

Yurok Tribe to unveil new search and rescue drone

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Alanna Nulph, a Senior Paralegal and Special Tribal Criminal Jurisdiction Coordinator, wanted to contribute more to the Yurok Tribe's effort to end the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People (MMIP), so she took it upon herself to become a certified search and rescue drone pilot and a sworn member of the Del Norte County Search and Rescue team.

In February, the Yurok woman received her Part 107 Remote Pilot certification from the Federal Aviation Administration, which is a requirement to operate drones for search and rescue (SAR) missions. In addition to acquiring all of the relevant credentials and putting in hours of training, much of it on her own time, Alanna is building a formal program through To' Kee Skuy' Soo Ney-wo-chek's MMIP Family Advocacy Program, including a list of procedures, to aid in search and rescue operations through the mobilization of specially equipped drones.

"This program was born out of my desire to be a 'helper' when a missing person incident occurs in our territory," Alanna said. "I have been sworn into Del Norte Search and Rescue so I can be on the front lines when someone goes missing."

Housed within the Yurok Tribal Court's To Kee Skuy' Soo Ney-wo-chek ("I will see you again in a good way", the drone search and rescue program will be incorporated into the Tribe's comprehensive response to

the MMIP crisis. At 11am on Friday, May 5, the Yurok Tribal Court is organizing a Flower Drop on the Weitchpec bridge to recognize MMIP victims and their families. All tribal families and friends are invited to participate. At the event, Alanna will be showcasing her drones to let the community know that they have a new resource at their disposal the next time a loved one goes missing.

Specialized drones are becoming a common tool used in search and rescue missions throughout the world. Remote-controlled aerial vehicles can be employed to search large geographic areas with difficult terrain in a short period of time. Drones can also be deployed in inclement weather and at a fraction of the cost of conventional aircraft, such as planes and helicopters. They have been used to find people in distress due to a wide variety of circumstances, ranging from hikers in Southern California to climbers close to the summit of Mount Everest in China.

Alanna operates two high-powered drones that have the ability to assist in multiple facets of search and rescue efforts. For example, the drones have extremely sensitive thermal imaging sensors that can detect heat signatures from long distances during the day and night. The sensor can pick up on body heat even if the person is under a closed-canopy forest or swimming in the water. This technology is especially useful in Yurok Country, where most of the landscape is covered in steep mountains, rivers, and dense mixed-conifer stands. Once the person is located, the drone can deliver precise GPS coordinates to first responders on the ground.

One of the drones is outfitted with a payload delivery system that is capable of carrying food, water and other critical resources to people who are waiting to be rescued. It can also shine a spotlight on the missing person to aid first responders. Alanna has already deployed the drones in real-life search operation. She participated in the search for a missing mushroom picker near Gasquet. During the two-week-long incident, Alanna logged her flight info with the local authorities and was able to provide reports to the missing persons family each day. She will play a critical role the next time someone is reported missing on or near the Yurok Reservation.

The drone program is part of the Yurok Tribe's wide-ranging effort to confront the MMIP crisis. In December of 2021, the Yurok Tribe declared an MMIP emergency following a spike in MMIP cases in the region. California has the fifth highest number of MMIP cases in the US and a majority of incidents occur in the northern part of the state, where the Yurok Tribe resides. The declaration mobilized a multidisciplinary team to address the many aspects of this complex crisis.

The Tribe formed a prosecutor's office to hold perpetrators accountable and hired a policy analyst to advocate for legislation targeting the underlying causes of the crisis. The Tribe also hired an investigator who is solely focused on MMIP cases. Earlier this year, the Yurok Tribe and U.S. Marshals Service (USMS) launched a new MMIP pilot project, which is part of USMS's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Initiative. The cooperative project brings together personnel from the Yurok Tribe.