



United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Wetlands Reserve Program

Cradle Valley Ranch Project

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Melany Johnson
Susanville Indian Rancheria
Cultural Resources Specialist

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The Susanville Indian Rancheria (SIR), a federally recognized tribe composed of Paiute, Maidu, Washoe, and Pit River people, is located near Susanville in Lassen County. The Bureau of Indian Affairs purchased the original 30-acre Rancheria in 1923 to create homesteads for “homeless California Indians” in Lassen County. Now, with a land base of 1,341 acres and a population of 967, the Rancheria has been steadily growing and is working to purchase additional lands and put them into trust.

WRP Easement

Several programs and funding sources from various partners are helping SIR to achieve their objectives for the Cradle Valley project. Among these, an NRCS WRP easement has proven to be an effective, flexible tool that fits well with the Rancheria’s vision and traditional land management techniques. For SIR it has been a catalyst and a centerpiece for further restoration efforts.

Wetlands Easement Key Tool in Indigenous Restoration Project

In 2003, the Susanville Indian Rancheria (SIR or Rancheria) of northeastern California acquired 160 acres of forested property in Plumas County, known as Cradle Valley Ranch. Their long term goal is to return this land to pre-settlement conditions and use it as a means of preserving their traditional culture. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is helping the Rancheria to achieve this goal through a Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) easement and other assistance.



Agency and Tribal partners at Cradle Valley Ranch during a project showcase tour in 2009. The goal of the project is to reduce fuel loads to improve forest health, minimize the threat of wildfire, enhance traditional use plant communities, and return the forest to natural conditions.

“It was not so many years ago that this land was entirely stewarded by our ancestors in a way that was sustainable and mutually beneficial to both humans and the ecosystem,” says SIR Cultural Resources Specialist Melany Johnson. “Our objective in owning and restoring these lands is to ensure that present generations of all peoples can enjoy them and interact with a living past while stewarding the lands and resources as a means of ensuring the opportunity for future generations to do the same.”

SIR plans to establish a cultural center and envisions the Cradle Valley property and similar land acquisitions in their traditional homeland as part of a vast park dedicated to the purposes of education, healing, protection, and traditional land management techniques. They also see these lands as an opportunity for promoting social harmony, celebrating cultural diversity, and empowering their people.

“Our plan is to provide land bases, islands of a sort, where people can learn about the land and its history. Traditional ecology can be learned and lived through implementation of an ecosystem such as our ancestors benefitted from and enjoyed,” says Johnson.



Yampah, an edible root food, harvested from a site on the Cradle Valley property. Yampah root was an important staple crop of Native Americans in Western North America. The nutlike roots of the plant are crunchy and mildly sweet, and resemble water chestnuts in texture and flavor.

Johnson emphasized that the restoration of the land is closely intertwined with restoration of the traditional culture. “For the Tribal culture to be complete again, the land must also be complete again,” she says. “The practice of traditional land management techniques is a way of life. The traditions and culture of the indigenous people are rooted in the everyday management of the landscape.”

The Cradle Valley property is completely surrounded by the Plumas National Forest and is composed of eastside pine forest, with a riparian corridor and aspen stands. Clarks Creek bisects the property and is surrounded by 28 acres of wet meadow with willows and native grasses. Over the years, uncontrolled grazing had severely degraded riparian and upland habitats affecting the hydrology of the entire Clark Creek watershed. An important first step in restoring the property was to install livestock exclusion fencing.

“Cattle using a Plumas National Forest grazing allotment were damaging the creek and riparian zone, and the Rancheria wanted to protect the area by keeping the cattle out,” says SIR Natural Resources Director Crista Stewart. “Over many years, cattle grazing on the property had eliminated wetland grasses and damaged the creek. The uncontrolled grazing had severely degraded habitats for a variety of fish and other wildlife resources significant to the Tribe.” The property was also heavily overgrown, choked with brush, noxious weeds, and too many trees, thus affecting forest health and creating a fire hazard.

To address these problems, SIR initiated an effort called the Cradle Valley Indigenous Landscape Enhancement Project in 2005. As part of this effort, they applied for WRP and received funding from NRCS and other sources (including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Environmental Protection Agency, and North Cal-Neva Resource Conservation and Development) to fence the area. The Rancheria forestry crew fenced around the perimeter of the property, using wildlife friendly fencing materials.

“The Rancheria put 64 acres of the Cradle Valley property into a 30-year WRP conservation easement, with NRCS as the easement holder,” explains NRCS District Conservationist Dan Martynn. “This land will be maintained primarily as habitat for wetland birds and other riparian species. Some upland habitat adjacent to the wetland area is allowed in the easement.”

WRP wetland enhancement and upland habitat management work was completed by 2007. The undertaking has improved conditions for native fish and wildlife species, including at-risk species, associated with the restored wetland, riparian, and forested habitats.

The easement revenue enabled the Rancheria to reclaim one-fourth of the purchase price of the land. These funds, in combination with funds from the Plumas County Resource Advisory Committee, were used by SIR for forest thinning and pruning to increase fire safety and improve forest health.

Martynn says that NRCS worked with SIR to develop a conservation plan, and SIR was able to acquire more funding through NRCS’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Plumas National Forest, and the California Fire Safe Council to improve forest health on 100 acres of the property through thinning, pruning, piling, and burning. In 2012, SIR signed up for an additional EQIP contract through the California Statewide Tribal Initiative. This contract, aimed at improving and managing forest health, is enabling SIR to do more thinning, pruning, upland wildlife habitat management, and plantings on 40 acres over the next two years. The contract has also allowed SIR to build their fuel reduction capacity and increase employment opportunities. SIR has applied what they learned through this effort and trained a proficient crew that is now in demand for fuel reduction work with other landowners in the area.

“This is truly a win-win project,” says Martynn. It’s improving wildlife and fisheries habitat enjoyed by various recreational communities while reducing the opportunity for a severe wildfire to develop in this area. It will benefit communities in Plumas and Lassen counties by providing a unique area to learn about conservation and traditional Native Americans ways and will also provide an area for Native Americans to host cultural gatherings and practice traditional ceremonies.”

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Using traditional land management techniques, Rancheria crew members pruned trees and burned piles of fuel to increase the amount of sunlight coming into the forest, strengthen the aspen stands, and remove unhealthy concentrations of young trees and underbrush. They also did native plantings along creek and meadow edges on about five acres and created areas for traditional root collection and restored areas for basket making materials.