



SOWING ME-WUK SEEDLINGS OF SYNERGY

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Berkeley Tuolumne Camp Rebuild

By Jeanne Ferris

Fire is an essential element when housed in safety. Native cultural fires can be sacred ceremonies, such as the prescribed burns used for centuries by the Yurok and Karuk tribes for land management, warmth, cooking food, supporting habitats, and lighting the dark. This fire is known as good medicine.

Most people understand the power of a live flame and a forceful breeze. One hot August night in 2013, a hunter ignored temporary fire restrictions and decided to make dinner in the Stanislaus National Forest. His meal morphed into a rabid inferno consuming everything in its path.

One hour by car away, the Tuolumne Band of Me-wuk Indians' village was "under advisory"—but never under mandatory evacuation orders—and went on fire alert. "We were a bit nervous about the possibility when Rim Fire took a turn one day," Dorie Bietz (Tuolumne Band of Me-wuk Indians/Central and Southern Sierra Me-wuk) said. "Some smoke—a few folks voluntarily evacuated because of smoke and health-related [issues]." Ms. Bietz is onsite around the clock serving as the tribal planner and emergency manager.

The Rim Fire raged for a week in Jawbone Ridge before reaching the hundred-year-old Berkeley Tuolumne Camp, famous for "where my kids can run free and I don't worry." With one hour's notice, families with small children, teenagers, counselors, service people, and staff evacuated mid-activity. Occupancy that day was at about 360. All personal possessions and 120 structures burned.

By the time the five thousand (at its peak) fire personnel contained the Rim Fire on October 24, the fire had left behind a black burn site "the size of Los Angeles."

Hundreds of people had evacuated from their homes and were displaced—remarkably with zero fatalities and ten injuries. The Rim Fire came within seven miles

of the western entrance of Yosemite National Park. California's ancient elders, better known as the Giant Sequoias, escaped destruction. The damages amounted to an estimated \$125 million in suppression efforts, with over 255,000 acres burned. Stanislaus National Forest sustained a burnout of 154,530 acres.

Liza McNulty left a principal founding position of fifteen years to oversee the Berkeley Tuolumne Camp Rebuild (BTCR). "It was a tailor made opportunity that I couldn't resist," she said. With a BS in civil engineering and a MS in environmental engineering, McNulty heads up BTCR as the capital improvement program manager. She oversees the immense undertaking of an environmentally approved design, construction proposals, and all fiscal responsibilities.

Last year, the twenty-page BTCR public update became available on the City of Berkeley website. It detailed cost recovery of \$60 million and five tiers of funding, with top-level coming from insurance, a public assistance grant, City of Berkeley, and private donations.

Securing the required permits from sixteen local, federal, and state agencies for an updated, code-compliant design expansion (from fourteen acres to thirty) with structure upgrades, energy-efficient improvements, and environmental impact measures has indeed tested McNulty's six years of expertise.

At the city's behest, Tuolumne Band of Me-wuk Indians' consent was included on the permit graph. When ascertaining fire damage at Sun City, a previously designated tent camping area within BTC, the "inadvertent discovery of objects of cultural patrimony" on federal land deemed it off-limits, and planned activity ceased.

In deference to the Me-wuk tribe, cultural resources' integrity will not be disturbed with improvements or replanting. The permanent installation of buck and pole fencing will be by hand. Mitigation measure CUL 1 assures additional discoveries are protected if uncovered during construction.

In 2015, professional biologists and botanists conducted technical assessments and evaluations in cooperation with the US Forest Service (USFS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Evaluations included but were not limited to aquatic wildlife, terrestrial wildlife, and rare plants. From these studies, mitigation measures have addressed riparian conservation goals, wildlife corridors, and drainages.

Pre-Rim Fire, the California spotted owl foraged near BTC, but the pending construction site does not offer a suitable nesting habitat. When bird nesting begins around February 15, construction will halt until September 1 to diminish disturbance severity.

A rare annual herb, the slender-stemmed *Mimulus filicaulis* (better known as monkeyflower), was recorded growing along drainage near Hardin Flat Road. Short-lived, reproduced by seed, and subject to annual changes in moisture regime, its distribution throughout the district's southeastern half appears well established.

