



LEARNING ABOUT INDIGENOUS FIRE STEWARDSHIP

The intentional use of fire has played an integral part in indigenous land stewardship in California for millennia. Many tribal communities continue to strategically employ fire or cultural burns for a diverse array of applications. For example, in Northern California, tribes conduct cultural burns to maintain healthy forest ecosystems, as well as encourage the production of traditional basket-making materials, such as hazel and bear grass. Cultural burns also increase the amount of forage available to deer, elk and bears as well as many more native mammal and bird species.



Fire is methodically deployed for these purposes and others, including forest fuel load management, meadow maintenance and more recently climate change mitigation. The intentionally burned forests also serve as natural fire breaks. When out-of-control conflagrations move into the previously burned areas, the blazes stop altogether or slow enough for firefighters to safely contain them.

After decades of suppression and in many places, the criminalization of these practices, indigenous fire is returning to California and the natural world is faring better for it. Tribal communities in Northern California are working hard to make cultural burning a common practice across California.



Recently, CAL FIRE, as well as many other government, non-profit, academic, and Tribal partners gathered at the Blue Lake Rancheria for a two-day workshop on cultural burning. The workshop was initiated by Yurok Fire Department Chief Rod Mendes, a cultural burning expert. “The cultural Burning Seminar was more than an educational event and skill-building exercise.

The seminar provided the ideal platform to inform external organizations and community members about the benefits of cultural burning. It also created an opportunity to foster greater collaborations between the fire organizations that serve Northern California,” said Chief Mendes.

“Tribal natural resource managers are keenly aware of the fact that excessive fuel loads not only threaten California forests, but inhibit the recovery of the state’s once prolific wildlife populations. Cultural burning is the most effective tool we have for improving forest health and preventing destructive wildfires.”

The Yurok Fire administers an active fuels management program with qualified person at all levels to conduct cultural burning.

The Blue Lake Rancheria is a sovereign tribal nation in northwestern California, near the cities of Eureka and Arcata in Humboldt County. The Tribe is making a concerted effort to rebuild their cultural traditions.

The first day of the workshop consisted of several talks and presentations from prescribed fire practitioners, local land stewards, academics working in this field, and indigenous fire practitioners. This provided attendees with a base of knowledge as to what cultural fire is, the history of its use in California, and the importance of bringing good fire back to the landscape.

On the workshop’s second day, attendees participated in a hands-on training in the use of contemporary cultural burning tools, such as the drip torch. Guided by CAL FIRE and tribal fire practitioners, participants ignited piles of brush to get a feel for operating a torch and being in proximity to fire.

Participants in this powerful workshop gained a basic understanding of how Native American people have safely utilized fire for generations while also learning the value of cultural burning in restoring wildlife populations and making California’s landscape more resilient to climate change.

CAL FIRE will continue to partner with indigenous burning practitioners to share the value of cultural burning in California’s natural fire cycle.

The return of cultural burning is an important aspect of increasing California’s adaptive capacity for reducing the effects of climate change and severe wildfires while also improving wildlife habitat and biodiversity.

