty was building and on May 18, 1999 a draft “Statement Regarding the Reuse of the Badger Army Ammunition Plant” was circulated by email. The final paragraph concluded: “Now, therefore, be it resolved that the undersigned request that ownership of the entire Badger Army Ammunition Plant be transferred to the State of Wisconsin. That management of this land be delegated to a group (including) ... State of Wisconsin (DNR), USDA DFRC, Ho Chunk Nation, Town of Sumpter, Town of Merrimac, and Sauk County (P&Z). Other advisory groups may be designated, as needed, in the future.”

Two days later, a “Draft Plan for Disposition of BAAP” which also supported ownership by the State of Wisconsin was circulated by email. The following day, endorsements were posted. Plans to garner broad public support for state ownership were announced. The intent, they wrote, was to “take this
basic document around and ask everyone we can – coalition members, community groups, local governments, legislators, businesses, individuals, etc etc. – to endorse it.”

On May 24, CSWAB’s board held an emergency meeting. The following day a letter condemning the proposal was sent to the coalition with a copy to former Ho-Chunk President Jacob Lone Tree. Conservation leaders denied the existence of any drafts or proposals in a subsequent letter to the Nation. At the same time, they angrily condemned CSWAB and its leaders for informing the Nation about a proposal that was intended to be “confidential”.

Once revealed, the coalition’s initiative faltered and was withdrawn. Retaliation, however, for CSWAB’s role in the failure of the plan was relentless. In the years that followed, CSWAB’s funders, local supporters, and allies were among those targeted. Efforts to marginalize the organization escalated.

When this failed, efforts were made to try to weaken the organization from within. The group’s Executive Director – and a member of the Sokaogon Ojibwa tribe – was the decided target. CSWAB board members were stopped in grocery stores, called on at their homes, and confronted after meetings. CSWAB’s director, they charged, was misrepresenting her board and was not serving the best interests of the organization. CSWAB’s board, which included Ho-Chunk tribal members, rallied behind their director and this tactic also failed.

On December 5, 2014, U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin announced that a provision in the National Defense Authorization Act would transfer 1,553 acres of former Badger Army Ammunition Plant lands to the Ho-Chunk Nation for prairie and grazing. The property will be held in trust by the Secretary of the Interior for the benefit of the tribe and will be a part of the reservation of the Ho-Chunk Nation. The lands lie within the heart of the Ho-Chunk Nation’s aboriginal territory including villages located within present-day Sauk County and along the Wisconsin River where Badger is located.

In this rural Wisconsin community, a handful of dedicated neighbors have, through the common fight for a safe, healthy environment, brought together cultures, resources, and a shared land conservation ethic. Community and tribal members have been effective and steadfast partners in protecting environmental and ecological resources at Badger. The Ho-Chunk Nation has testified at public hearings, rejected contrary land use proposals, and passed resolutions supporting the highest degree of cleanup. Together, we have been stronger in our fight to build a healthy future for our community and our children. Together, we built community when others almost succeeded in tearing it apart.