

Forest Warriors

Tribal group conducts restoration projects, gets on-the-job training

By JOEL ASCHBRENNER
H&N Staff Reporter

SYCAN MARSH — Sawdust flies as Justice Blacksun’s chainsaw slices through a young lodgepole pine. He fells the tree and quickly moves on to another.

Two years ago, he didn’t know a thing about running a chainsaw, and now he directs younger crew members, showing them how to sharpen blades and fix motors.

Blacksun is a member of the Klamath Tribes’ Forest Warriors, a crew that works on restoration projects around the region. Earlier this month, the crew was clearing invasive trees from the Sycan Marsh, north of Bly.

The Forest Warriors program was established in 2010 to create a tribal workforce for restoration and forest management projects. It provides job training and employment in a community where both are hard to come by.

“It’s awesome,” Blacksun said, taking a break from his work as sweat steamed from his skin. “If it weren’t for the Tribes opening that door for me, I don’t know where I’d be working.”

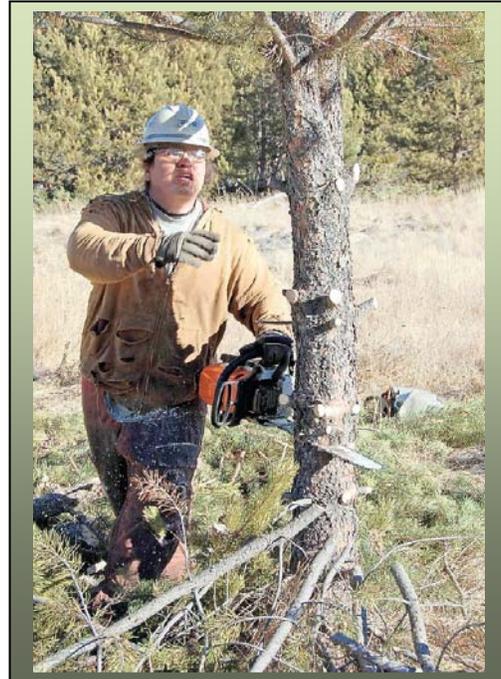
Blacksun had spent six months looking for work before joining the Forest Warriors. A steady paycheck is critical for him now. His 9-month-old son, River, in Klamath Falls depends on it, he said.

In Chiloquin, working with the Forest Warriors comes with a sense of pride, said Dan Galecki, training officer with the crew. He has a stack of resumes from tribal members looking to join.

“People want to work on this particular crew,” he said.

The crew works on a contractual basis, performing restoration work for private landowners, public agencies and environmental groups. The project at the Sycan Marsh is a partnership between the Forest Warriors; the Nature Conservancy, which manages a 30,000-acre preserve there; and Lomakatsi Restoration Project, an Ashland nonprofit that develops and oversees restoration projects.

“ This is food on the table, employment in a tough economy,” said Marko Bey, director of Lomakatsi.



Justice Blacksun cuts lodgepole pines, part of a restoration project at Sycan Marsh, north of Bly. Blacksun is a member of the Klamath Tribes’ Forest Warriors, a crew trained to perform restoration activities.

Work around the marsh will be complete in a few weeks and the crew will move on to other projects. This spring, the Forest Warriors will be in Moore Park thinning forests to reduce fire hazards.

The crew has worked with Lomakatsi in five counties. The project at the Sycan Marsh, an area that once belonged to the Tribes, is a special one, Blacksun said.

“It feels good to work on our ancestral land,” he said, putting a hand to his chest. “It feels powerful. It puts a smile on my face to work on this land my ancestors fished and hunted.”

The Forest Warriors program was founded with a nearly \$1.5 million federal stimulus grant. It provided crew members with 18 months of classroom and on-the job training.

More than just a paycheck, the Forest Warriors provides job skills for tribal members, said crew boss Joe Ochoa. Several crew members have used the training to get work elsewhere.

“It helps a lot of guys get back to work,” he said. “And they like the work. It helps them support their families.”

