



## Northern Rockies Fire Science Network

A JFSP FIRE SCIENCE EXCHANGE NETWORK

# TRIBAL FIRE & FOREST MANAGEMENT ON THE FLATHEAD RESERVATION

FIELD TRIP SUMMARY 15 • SEPTEMBER 2025

On June 15, 2024, 30 attendees from the Joint Fire Science Program's (JFSP) Fire Science Exchange Network (FSEN) convened at the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) Division of Fire Management building in Ronan, MT to learn about wildfire and forest management on the Tribe's ancestral lands on the Flathead Reservation. The day began with a welcome and introduction from Pend D'Oreille elder, Stephen Small Salmon, who spoke first-hand of assimilation and shared stories in fluent Salish. The field trip was led by Ron Swaney—Fire Management Officer for the CSKT. He first gave a presentation on fire history and management and then led the attendees to several locations on the Flathead Reservation to observe and discuss past wildfires and current forest management techniques.

## OVERVIEW

The Flathead Reservation was established in 1855 with the signing of the Hellgate Treaty. Prior to this, cultural fire was an integral part of the landscape. The Tribes used plants for medicine and food that depended on fire, and they applied fire to these areas to help these plants return in abundance. Evidence from tree rings shows that fire was applied in a roughly three-year rotation in some areas. "Everything was a life cycle," Swaney explained. After the Hellgate Treaty was signed, the reservation was managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which initially did not incorporate Tribal values or opinions into its management strategies. Federal officials called "Indian Agents" were hired to administer timber sales and as with many reservations across the U.S., timber management by these Indian Agents led to the exploitation and illegal harvest of the CSKT's timber. During that same time, a prohibition of Indigenous fire on the landscape was put into place, taking away both a cultural tool and



a key management technique used by the Tribes for millennia prior. In 1975 the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (Public Law 93-638) was passed, allowing sovereign Tribal governments like the CSKT to develop a forest management plan suited to their individual cultural, ecological, and economic values.

The CSKT Division of Fire Management now operates under the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a tribal program. The BIA Flathead agency superintendent maintains final approval signature authority for things like NEPA, management plans, burn plans, etc. However, an interdisciplinary Tribal team develops the plans and management direction in order to meet CSKT land management goals and objectives.

*The Northern Rockies Fire Science Network (NRFSN) serves as a go-to resource for managers and scientists involved in fire and fuels management in the Northern Rockies. The NRFSN is funded by the Joint Fire Science Program and is one of 15 Fire Science Exchange Networks across the country. The NRFSN facilitates knowledge exchange by bringing people together to strengthen collaborations, synthesize science, and enhance science application around critical management issues.*



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## CSKT FIRE HISTORY

Prior to colonial settlement, the Indigenous people living on this landscape used fire as a tool. Swaney explained that fire was a gift from beaver. Settler journal entries from this time say that fall skies were almost always filled with smoke. Swaney emphasized that it is hard to imagine how many acres burned on these lands pre-settlement. But wildfire history on the Flathead Reservation changed steadily post-settlement.

In 1875, a group of Pend d'Oreille were traveling east to hunt buffalo. Two members of the tribe were shot and killed by officers of the "International Line." This incident, and the subsequent suppression policies that followed, changed the Tribe's relationship with fire and its use on the land.

Recent fire history unveils a significant change in fire occurrence and acres burned on the Flathead Reservation:

- Between 1978 and 1997 an average of 1,000 acres burned each year on the reservation and aggressive suppression was the standard response.
- From 1998 to 2017 the average annual acreage burned was just over 7,000.
- From 2018 to 2023 the average acreage burned jumped to 17,000 acres.
- In 2023, wildfires burned more than 45,000 acres on the reservation. Extreme wind was a crucial factor in the Mill Pocket, Niarada, and Big Knife fires of that summer.

Swaney called this rise a dramatic increase in extreme wildfire activity and attributed the change to a combination of factors, including fuels accumulation, dynamic shifts in weather, extreme wind, and suppression response.

## MANAGEMENT

The Flathead Reservation is 1.3 million acres in size. Of this, roughly 459,000 acres are forested, 236,000 of which are administratively available for timber harvest. A new forest management plan is developed roughly every ten years for the Flathead Reservation. Swaney said the CSKT have received a grant to create a cultural burning plan, the intent of which is to restore cultural fire back to the ground as their ancestors used to do.

The CSKT Division of Fire has seen some success with their fuels work and aims to increase the number of acres that are prescribed burned in the spring and fall when temperatures are cooler, with the goal of reducing the acres that burn in the summer when temperatures are higher. Swaney noted that the spring and fall burn weather has also changed in recent years however, narrowing the window of opportunity to burn due to unfavorable weather conditions. Regardless, the reintroduction of fire remains a priority.

In terms of managed wildfire, Swaney says those decisions are largely driven by firefighter safety, values at risk, and time of year. Specifically, a firefighter fatality in 2017 caused the CSKT Division of Fire to reassess its approach to risk management.

## FIELD TRIP

The first stop on the field trip was to the Mission Mountain Overlook off of Highway 93. The site offers an expansive view of the Mission Mountains, encompassed within the Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness. The Wilderness was established in 1979 and was the first Tribally designated wilderness in the country. Swaney explained that there is a significant amount of cultural activity that occurs there. Because of the





cultural activities taking place in the Wilderness, when a fire breaks out in that area Swaney consults the two cultural committees in the valley to get direction on how his team should proceed. Swaney pointed out that there is a buffer zone below the Wilderness, between it and the residential properties on the valley floor.

The field trip continued on to the Jocko Valley Cemetery outside of Arlee. Here Swaney described some of the lessons learned from the Big Knife Fire, which burned over 7,000 acres during the summer of 2023. The CSKT Division of Fire had previously done some treatment at the edge of the primitive area where the Big Knife Fire eventually burned, which aided in slowing the fire's approach to the valley floor. Swaney said his team did a good job with structure protection and setting up early, but took away some lessons learned for improved communication with the public for future events.

The field trip ended with a visit to Jocko Prairie, an area that had received a non-commercial thinning treatment targeting the understory, followed by a prescribed burn.

Jocko Prairie is located in Jocko Canyon and gets limited sunlight, therefore this area stays wetter than other regions of the reservation. Swaney described the treatment here as a success and said the intent was to showcase the type of work they're trying to do on the reservation, through the use of fire to return the cultural and ecological values of the CSKT to the landscape. The presence of blue camas (*Cammasia quamash*) in the treatment area was a visible example of their success. "The camas lay sleeping in the ground," Swaney said, "And the fire woke it up."

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

CSKT Fire on the Land Website: <https://fwrconline.csktnrd.org/Fire/index.html>

Tribal Fire and Forest Management: <https://nrfirescience.org/resource/19687>

Field trip presenters -Ron Swaney (CSKT Division of Fire); Stephen Small Salmon (Pend D'Oreille)

Planning Committee - Darcy Hammond, Charles Goebel (Northern Rockies Fire Science Network); Vita Wright (Northwest Fire Science Consortium)

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