

Yurok Tribe purchases 40-acre parcel for food security farm

January 9, 2021



The Yurok Tribe recently purchased 40-acres of agricultural land to create a food security farm.

“The COVID-19 crisis illuminated a very real potential for food shortages in our rural region. We purchased this property to make the tribe more self-sufficient during times of emergency and when things get back to normal. This property presents an ideal location to cultivate a tremendous amount of healthy, organic produce for our people,” said Joseph L. James, the chairman of the Yurok Tribe. “Establishing this environmentally sustainable food security farm will also strengthen our sovereignty.”

“This year, we have taken significant steps toward radically increasing the availability of healthy foods on the reservation. With this acquisition and the purchase of the old Weitchpec nursery, we have secured more than 65 acres of land for food production, which will complement our efforts to restore our natural food resources. For many years to come, these projects will improve the physical and mental health of our youth, families and elders,” added Ryan Ray, the Yurok Tribal Council’s Requa District representative.

The Yurok Tribe Environmental Program's Food Sovereignty Division will manage the Klamath farm, which is located next the Margaret Keating Elementary School and the Yurok Tribe's Head Start and Early Head Start. The Food Sovereignty Division's staff will employ a holistic, regenerative method of cultivation to grow a wide variety of vegetables at the site. An organic orchard will be established on the property, too.

Purchased with funds from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act, the parcel is comprised of roughly equal parts fertile pasture and forest. The redwood-dominant forest flanks Mynot Creek and contains traditional food resources, such as huckleberry. In the future, the Klamath farm will also serve as an outdoor classroom where Yurok students will participate in projects featuring the following: earth-friendly plant cultivation, culturally consistent land management, traditional food harvesting and fish and wildlife habitat restoration.

Earlier this year, the Yurok Agricultural Corporation, a Yurok Tribe-owned entity, acquired the 26-acre Weitchpec Nursery. In addition to sustainably grown fruits and vegetables, the tribally operated nursery will soon offer plant seeds and starts as well as gardening equipment. The Yurok Agricultural Corporation will also provide tutorials at the site to assist local residents in developing and maintaining their own food gardens.

In 2017, the USDA declared the Yurok Reservation a food desert because there are very few sources of healthy sustenance on tribal lands. This was not always the case. Prior to European contact, the Klamath River was filled with fish, including abundant salmon and steelhead runs that arrived in each of the four seasons. On land, a large quantity of wild game accompanied an enormous variety of edible plants and fungi. The immense natural bounty was a direct outcome of precise tribal land stewardship strategies designed over the course of millennia to facilitate maximum productivity and biological diversity. Another factor contributing to the lack of access to nutritious foods is the fact that most of the arable land on the reservation is privately owned, excluding the tribe's new properties in Klamath and Weitchpec.

At the start of the pandemic, it quickly became clear that rural areas would receive resources last, which is a worrisome predicament in the event of a food shortage. That is why the tribe is developing creative solutions to increase the availability of healthy forms of nourishment on the reservation, such as purchasing land for organic crop production, the restoration of traditional food sources and the revitalization of the overall landscape.

"We are working toward becoming completely self-sufficient and food sovereign. I foresee a day when there is convenient access to sufficient supplies of organically grown produce and the natural resources that sustained our people since time immemorial," concluded Chairman James.