Restoring the Sycan Marsh

An ongoing restoration project at the Sycan Marsh will repair wildlife habitat and produce timber for sawmills and wood for biomass plants, said Craig Bienz, director of the Nature Conservancy’s Sycan Marsh preserve.

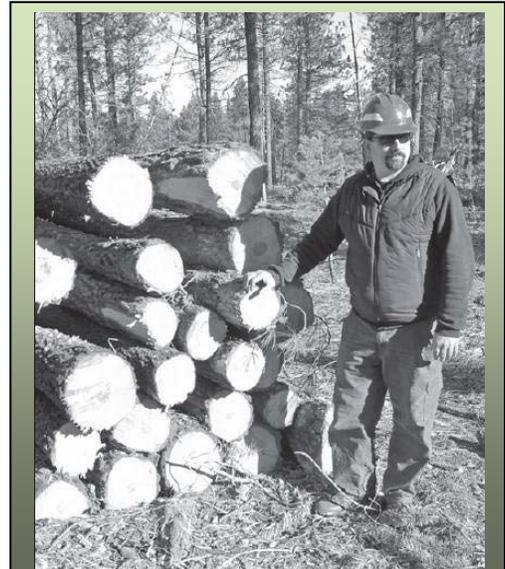
It’s good for the environment and good for the economy; that’s the beauty of the project, Bienz said.

The project will restore 328 acres of forest habitat and produce 250,000 board-feet of timber and up to 4,000 tons of biomass.

The project is a partnership between the Nature Conservancy; Lomakatsi Restoration Project, an Ashland nonprofit, and the Klamath Tribes’ Forest Warriors, a restoration work crew.

Earlier this month, the Forest Warriors’ 12-man crew was busy removing invasive lodgepole pine from around Long Creek.

Lodgepole soak up water from the river system and choke out native riparian vegetation, such as aspens and other hardwoods. Restoring native vegetation should make the creek colder and clearer, and help protect bull trout, a federally-listed species, Bienz said.



Timber production is one of the benefits of a restoration project at the Sycan Marsh, said Marko Bey, director of Lomakatsi Restoration Project, which is overseeing the work. The project will produce up to 250,000 board-feet of timber and 4,000 tons of biomass.

Up the road, logging crews are restoring about 200 acres of lodgepole and ponderosa pine stands. They're thinning the forest from about 500 trees per acre to about 100 to reduce fire hazards and restore habitat for whiteheaded woodpeckers. Ideally, projects like this will prevent the bird from being listed as an endangered species, Bienz said.

“This 200 acres is a snapshot of the hundreds of thousands of acres that need restoration,” he said.

— Joel Aschbrenner



From left, Marko Bey, Craig Bienz and Dan Galecki survey a meadow near Sycan Marsh.

Forest Warriors hope to manage tribal land

Ideally, the Klamath Tribes Forest Warriors will one day restore and manage their own forestland, said Joe Ochoa, crew boss with the tribal restoration crew.

The Tribes are set to receive a 92,000-acre tree farm under a provision of the Klamath Basin Restoration Agreement, a controversial water settlement that still requires approval and funding from Congress.

Until the Tribes have their own land, it takes about \$1 million in restoration projects a year to keep the Forest Warriors' 12-man crew working, said Marko Bey, director of the Lomakatsi Restoration Project, an Ashland nonprofit that has been employing the Forest Warriors on ecosystem restoration projects since May of 2011.

Officials with Lomakatsi and the Nature Conservancy hope to secure larger restoration projects on federal Forest Service land within a year, said Craig Bienz, director of the conservancy's Sycan Marsh preserve.

For now, the Forest Warriors work on smaller projects with groups like the Klamath Lake Land Trust. The Land Trust has hired the Forest Warriors for three projects, mostly thinning juniper forests to improve watersheds in eastern Klamath County.

“I think it was very special working with them,” said Crystal McMahon, executive director of the Land Trust.

— Joel Aschbrenner