

**Bipartisan Forum on "Save Our Sequoias: The Impact of Catastrophic Wildfires  
on the World's Most Iconic Trees"**

**Friday, July 15, 2022**

**10 a.m. Eastern/7 a.m. Pacific**

*By William Garfield, Councilman, Tule River Tribe*

On behalf of the Tule River Tribe, we applaud House Committee on Natural Resources Ranking Member Bruce Westerman, Representative Kevin McCarthy and Representative Scott Peters for working diligently across party lines and through all stakeholders, including the Tule River Tribe, to ensure that there are greater protections of the sacred Giant Sequoia Groves. We are thankful to the committee and legislative staff that worked tirelessly to get us where we are today.

My name is William Garfield and I am a current tribal Councilman and former Chairman of the Tule River Tribal Council, the governing body of the Tule River Tribe. Our People are descendants of the Yokuts Indians, a large group of linguistically-related people who occupied the San Joaquin Valley in California for thousands of years prior to contact with non-Indians. Following the incorporation of California into the United States, several efforts were made, beginning in 1851, to relocate the Tule River Indians to a permanent homeland. The current Reservation was defined by three Executive Orders issued between 1873 and 1878 and today covers approximately 58,000 acres. The Tribe currently has 1,952 enrolled tribal members.

During my tenure as Chairman and specifically on September 9, 2021, the 97,528-acre Windy Fire was ignited by lightning on the Tule River Indian Reservation. The fire spread quickly - especially in areas where there was little to no previous prescribed preventative work known as "hazardous fuel reduction" to minimize fire severity. We took an "all hands-on deck" approach to help fight the fire alongside our neighbors and partners. With weather conditions changing constantly, we faced our worst nightmare: the fire spread throughout several sequoia groves and beyond. When the Windy Fire was finally contained and we assessed the damage, we knew that without the preventative work, we would have lost much more.

H.R. 8168 introduced last month - the "Save Our Sequoias Act" is a long overdue effort to empower resourceful experts and stewards to employ critical resiliency efforts to combat the very real threat of fire that plagues roughly 70 Sequoia groves as drought conditions increase. We recognize that there are currently few long-term drought solutions in place in the area to protect our forest and lands - so we must work together to save our sequoias. The Tule River Tribe is proud to support the passage of the Save the Sequoias Act.

We are genuinely committed to contribute our Traditional Ecological Knowledge of forest management practices that has kept the Giant Sequoias - true national treasures, in our presence for thousands of years. Our Traditional Ecological Knowledge is science and we appreciate that the legislation not only acknowledges this, but requires it. The holders of this knowledge is the Tule River Tribe.

The legislation forges a responsive coalition between the Tribe and its longstanding partners - federal, state and local land managers to bring our very best to the table as we work to advance the resiliency of the sequoia groves. The legislation paves the way to formalize a clear path forward on how we can combine our strengths to safeguard the sequoias.

The Tribe is proud to note that we are working hard to further contribute to protect the sequoias. After over 50 years of negotiating, we are on the cusp of reaching a settlement of our Indian water rights with the United States. We plan to introduce legislation yet this year that will allow us to select and construct the best permanent drought solution for the South Tule River. If reached, this settlement will fund a reservoir that supplies a consistent water supply throughout the year, especially during droughts, to the Tule River reservation and downstream users. Better managed water resources is crucial to contain high severity wild fires. The combined effect of the tribe's water rights settlement legislation and the Save Our Sequoias Act will ensure the well-being of the Giant Sequoias for generations to come.

On Tuesday the Tribe hosted over 30 guests that included the Assistant Secretary of the Interior - Indian Affairs - Bryan Newland, and various other federal agency officials along with state officials and their staff to tour the Tule River Indian Reservation and the Headwaters of the National Sequoia Monument. The caravan of guests made numerous stops and were able to experience a "boots on the ground" perspective of the gloomy effects of the unforgiving Windy Fire ravaged area. We made sure that our guests likewise took time to appreciate the new growth, reforestation and recovery from previous fires.

We stopped to witness our crews hard at work to clean up the downed trees, treat the areas and plant over 180,000 new trees to rehabilitate damaged areas. Reforestation is no simple task. The burned areas do not exactly provide ideal conditions for young vulnerable seedlings. A lot of science, care and strategy is needed to ensure that those new trees will grow and survive. This work is done in hard-to-reach locations and in challenging weather conditions. Our crews include seasoned mentors and experts as well as numerous tribal youth from different tribal nations that will master these forest management practices and carry our Traditional Ecological Knowledge forward as it has been done since time immemorial. We know that we need more of this good work to achieve our collective goals.

We were able to show our guests that our traditional forest management practices worked. The reach of the Windy Fire could not succeed far past the lines of our traditional risk reduction treated areas that saved many trees and our Reservation. We are grateful for these gifts of knowledge from our ancestors and appreciate that we are in an era where these gifts are valued the way that they should be - because we all will continue to benefit from them.

These ancient trees are not easily replaceable. They must be protected by all means possible. We continue to assess and recover from the Windy Fire and have learned much from it. We have been reminded that we need to collaborate to reduce fires. We need to coordinate the attack plan. We need to share our knowledge and our resources. We need to respect and employ Traditional Ecological Knowledge. We need to do this together as co-stewards - and we need to do this now.

For these reasons, we thank you for this opportunity to provide comments in support of the Save the Sequoias Act. Thank you.