For the migrating western pond turtle, according to the BTCR report, "effects would be negligible and would not lead to a trend toward Federal listing or a loss of viability."

Since BTC sits by the south fork of Tuolumne River, "all structures have been located outside of the hundred-year floodplain," McNulty said. "Our only construction within the hundred-year floodplain is related to accessible pathways to beach and island program areas."

Watershed management includes a traditional wastewater treatment (septic) system, and water intake is done by hand with a hose into the river during BTC operation.

A Water Quality Emergency Notification Plan is required by Tuolumne County, the State of California's Health and Human Services Agency, and the California Department of Public Health before BTC operations begin (generally between April and November inclusive of camp set-up and take-down). This plan is for notifying the residents downstream of an immediate shutdown in case of effluent discharge, also known as wastewater.

"We have no discharge at all into the river, nor any disturbance of the riverbed itself," McNulty said. "We did explore the possibility of gray water onsite, however due to setback requirements for gray water from water bodies and our proximity to the river, it was not possible to implement."

In response to a question about compost, McNulty replied, "Composting is not feasible due to bears and wildlife."

"Solar-ready components (connections, conduits, etc.) and solar panels have approvals in place with the USFS but cannot be funded in the initial build. Measures are in place to convert several parking stalls to electric charging stations in the future," McNulty continued.

Regarding air quality, campfires would be limited to one and a half hours on Friday nights during camp operation and prohibited on "no burn" days. Also included in the plans is an approximately 240,000-gallon water supply for fire prevention storage and a system of hydrants and standpipes throughout BTC.

All buildings have a green design with passive cooling and heating, no mechanical units. Outdoor lighting shall be dark sky compliant and consistent with California's Green Building Standards Code for Light Pollution Reduction, including shrouds, timed switches, or motion detectors.

Orienting the outdoor amphitheater to the north and not downstream of nearby residences resolved noise pollution concerns. The speaker system will not exceed noise levels of 50 Leq dB, and monitoring of the maximum volume levels allowed will be done with a handheld sound pressure level meter.

The non-profit Friends of Berkeley Tuolumne Camp (FOBTC) is comprised of camp alumni—families, neighbors, businesses, staff, counselors, teens who are now adults—all dedicated to fundraising and rebuilding the beloved camp.

Not specified in the BTCR plans but addressed by a FOBTC presentation to the Me-Wuk tribe are proposed camp signage to include historical references to Me-wuk and possibly, educational lectures for the children facilitated by Me-wuk elders or representatives—a new and inclusive idea at BTC.

“I wasn't at the FOBTC presentation, but I did read the notes taken,” Ms. Beitz said. “Those proposals were received favorably by the tribe.”

Also presented was FOBTC's intent to purchase seedlings from the Me-Wuk's Native Nursery when it reopens.

Scott Gelfand, executive director for FOBTC, said, “Planting trees has changed how I view the USFS. I have the greatest respect for their willingness to collaborate. They are tremendous stewards of public land.” With an estimated six to eight thousand trees needing replacement, recovery is slow. One-gallon seedlings of ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, sugar pine, white alder, and red cedar are waiting to reconnect with the earth.

“There are only two times a year we can replant, once in March when it's thirty below and again in the middle of December; both times are weather dependent,” Gelfand continued. “When we started, we had six volunteers helping the conservation corps, and by 2019, we had five hundred. Sheltering-in-place began that same week, so the window for planting got shut down this year.”

Starting in 1986, Gelfand worked as BTC's assistant camp director. Today he is an active entrepreneur and a stakeholder with Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions. Gelfand has been passionate about trees and BTC for thirty-four years. “We are so excited to open in 2022,” he said. “We still need to raise funds for the gap (like purchasing mature trees), but locals have really risen to the call for action, including the City of Berkeley.”

“With everything on hold,” McNulty said. “Opening to the public right now would have been ill-timed, it’s actually been a blessing in disguise.”

BTC has existed on Me-wuk ancestral lands for decades, but the tribe has never utilized the camp facility. With seedlings from the Me-wuk, sown by loving hands of earth stewards, perhaps these baby trees will grow, creating synergy with Indigenous wisdom and healing the earth.

And may the new diverse generation of footsteps leave no trace when they visit the river.