

by **Jim Nanamkin, Daria Day, and Soledad Holguin** with contributions from **Captain Aaron Franco**

In 2009, Captain Aaron Franco of the Tule River Fire Department investigated thirteen fires that had been set by seven children between the ages of 8 and 15 years old in the grassy fields surrounding Painted Rock, a culturally important site for the Tule River Band of Yukot Indians. The Painted Rock site, located along the Tule River, includes bedrock mortars, pitted boulders, midden and pictographs. The pictographs are painted on the ceiling and walls of a rock shelter and include paintings of a male, female, and child Bigfoot (known as the family), and many other animals and shapes. This rock art site is unique; not only because it contains a Bigfoot pictograph,

but also because of the traditional Native American stories that accompany it. There are no other known creation stories involving a Bigfoot-like creature in California or anywhere else in the west.

"It takes a lot of people; taking a small bite; to make a Youth Fire Prevention Program a community effort."

- Jim Nanamkin, Regional Fire Prevention Officer, Bureau of Indian Affairs

Prior to this incident, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) at the Pacific Region initiated a wildland fire investigation focusing on ignition sources and intentional human involvement. Jay Hinshaw, BIA Wildland Fire Investigator and Jim Nanamkin, BIA Regional Fire Prevention Officer, discovered youth between the ages of 5 and 17 who were misusing fire represented the

highest group of human-caused wildland fires. A string of wildland fires set on the Tule River Reservation in 2007, investigated by Mr. Hinshaw, had been set by four children; ages 4, 5, and 9.

Most of the fires set by children on the Tule River Reservation occur in wildland areas. This presents a very real threat to the Tule River community. The reservation is located in a remote, rural area approximately 20 miles from the

nearest town of Porterville. The reservation is accessible only by a winding road that follows the meandering South Fork of the Tule River. The nature of the vegetation and shape of the Tule River Valley make this area particularly susceptible to fast-moving wildfires with catastrophic potential.

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Youth from the Tule River Indian Reservation dressed in traditional Native American Regalia.

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These fire incidents not only posed risks to the youth involved and their community but also their cultural heritage. The loss of the pictographs at Painted Rock would have been a great loss for the Yukot Indians who, along with other tribal communities, have historically used fire as a highly honored tool, community resource and integral part of ceremonies for centuries. Shame upon fire which is bestowed with great respect and honor would also have been a great tragedy to Indian Country.

The Tule River Tribal Council and Fire Department recognized the need for a strong, intervention-based program to help the youth who were misusing fire. This recognition set into motion the development of the *Youth with Fire Intervention Program*. The program would incorporate the strengths and challenges unique to Indian Country with the goal of helping youth regain their self-respect and the trust of their community by learning about the responsibility they have to protect their families, communities, and natural and cultural resources.

The Council tasked the Tule River Fire Department to develop the program. Through education and community service, the program would teach youth how unsafe fire affects their community and reintroduce youth to the cultural values, tradition, and the ceremonial uses of fire. The focal point is through community service and education, youth who misuse fire can regain their status as 'tribal members in good standing.'

Chief Shane Santos and Captain

Aaron Franco partnered with Mr. Nanamkin, who had recently developed a program to support tribes in just such efforts, to bring the fledgling BIA program to Tule River to put into practice. The BIA contracted with Daria Day to develop the Youth Fire Prevention Program for the Tule River Tribe.

Captain Franco took on the role of program coordinator and brought together partners from tribal programs and within the community (Tule River Clinic, Recreation, Mental Health, Social Services) to create a coalition to provide input for the program operation, to support the youth and their families through program services, and to represent the backbone of the program. The coalition consulted with Soledad Holguin, BIA, and Judy Okulitch, Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal, to incorporate aspects of Oregon's model and train coalition members on the *Oregon Juvenile with Fire Screening Tool*.

The program is consequence-based and creates community support for the youth involved. Youth are required to sign a behavior contract that includes 200 hours of community service and a commitment to never again set fires on the reservation before the age of eighteen. Service hours are completed within the coalitions' partner programs and include:

- Tule River Fire Department: focused on fire prevention, safety, and survival education.
- Tule River Department of Public Safety: community restoration and learning the role of public safety within the community.
- Future Generations Program: receive guidance from peers

serving on Youth Council on what they might do to regain their trust.

- Tule River Recreation Department: various tasks at community recreation center, equipment/facility maintenance
- The youth return to the Tule River Fire Department for completion of the program.

The program incorporates parent accountability and requires parents and/or guardians to sign the contract. They must complete at least 40 hours of the community service with their child. The hope is that by doing so, they can reconnect with their children and perhaps heal their family.

If the child or parent fail to complete the program or violate the contract by setting another fire, they face the consequence of being held financially liable for all fire suppression costs as well as all damage costs that occurred as the result of the fire-setting behavior.

Strong support from the Tribal Council has allowed the program to grow quickly. The program is ongoing and continues to evolve as coalition partners expand their understanding of fire and their ability to work together to support the youth through the program. As of May 6, 2010, two of the seven children involved in the fire at Painted Rock have graduated from the program. The youth are looking forward to going before their Tribal Council again, this time as true members of their community who respect and understand the responsibility they have to protect their people, their resources and their cultural heritage.

