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California Condor Recovery Plans to Expand to the Pacific Northwest

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A relocation program will seek to introduce the California condor, which only had a population of 23 in the late 1980s, to the Pacific Northwest in a bid to restore the bird to its ancient grounds.

A California condor, tagged and equipped with a radio tracking device.

(CN) — The Yurok Tribe, the largest indigenous tribe in California, has honored the condor for innumerable generations.

“Our relationship with the condor goes back to time immemorial,” said Tania Williams-Claussen, the wildlife director for the Yurok Tribe, whose homelands extend from the Klamath River all the way to the Pacific Ocean in Northern California and Southern Oregon. “It has hurt

not having this powerful spirit and powerful creature for the last 100 years not sharing our community as the creators intended."

The California Condor has not been seen flying majestically from the banks of the Klamath or Trinity River for the better part of a century because the creature's population declined so precipitously throughout the 20th century — to the point where only 23 individuals remained in 1982.

The condor, the largest soaring land bird in North America, was completely removed from the wild in 1987 when wildlife officials began a captive breeding program to stave off extinction. Since then, the population has bounced back.

"The story of the condor is one of the successes of the Endangered Species Act," said Quinn Read, the Oregon Policy Director for the Center for Biological Diversity. "Their population numbers were in the low 20s in the late 80s and now there are about 450 birds in the wild."

Wildlife officials announced this week that they are seeking to augment that success by creating a relocation program aimed at introducing the birds to the northern stretch of California, or the homelands of the Yurok.

The Yurok Tribe has partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service to create a relocation facility with the aim of reintroducing the bird to the Yurok Ancestral Territory and the Redwoods National Park.

"The idea started in 2003 with a panel of elders," Williams-Claussen explained during an interview with Courthouse News. "Our tribe decided the condor was the single most important land-based species to bring back to our lands."

While condors are large vultures, they possess a magnificence, particularly in flight that belies their categorization as scavengers.

“They look like dinosaurs,” Read said, referring to their enormous wingspans of about 10 feet.

Read said she recently took her 2-year-old son to see California Condors in captivity.

“He was so excited,” she said. “I can’t wait for him to see them in the wild while we are camping or hiking.”

In order for that to materialize, the Yurok Tribe has been working to lay the groundwork for reintroduction to the Pacific Northwest, particularly the Klamath River Basin and the surrounding territories around the California-Oregon border.

Extensive environmental analyses, contaminant analysis and environmental approvals for the construction of a relocation facility all had to be performed before the relocation would get a signature from the feds.

But several partners in the federal government say they recognize the bird’s reintroduction is a critical element to restoring these places to their former ecological condition.

“The return of condors to the skies above Redwood National and State Parks is a critical step toward recovery of this majestic landscape,” said Steve Mietz, superintendent of Redwood National and State Parks. “We will continue the unparalleled success story of condor recovery allowing all Americans to visit the tallest trees in the world while watching one of the largest birds in the world soar overhead.”

The condors who are released via the relocation program receive most of the same protections as their counterparts in Southern and Central California, except incidental take, or accidental deaths, will not be punished.

However, a suite of activities will not be allowed within 600 feet of nesting condors.

Also, wildlife officials are bullish on the notion that California's recent outlawing of lead ammunition will also help accelerate the condor's recovery.

Myra Finklestein, a researcher at UC Santa Cruz, helped pioneer the study of lead's interaction with wildlife. She found that when deer and other ungulates are killed with lead bullets and scavengers like the California condor feed upon the carcasses, the lead poisoning is transmitted to the condor, with deleterious and often fatal results.

"Lead is the number one mortality factor for free-flying juvenile and adult California condors, and work that we have done has shown that lead poisoning is preventing their recovery," she said in a recent interview. "So it is the major threat that's impeding their ability to recover in the wild."

Read said Oregon has considered a similar law and will again, particularly if the condors expand further into the Pacific Northwest in coming years.

Williams-Claussen said the Yurok Tribe will also formerly ban lead ammunition. The tribe is not beholden to state laws, but the wildlife director said most tribal members are already aware of the baleful effects of lead ammunition.

"We just want to formalize it," she said.

But most of the imminent work will be to prepare the location facility. The Yurok Tribe was initially hoping to begin releasing breeding pairs of condors into the wild come this autumn, but Williams-Claussen said, given the remaining work combined with lingering coronavirus concerns, next spring is a safer bet.

"We're very enthusiastic that when the day comes the birds will have old-growth redwoods to nest in, open prairies to forage and riparian environments too," Williams-Claussen said. "This

means something to a lot of people. It can serve as a beacon, an example of yet another win for conservation.”