



August 12, 2008

Tribes object to fighting fire in sacred places

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GRANTS PASS, Ore. (AP) — Indian tribes from the Klamath River canyon are worried that the U.S. Forest Service is violating some of their sacred lands by fighting a remote wilderness wildfire rather than leaving it to burn naturally.

“Talking with Forest Service firefighters, I have been saying this is the Sistine Chapel, the Mount Sinai, the Vatican,” for the Yurok, Karuk and Tolowa tribes, Christ Peters, the Yurok tribe’s liaison with the Forest Service, said from Arcata, Calif.

“If fire should move in naturally, we’re comfortable with that,” Peters said. “But if you bring a drip torch into the Vatican and intend to ignite it, you are going to have some opposition.”

The Siskiyou and Blue 2 fires have been burning for weeks at low intensity in the Siskiyou Wilderness on the Six Rivers National Forest in the Siskiyou Mountains between the Klamath River and the Oregon border.

With so many fires in the area, it took weeks for the Forest Service to send its first crew, and they adopted a strategy of burning out a perimeter around the fires to prevent them from spreading as the weather gets hotter, drier and windier.

Under protocols established years ago, the tribes have been meeting with the Forest Service over the management of the fires, and Six Rivers National Forest Supervisor Tyrone Kelley said they are being sensitive to their concerns.

“We realize the significance of this area,” Kelley said. “We’re working with them.”

But though the fires are far from any homes, leaving them to burn without a strong perimeter around them is not an option, given the nearby timber resources and expectations that the fire conditions will get worse, he said. He added that because the fires are in a wilderness area, fire lines are built by hand, not with bulldozers.

The area is home to many prayer seats or vision quest sites shared by the three tribes, where tribal members have fasted, prayed and sought spiritual guidance for thousands of years. The area is also used to gather grasses for baskets and Port Orford cedar for ceremonial buildings, such as sweat lodges.

Peters said the tribes share a belief in creating the world anew each year, celebrated in the Boat Dance and White Deerskin Dance.

“Our ceremonies are based on creating the world anew each year,” Peters said. “The area impacted has a spiritual intelligence we have access to generation after generation that ultimately gives birth to these ceremonies. Part and parcel of the ceremonies is to establish an order or balance within the world.”

In the 1980s, the tribes fought a Forest Service proposal to build a logging road through the area up to the U.S. Supreme Court, where the tribes lost, Peters said. Later, the logging project was killed by designation of the area as a wilderness.

For untold centuries, native people have set fires to manage natural resources, such as the oaks that produce acorns, a major traditional food source, and grasses used to weave baskets, Peters said.

But the tribes are worried that the fires set by the Forest Service burn at higher intensity, destroying fisheries habitat and other resources, and using instruments such as drip torches violates the spirituality of the place, said Bill Tripp, eco-cultural restoration specialist for the Karuk tribe.

“They are politically driven to have containment,” of a fire, he said. “In order to get containment, they have to have a line all the way around this thing, and they need black all the way around the line.

“They have to burn it hot to have a place to escape to safely. It’s not very good ecologically.”

