David Mike and Norman Mike of the Ajumawi Band use drip torches to ignite slash piles during a controlled burn near Fall River Lake as part of an ongoing ecocultural restoration effort.

**Oak burn project a step in returning indigenous fire to ancestral land**

By TOM GRECO

Lomakatsi Restoration Project, an ecosystem restoration nonprofit that works throughout Northern California and Oregon, is partnering with the Ajumawi Band of the Ajumawi-Atsuge Nation (Pit River Tribe) to return beneficial fire in their ancestral homelands — and to make the community of Fall River Mills safer from wildfires.

As the next step in an ongoing restoration effort, Lomakatsi crews, consisting of local tribal community members with crew support from the region, conducted a controlled burn on a 20-acre oak woodland adjacent to Fall River Lake.

The operation in mid December had crews monitoring the site over two days to ensure all embers were extinguished.

For thousands of years, frequent low-severity fire from lightening and indigenous burning shaped the landscapes of California.

After a century of fire suppression, forests and woodlands have grown overly dense, increasing the risk of severe wildfire danger to communities.

In 2018, the Hat Fire burned 1,900 acres and extended to within a mile of downtown Fall River Mills.

“This controlled burn is an important step towards returning indigenous fire to our ancestral lands,” said Belinda Brown, Lomakatsi’s tribal partnerships manager and an enrolled member of the Ajumawi-Atsuge Nation.

“To our people, carefully applied, low to moderate intensity fire is medicine. It is necessary to maintain balance in our ecosystems. When it’s taken away, you start to see problems, like all the megafires we are experiencing in the West today,” she said.

“So we are happy to be laying the groundwork to bring beneficial fire back to maintain our ecocultural systems that indigenous people depend on for our survival.”

The controlled burn builds on the ongoing Fall River Trail Improvement and Ecocultural Enhancement Project, a collaborative ecological restoration effort between Fall River Valley Community Services District, Lomakatsi, the Ajumawi Band, and Inter-Tribal Ecosystem Restoration Partnership, with

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Burn project aims to improve oak woodland health

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funding from Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council. The project aims to improve oak woodland health and habitat for wildlife, while reducing wildfire risks to adjacent homes and the town of Fall River Mills.

The oak woodland restoration will also enhance living cultural resources that the Ajumawi Band and the tribal community depend on for subsistence, such as acorns, which have been gathered as a major food staple for thousands of years. This effort reintroduces a sophisticated horticultural indigenous land tending practice of favoring oaks trees by reducing competition around them—and using carefully applied fire to ensure a good mast of acorn crops for gathering. In this way, the project will help maintain a key element of the cultural heritage of the Ajumawi Band and many California and western tribes.

The project began earlier this year, when Lomakatsi and Issi Wah Ecocultural Services Inc., a local, tribally-owned business, conducted ecological thinning and fuel hazard reduction at the site by removing dense juniper and pine near white and black oak trees. A major emphasis of the work was to protect the large, older oak trees—known as “legacy trees”—by reducing these small trees that cause stress for nutrients, sunlight and water, and can also serve as ladder fuels that allow fire to jump up into the canopy. Without natural fire to keep them in check, juniper and pine can also grow above and eventually shade out oaks, threatening the incredible biodiversity harbored by oak habitats.

The slash generated from the thinning was piled by a six-person tribal youth crew employed by Lomakatsi, who were managed by elected Cultural Representatives from the Ajumawi Band, during a training program in the summer of 2019.

“By bringing all these partners together—including our youth and a tribal business—we’re building the capacity of the Ajumawi to pursue collaborative eco-

cultural restoration,” said Ginger Amoroso, Lomakatsi’s Tribal Youth Crew Manager and elected Cultural Representative of the Ajumawi Band. “Our lands need to be cared for and protected for future generations. Through this effort, we’re training our tribal youth and giving them an opportunity to work and build a positive place for people to enjoy in our Ajumawi homelands.”

In addition to improving habitat and reducing wildfire risk through ecological thinning and prescribed burning, the next phase of the project launching this winter will improve recreational trails, and establish native plants used for cultural and subsistence purposes.

The controlled burn was conducted by Lomakatsi’s professional forestry and fire crews in close collaboration with the Fall River Mills Fire Department and CALFIRE. All efforts were made to limit smoke emitted. Any community members with questions or concerns are encouraged to contact Lomakatsi Restoration Project at (541) 488-0208 and the Fall River Mills Fire Department at (530) 336-6117. Learn more about Lomakatsi at www.lomakatsi.org.