

## Cultural Burn Training Exchange

*By Margo Robbins  
Executive Director, Cultural Fire Management Council*

TREN returned once again to Yurok Country in far northern California—where the mountains are steep, the brush is thick, and the river gives witness to the healing of the land. The Cultural Fire Management Council, in cooperation with the Yurok Tribe, hosted 40 firefighters from California, as well as Alaska, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Ecuador and Spain. Some had never been on a fire before, but were keen to learn how to bring good fire back to their homelands. Some were seasoned fire fighters and prescribed burners who had come to share their expertise, increase their qualifications, and lend a hand in the on-going restoration of Native lands. Some came to restore the land that supports their cultural lifeways, while others were more focused on using fire as a tool for wildfire prevention. But they all came to burn and learn together, hone their skills at lighting fire, and learn more about the ecosystems that rely on fire to be healthy.

The CFMC-Yurok Cultural Burn Training Exchange is a little different than other TREN in that it takes place on a reservation and the goal of the burns is to increase the health and availability of culturally important species. Participants learn about which plants are good for food, medicine or basketry, and how to apply fire in ways that enhance their productivity while reducing the competing vegetation that tries to crowd them out. They learn how to burn in some of the steepest, most fuel-laden landscapes around, and they learn the importance of place-based knowledge and its value when working with fire. The Yurok people have occupied their homelands for tens of thousands of years and they know how to use fire to keep the land healthy physically and spiritually.

The first test fire was lit with wormwood torches, a traditional way of applying fire to the land. Prayer was sent up with the smoke. You could smell the medicine as it drifted on the breeze and know deep within you that we were doing the right thing. We were applying medicine to the land and we were all thankful to be part of this effort that is so much larger than ourselves. Returning fire to the



Read about this TREN in the AP News article “For Tribes, ‘Good Fire’ a Key to Restoring Nature and People” by John Flesher, with photos by David Goldman.

land will affect not only this generation, but generations into the future. It will bring balance to the ecosystem, enrich the soil, sequester carbon, increase the quality and quantity of water, improve animal habitat, reduce the spread and intensity of wildfire, and ensure the continuance of Indigenous cultures.

With these goals in mind, we worked together as a team and bonded like family. Government agencies, tribes, non-profits, for-profits and individuals put our lives in each other’s hands as we restored an ancient tradition of purposefully putting fire on the land.

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The Prescribed Fire Training Exchange (TREN) model was developed under the *Promoting Ecosystem Resilience and Fire Adapted Communities Together* (PERFACT) cooperative agreement between The Nature Conservancy, USDA Forest Service and agencies of the Department of the Interior. For more about PERFACT, contact Marek Smith at [marek\\_smith@tnc.org](mailto:marek_smith@tnc.org).

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