

Yurok leaders participate in signing of Feather Alert Bill

October 1, 2022



Last week, Yurok Chairman Joseph L. James, Vice Chairman Frankie Myers and Yurok Chief Operating Officer Taralyn Ipina joined California Governor Gavin Newsom and Assemblymember James C Ramos for the signing of the historic Feather Alert bill (AB1314).

“I would like to thank California Governor Gavin Newsom and Assembly Member James C. Ramos for creating a mechanism to quickly get the word out when indigenous people go missing or are at risk,” said Joseph L. James, the Chairman of the Yurok Tribe. “We supported the Feather Alert bill because it will help reduce the disproportionate rate of MMIP cases in California. The next generation of indigenous Californians should not have to live in world where they have to worry about family members going missing or worse. With the emergency notification in place, we will take action to address the remaining root causes of this complex crisis.”

The legislation authorizes the California Department of Highway Patrol to issue a Feather Alert at the request of law enforcement when an indigenous person is reported missing under “unexplained or suspicious circumstances.” The CHP can also assist the investigating agency by distributing “a be-on-the-lookout alert, an electronic flyer, or changeable message signs,” according to the bill.

There is an especially urgent need for the emergency notification system in California, which has the fifth highest number of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP) cases in the US. Acknowledged in the legislation, most California tribes have little to no access to conventional media, not to mention extremely limited resources to spread the word about missing persons cases. Within California, a large majority of cases occur in Northern California. In December of 2021, the Yurok Tribal Council declared an MMIP emergency. The declaration accelerated the expansion of the Tribe’s MMIP Program, which was created to confront the many facets of the crisis. The Yurok Tribal Court-administered program hired a team of academic researchers and other subject matter experts to study the issue and produce three in-depth reports focused on the various aspects of the MMIP crisis.

This year, the program published its third and final report. The detailed document contains a customizable roadmap that tribes can use to respond to new and existing MMIP cases. The Tribal Court also established the Office of the Tribal Prosecutor to aid in investigations and prosecutions. A policy analyst was onboarded to resolve the longstanding systemic barriers that prevent tribes from fully addressing the crisis.

The Tribe is also working with a diverse group of California tribal leaders as well state and federal legislators to bring an end to the MMIP epidemic. On July 12, 2022, Yurok Chairman James convened a tribal briefing to lay the groundwork for a unified response to the MMIP crisis in the state.

More than two dozen tribal leaders, representing tribes in all parts of California, joined the strategic discussion, which included a call to action.

On Tuesday, October 4, the Yurok Tribe will host the first-ever statewide policy summit on MMIP. The 1st Annual Northern California Tribal Summit on MMIP will bring together tribal leaders, law enforcement officials and MMIP survivors as well as state and federal lawmakers, academic researchers and victim advocates to identify solutions to stop the crisis.