

Sierra to California All-Lands Enhancement Winter 2021 Meeting

February 25th, 2021 | Online

Meeting Summary

Sierra Institute hosted its tri-annual Sierra to California All-Lands Enhancement (SCALE) meeting on February 25th, 2021 virtually over Zoom. We had over 90 participants from a broad array of interests, representing different collaboratives, organizations, agencies, and other partners from across the state. The meeting began with a presentation titled “Some ruminations on fire and vegetation trends in California” from Hugh Safford, Regional Ecologist with the USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region, which established the ecological context and implications of the 2020 wildfire season in California. Following this, two panels were held, titled “Discussion of 2020 Wildfire Season and Impacts” and “Tribal Impacts of the 2020 Fire Season,” as means to delve into the wide array of community and tribal impacts that were felt from this most recent fire season. Randy Moore, Regional Forester with the USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region, gave a presentation titled “Achieving pace and scale: some next steps,” which outlined next steps and priorities of the agency moving forward. Following a brief break, the meeting continued with a final panel, “Equity in Forest Restoration,” in which panelists discussed barriers and opportunities regarding tribal involvement in land management and restoration work. Finally, Patrick Wright, Manager of the Governor’s Forest Management Task Force gave an overview of California’s Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan.

Opening Presentation: “Some ruminations on fire and vegetation trends in California”

Hugh Safford - Regional Ecologist, USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region

- California fire trends from 1908-2020: Annual burned area has risen rapidly since the 1980s, however this is still significantly less than the mean annual burned area in California prior to mass Euro-American settlement (EAS).
- Humans have greatly altered fire frequencies across California. Northern California has seen increased fire return intervals, due to years of fire suppression and exclusion efforts in F4 ecosystems (oak woodlands, yellow pine, mixed conifer). Southern California has seen an increase in fire frequency and enhanced ignition effects in shrublands.

- In the Sierra Nevada, high severity burned area is increasing rapidly and is much greater than what was seen under EAS conditions.
- This has resulted in significant impacts. Specifically, old growth forest has become an endangered species in the Sierra Nevada. For young trees, high severity patch size is increasing, which negatively affects local wildlife, as well as the natural regeneration of conifer species.
- Ultimately, the future looks smoky. Major vegetation changes will result from this increased fire, as well as climate and other factors. These changes include:
 - o More difficult regeneration of conifer species
 - o Hardwood species will replace many lower elevation conifer forests post-disturbance
 - o Major structural and compositional changes to montane and subalpine forests
 - o Major expansion of grassland due to frequent fire in forests and shrublands

Panel I: Discussion of 2020 Wildfire Season and Impacts

Will Harling, Executive Director, Mid-Klamath Watershed Council, Western Klamath Resource Partnership (WKRP)

- In the Klamath, there were two major wildfires in 2020: The Slater Fire and the Red Salmon Fire.
- The Slater fire started on Pacific Power lines and burned 90,000 acres in 24 hours, in which 200 homes and 2 lives were lost.
- The Red Salmon fire burned from June to October, in which older fire footprints did not help much to contain it, but the Butler fire was an effective barrier for the town of Forks of Salmon.
- These were demonstrations of severe wildfire that we have never seen before, and the fires that we are seeing today have no parallel in recent history. Our ability to manage ignitions is stopping us from managing fuels.
- They are currently dealing with the issue of putting prescribed fire on the ground. There is a need to build local resources and develop relationships with diverse groups in order to field a team and take advantage of burn windows, as well as to take an offensive approach through TREX (Prescribed Fire Training Exchanges) and AHAL (All-Hands All-Lands) an interagency prescribed fire program.

Frank Aebly, District Ranger, Upper Lake and Covelo Ranger Districts and Hinda Darnier, Fuels Specialist, both from the Mendocino National Forest

- On August 16, there was a lightning event which started over 37 fires on the Mendocino NF, 3 or 4 of which were difficult to manage and grew to over 1 million acres. This put an incredible amount of strain on Forest Service staff, both physically and mentally.

- Communication between state and other emergency personnel was difficult and limiting.
- Community Impacts: The local area has seen a lot of wildfire in the last 6 or 7 years, with the Mendocino Complex (including the Ranch fire) in 2018, and now the August Complex in 2020. The small community on Lake Pillsbury was evacuated for both of these fires, which has taken a toll. These fires heavily impact people and their emotions, and Forest Service employees were exhausted.
- COVID added another layer of complexity to the wildfire season and added stress. One example of this is that it was difficult for some to differentiate between respiratory irritation from smoke, and the need for a COVID test. On incident management teams, people were pulled off the lines and had to get tested and isolate before they could return.

