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In June, the Governing Board at the National Interagency Fire Center selected the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), Fort Apache Agency and the Coronado National Forest, Sierra Vista Ranger District to be recipients of the 2019 Pulaski Award. This marks the first time BIA has received this prestigious award.

The Pulaski Award recognizes groups demonstrating outstanding performance in the areas of interagency collaboration, cooperation and coordination; safety of wildland firefighters or the American public during a wildfire; outstanding group performance in fire management and fire operations activities; outstanding performance on a wildland fire management project or activity; and development of partnerships or communication tools.

Tribes reserve the right to use ancestral and reserved treaty right lands for religious and cultural purposes such as hunting, fishing and gathering, and the BIA has a trust responsibility to protect, restore and reduce the impacts of wildfire on these lands. In conjunction with the White Mountain Apache Tribe, Yavapai Apache Nation, Fort Apache Agency and the Coronado National Forest, BIA's Western Region facilitated the development of a collaborative RTRL proposal, thereby demonstrating interagency collaboration and outstanding performance on a Reserved Treaty Rights Land (RTRL) project.

RTRL program funds enabled Tribes, the Forest Service and the BIA to participate in this collaborative project to address shared interests that enhanced the health and resiliency of the Oak Savana ecosystem and helped protect culturally and spiritually significant areas to the Apache people. Among the beneficiaries of this work were the Fort Apache Fuels crew members who helped protect their ancestral lands from potential wildfires.

The Fort Apache Fuels crew treated (cut and piled) over 100 acres and supported the Coronado’s implementation of a 1,160 acre prescribed burn designed to create a resilient and sustainable Oak Savana ecosystem. By performing these vegetation management treatments, the project helped address Apache concerns about the Chi'chil, the acorn from Emory oak, which is an important food source for the Apache people and cultural element the ecosystem supports. In the future, the crew, along with the Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management, will assist the Douglas and Santa Catalina Ranger Districts with vegetation treatment work taking place on Mt. Lemmon near Tucson, Arizona.

Congratulations to all who received this prestigious award and for the important work accomplished through these outstanding collaborative efforts!

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