

Yurok Agricultural Corporation expands food sovereignty

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The Yurok Agricultural Corporation has purchased 26-acres of land that will be used to develop a culturally relevant food sovereignty program on the Yurok Reservation.

Previously owned by the Weitchpec Nursery, YAC officials said the property is an ideal location to build the much-needed food program, which will serve residents on and near the reservation.

“Weitchpec Nursery was the premier supplier of flower and vegetable starts in the Humboldt County region for many decades. When the owners retired the community lost jobs and revenue from that business,” said Toby Vanlandingham, President of the YAC. “The Yurok Agricultural Corporation has an opportunity to once again bring that business back into the community to stimulate economic growth, create decent paying jobs, and to assist residents with becoming self-sustaining by growing their own food.”

The purchase was timely as it occurred during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

“COVID has heightened the importance in rural communities of micro agriculture and food sovereignty,” said Madison Green, Secretary of the Board. “The purpose of the Yurok Agricultural Corporation is to develop agricultural economic resources and to maximize revenue derived from such resources on behalf of the Tribe and its members, this project falls directly in line with our core mission as a company and will benefit our people for decades to come.”

YAC Vice President Edward “Horse” Aubrey said the nursery will be dedicated to providing a quality choice for people looking for plant starts and garden supplies, as well as creating a farmers marketplace and an outlet to local area stores with quality vegetables at affordable prices.

“I’ve been a staunch supporter of Yurok people maintaining true sovereignty by growing their own medicine and food, so when Toby brought this idea to the table it was a no-brainer — power to the people,” Aubrey said.

The new program will also focus on educating and assisting Yurok reservation residents in all aspects of food sovereignty. Since the entire Yurok reservation was declared a food desert by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2017, a multitude of studies have been done on the area and a small number of grants have been awarded to build a healthy, sustainable and culturally centered food system. In some areas off the reservation there has been success, but on the Yurok Reservation there has been no solid foundation laid to sustain a program into the future.

“We’re still in a food desert and have been since colonization basically,” Vanlandingham said. “I have been in agriculture my entire life, in order to really bring about change on the reservation we need a program that is not grant funded and has the resources to keep the program going. I was running the Kenek We-roy community garden up until I was elected to Tribal council, then life got busy. Now that I am the president of the agricultural corp I have the ability to build a system that the community needs, based off of the community needs, and not worry about finding a grant for that.”

“Now I am not saying we will stop pursuing grant dollars, but outside funds will not be the defining factor in the success of this program,” Vanlandingham added.

With a tentative opening date of March 2021, the Yurok Agricultural Corporation will bring the dream of the community to reality and be the supplier of locally sourced non-GMO, high quality vegetables and vegetable starts. The nursery will also offer organic seeds and a variety of potted fruit trees that are suited to the local climate. Weitchpec Nursery will serve both residential customers and area retail stores. There will also be a variety of garden accessories such as potting soils, safe fertilizers and garden tools available. In addition, gardening how-to’s and community workshops to further educate residents on the benefits of growing food will also be provided to the community.

The Yurok Agricultural Corporation is a Tribal entity that is organized, chartered and wholly owned by the Yurok Tribe. The YAC was created to develop agricultural economic resources in an orderly manner and to maximize revenue derived from such resources on behalf of the Tribe and its members.