Panel II: Tribal Impacts of the 2020 Wildfire Season

Ben Clark, Tribal Chair, Mooretown Rancheria

- In 2017, the Ponderosa fire destroyed ancestral homes of tribal members, cultural sites, and property. The fire burned up storage units with irreplaceable items. During the Camp fire, 14 tribal members and 5 employees lost homes, and 85 people died. A distribution center was established in order to provide for the needs of those who were displaced- including bedding, dishes, cookware, gasoline vouchers, and more.
- People were still rebuilding from this fire when the Bear fire (part of the North Complex) hit this year.
- Given these fires, and current growth of vegetation, it is incredibly difficult to get fire insurance.
- In the community, there has been strong support for one another, with special prioritization given to elders. In their efforts to provide essential items to members of the greater community through their distribution center, Mooretown Rancheria received support in the form of donations from nearby tribes.
- Their tribe historically practiced traditional burns. However, regulations from the FS tightened, and the forest got denser, with more brush. The impact of the fire has been devastating to the forest. They are now trying to target areas between towns to get the fuels down

Greg Osborn, Project Coordinator, Forestry Contract Services, Mooretown Rancheria

- The North Complex fire was wind-driven, and incredibly destructive.
- The Mooretown Forestry Dept. was developed as a way to provide jobs for tribal members. It usually employs 20-25 people per season, with work that includes hand-

cutting, grapple piling, road construction/maintenance/installation, removal of culverts, and more.

- Since the fires, the workload has increased as people have seen the importance of fuels reduction projects.
- The Mooretown tribal people have traditionally worked in the forest, and it is a way of life for them. Their fuels reduction projects are being done to help save communities, and they often have more work than they can handle.

Irvin Jim, Chairman of Woodsford Washoe, Southern Band of Washoe; President, Intertribal Council; Supervisor, Alpine County

- The Southern Washoe Band experienced a fire last year that burned their pine nut hills. Pine nuts are one of their staple cultural foods, with a long (25 years) sprouting time.
- The Washoe Resources Group is working on numerous fuels reduction projects in the Lake Tahoe Basin, using TEK and traditional burning. They believe that they were put on their homelands to be the caretakers of their homelands. After having been kicked out of Lake Tahoe in the 20s, and unable to access it in the 30s, there is now a sense of pride in being able to work in their homelands.
- The federal government had looked down on them and taken control of their lands, but these homelands are now burning up.
- Tribal people need to get back into the forest- we need to rewrite policies and procedures so that tribal elders have a voice and opportunity to use their knowledge in putting fire on the ground.

Ali Meders-Knight, Mechoopda Tribe, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) specialist, Tribal Relations Implementation team for R-5 and Environmental and Conservation Committee for the Northwest Forests

- Mechoopda territory had already been impacted from the fires in Paradise when the Bear fire from the North Complex hit them this year. This year was also a double blow from both wildfires and COVID.
- Federal and state certification is insufficient for tribal workforce development, so they have developed a TEK workforce certification program and are working with partners to develop strategies to address a variety of issues including: the expansion of non-native grasses, scotch broom, re-planting of non-native plants in the wrong ecological zones, and more.
- They are hoping to build a huge training capacity so that when funding is available, they are equipped to get workers on the ground.
- Consultations with tribes were initially centered on archeology and the preservation of cultural sites, but they have expanded to include cultural keystone species and other aspects of TEK.

Kathy McCovey, Karuk Tribe, Retired Forest Service Archeologist, Cultural Anthropologist

- Prior to the Happy Camp fire, she had worked on the Red Salmon fire in Karuk territory. Their sacred areas, where people gather medicines, are in areas of higher peaks. This is where lightning strikes, and where incident command teams light backfires, which can jump lines.
- There is a strong distrust of firefighters coming into the Forks of Salmon community, as well as opposition to dropping fire by drone. The people here don't feel that they have a lot of control and are tired of current management.
- In Happy Camp, it felt like everything burned. They lost animals, acorn groves, basket materials, and so much more. Hunting and gathering areas have been heavily impacted. People lost homes and can't get fire insurance due to poverty in the area. Many are living in trailers, and there are a lot of homeless. It was horrific and it is difficult to find the words to explain what happened.

Speaker: "Achieving pace and scale: Some next steps"

Randy Moore, Regional Forester with the USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region

- The new Administration wants to focus on four areas: 1) rural economies, and how to make adjustments for small rural communities, 2) COVID, 3) climate change and how the environment is changing over time, and 4) racial equity.
- There are 1.8 billion board feet of burned timber that needs to be removed from roads and trails.
- There are roughly 500,000 acres of land in need of some form of reforestation, but this is difficult. They need scientists and geneticists to engage with them, both from inside and outside the university system.
- There are currently 12,000 acres of land that are reforested annually. In regard to the 500,000 acres that need to be reforested- what is the stock, and where do we get it from?
- On improving relationships between the FS and tribes: Wants to have a conference, on a government-to-government basis with tribes to ask the question of how we improve relationships and begin to include cultural burning on federal lands.
- There are some authorities that lend themselves to getting things done: Good Neighbor Agreements with tribes added as partners, Shared Stewardship Agreements, and the Tribal Forest Protection Act.
- Wants feedback on how to include tribes in the work that the FS does in the greater community- how to create something and duplicate it across the state?
- The FS is serious about expanding treatments across forests and is looking for the best ways to move forward.

- Recommended that participants reach out to Rowena Yeahquo, R5 Tribal Relations Specialist rowena.yeahquo@usda.gov, regarding next steps in working with tribes to treat acres.

