

Using Fire to Protect the Land

By Don Motanic

During fall 2020, western Oregon experienced one of the most catastrophic fire seasons in modern history.



Consequently, foresters and community members in the region are seeking methods to avoid or lessen the impacts of future wildland wildfires. One such method is using “good fire” to protect the land, which has been used by the people who have lived on this land for a millennia.

A loss of land and recognition

The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde (CTGR) includes more than 27 tribes and bands that once occupied and managed lands from southwest Washington State to northern California. The Oregon Trail created a migration of settlers who were motivated to individually claim up to 640 acres of free land through the 1850 Land Donation Act regardless of whether there were signed treaties between the federal government and the tribes.

From 1853-1855, the CTGR had ratified and unratified treaties with the federal government that resulted in a loss of their ancestral land. An executive order signed in 1857 established a 61,000 acre-reservation. However, fed-

eral recognition of this reservation and the Tribe ceased in 1954 with the passage of the Western Oregon Termination Act. This legislation removed the Tribe and its members from its federal status and trust relationship. A total of 60 bands in western Oregon, including the Coos, Lower Umpqua, and Siletz, experienced a similar fate. (To learn more about this act, visit <https://tinyurl.com/3ftmu2f2>.)

On November 22, 1983, the passage of the Grand Ronde Restoration Act created the Confederate Tribes of Grand Ronde. Yet it wasn't until five years later when President Ronald Reagan signed the Grand Ronde Restoration Act that restored a 9,811-acre Reservation located just north of the city of Grand Ronde.

Reclaiming culture and wildfire

With the restoration of CTGR's status came the rebuilding of its staff to manage its natural resources and reclaim a fire culture that predates European settlement. At the Northwest Innovative Forestry Summit 2021, Colby Drake, the interim natural resource director, presented on the Tribe's current work and future goals. Drake is a Tribal member with 20 years of experience as a wildland fire fighter and has qualifications as a Type 2 burn boss.



Colby Drake

“The CTGR fire capacity started out similar to most programs where it focused on being suppression heavy and industry oriented with slash treatment and site preparation,” Drake told the virtual audience.

The program later pivoted to focus on cultural burning to restore plants and food sources that sustained the tribal existence for more than 10,000 years. One of these food sources is elk.

“Out of those 10,000 acres, we have about 100 acres of dedicated elk meadows,” explained Drake. “We've partnered with the Natural Resource Conservation Services and received funding opportunities over a five-year period. We've seen a huge return of habitat returning, because it's very important for the hunting access for elders and our tribal community.”

Cultural burning has also proven a successful way to manage non-native vegetation, such as Scotch broom and Himalayan blackberries. Following the burns, native plants grown in the tribal nursery are planted on the site.

Creating partnerships through wildfire

As a result of the CTGR's expertise in conducting cultural burning, they have partnered with a number of agencies seeking this expertise to fulfill their management goals. One such project is with the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department on the Champoeg Prairie located within the Champoeg State Heritage Area; Champoeg is a modified Kalapuyan word for yampa, which is a native celery root that grows in the

Continued on next page

Want to Learn More About the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde's Fire Work?

To see Colby Drake's full presentation at the Northwest Innovative Forestry Summit 2021, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QR4b6DqRdEY>. His presentation begins at 41:00.

The restoration of the Champoeg Prairie is a collaborative project that involves the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department and Institute of Applied Ecology. To learn more about the work, visit https://appliedeco.org/program/habitat-restoration/?post_types=report.

Oregon Metro profiled the Quamash Prairie work <https://www.oregonmetro.gov/news/restoring-fire-prescribed-burn-quamash-prairie-reconnects-land-culture-and-habitat>.



area. Cultural burning is being conducted to restore this traditional food source and increase the opportunities for tribal members to harvest this food and other plants.

Another partnership is with Portland Metro and the Portland urban Native community where CTGR completed a cultural burn to restore roots on the 254-acre Quamash Prairie area near Tualatin, Oregon.

Drake welcomes opportunities and partnership where CTGR can return cultural burning to areas where it was traditionally performed. "It seems like the momentum is just ripe right now to get good fire on the ground," he said. "It's getting to the point where I'm almost having to turn down opportunities until I can build up the work capacity more to continue to put good fire in the Willamette Valley and within our ceded lands." *WF*

Don Motanic (*Umatilla*) is a technical specialist with the Intertribal Timber

Council. He can be reached at 360-600-4079 or donmo@itcnet.org.



PHOTO COURTESY OF COLBY DRAKE

In addition to conducting cultural burning on Tribal lands, the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde conducts cultural burning for other state and local agencies, including Portland Metro and Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.



**“more cost and
time effective”**

“As a professional forester working in the field, I encountered issues that I could not solve with my local expertise. Being a member of SAF allowed me to connect with others with similar issues. I didn't have the time and money to research certain issues individually so I found it more cost and time effective to work with a group pooling resources and networking to solve similar issues.”

Jeanette Griese, CF, Reforestation Services Supervisory Forester, Oregon

Solve problems faster with the SAF resources and communities.

5400 Grosvenor Lane • Bethesda, MD 20814 • www.eforester.org • (866) 897-8720