Panel III: Equity in Forest Restoration

Bill Tripp, Director of Natural Resources and Environmental Policy, Karuk Tribe
Department of Natural Resources

- Fire has always been a way of life for the Karuk people, and is a part of ceremonial practices.
- After years of fire exclusion, they have been hard hit by fire after not being able to implement their own burning practices. They have experienced a lion's share of impacts from fire suppression and climate change- in terms of burning of homes, hazardous air quality, and more.
- They are trying to get back to a place where they are part of the ecosystem again, as food web ecology is part of the culture.
- There is a need to transfer tribal knowledge to future generations.
- "1/3 of the cost of one fire in Karuk Territory could have established an endowment fund that generated \$2.25 million per year for indigenous stewardship."

Irvin Jim, Chairman of Woodsford Washoe, Southern Band of Washoe; President, Intertribal Council; Supervisor, Alpine County

- There is a large mountain to climb in terms of equity in forest restoration- but it needs to start in agencies.
- Finding a place to train in prescribed fire, and also easing up on restrictions is needed.
- During the Camp fire- there was a large amount of money from FEMA. Had tried to get their people back on the land to work on this area. FEMA, Calfire- none of this money is seen by the local people. They have their umbrella contractors.
- This is happening when they have workforce capacity (and opportunities to build this) in their own area.

Ali Meders-Knight, Mechoopda Tribe, TEK specialist, Tribal Relations
Implementation team for R-5 and Environmental and Conservation Committee for
the Northwest Forests

- In Chico- their tribe had strong impact through employment in cultural monitoring after the Camp fire. But this is also not a sustainable source of money.

- Cultural monitoring program only goes into archeological aspects- doesn't fully account for or incorporate TEK.
- Put together TEK program with tribe- to develop curriculum to contract under their own certifications of TEK.
- Putting together cultural database for resources and keystone species.
- Working on baseline forest stewardship contracting program and training program with this knowledge.
- Tribal Sovereignty- "all of California is unceded Indigenous land"- tribal authorities are necessary ecologically, morally, and legally.
- Policies to support sovereignty- SB18: requires all gov to consult with tribes on making new designations or amendments to open space or general plan, AB52: tribal cultural resources- anything that a tribe deems significant is federally protected- includes living cultural resources and cultural landscapes in addition to simply archeological resources.
- Different phases of the program structure: identifying keystone species through multiple levels, (cultural keystone species, advanced ecosystem services) then moving to specialization in plant processing, cultural fire, and land management planning.
- Need to create a workforce to build their economy in these areas.
- In the specialization of cultural fire, TEK could be integrated into CalFire certifications to write TEK knowledge into fuels management plans and focus on local territories.
- In regard to emergency response agencies and tribes: "Four tribes in ISWI filed a consultation request with Cal OES for Camp Fire restoration. We are still waiting for a response 13 months later."

Steve Wilenksy, President, Calaveras Healthy Impact Product Solutions (CHIPS)

- In terms of a triple bottom line of restoration of ecology, economics, community- the community aspect has been wrought with a history of inequity.
- How to take this history and overcome the inequities involves the question of health. Not just the health of the forest and streams- but of the communities and people as well.
- Transportation is another form of inequity- people need transportation out to forest and very little funding support addresses this.
- COVID: the pandemic needs to be dealt with on an equitable basis.
- Housing in the Sierra is another issue- we need proper workforce housing for people. Housing support programs, while well-intended, sometimes have undesirable results. Some people through CHIPS were being kicked out of housing for making too much money.

- Issue of FEMA- 2 billion dollars went into the Camp fire (Paradise) community, and there is a need to make sure that this money actually stays in communities that have been devastated. Most funding is still going to traditional corporate partners in the federal system. Allocation of big dollars in this system is not yet what he would consider equitable.
- The dream goal is repatriation of lands back to tribes.

Speaker: “California’s Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan”

Patrick Wright, Manager of the Governor’s Forest Management Task Force

- California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan: a framework to strengthen wildfire resilience and forest health.
- Themes from the plan:
 - o Climate change is driving these fires
 - o Emphasizing regionally-tailored strategies
 - o Integrating forest health and community projects
 - o Expanding prescribed, low-intensity fire
 - o Linking forest and ecological health to that of rural communities
 - o Developing strong partnerships
- Key goals: increase pace and scale of forest health projects, strengthen protection of communities, manage forest to achieve economic and forest goals, drive innovation and measure progress.
- There are big increases in funding support for communities and regional action plans that put regional efforts in the driver's seat.
- Now: they are trying to streamline the task force structure and move out of the recommendation phase into implementation. Priorities moving forward include
 - o Aggressive reforestation plan
 - o More detailed and aggressive prescribed fire plan
 - o Being more specific about how to meet the 1-million-acre target
 - o Align data and tools among agencies.
 - o Engaging in collaboration through better outreach to communities and involving local stakeholders and tribes in shaping restoration plans and projects- and then actually implementing the projects themselves and allowing these communities to receive the revenue from this work.

- The challenge is doing this in a way that doesn't result in micro-managing by federal agencies and recognizing different priorities and risks of different regions.