

Nearly 900 Acres Bordering Yosemite Returned to Tribal Ownership in Historic Land Transfer

Once threatened by development, the land was protected and stewarded by Pacific Forest Trust for 20 years — and will now return to the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation after 175 years.

San Francisco, CA — (December 2, 2025) — Nearly 900 acres of land bordered by Yosemite National Park and the Sierra National Forest have been transferred back to tribal ownership after 175 years, marking a major milestone in California’s cultural restoration efforts and historic commitment to support the return of ancestral, indigenous lands.

The transfer from Pacific Forest Trust to the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation — underwritten by a grant from the California Natural Resources Agency Tribal Nature-Based Solutions Program — provides the tribe with ownership of the naturally and culturally significant Henness Ridge, site of a traditional Native American trail from the Central to the Yosemite Valley and a key migration corridor for deer and other mammals. Pacific Forest Trust spent two decades preparing the land for its return to tribal ownership — acquiring it when threatened by development and restoring it after the 2018 Ferguson Fire. In fact, the Ferguson Fire was stopped from further spread on this Ridge, protecting the community of Yosemite West.

This transfer underscores Pacific Forest Trust’s longstanding commitment to working in partnership with tribal nations. In the 1990s, the organization partnered with the InterTribal Sinkyone Wilderness Council to establish the first-ever conservation easement with tribal entities in the United States. That precedent helped pave the way for projects like Henness Ridge, where conservation and cultural restoration go hand in hand.

Located just west of Chinquapin/Badger Pass and State Highway 41, the property overlooks both branches of the Wild and Scenic Merced River to the south and north, the Central Valley to the west, and the main Yosemite Valley to the north. For generations, the Southern Sierra Miwuk people cared for these forests, meadows, and springs. But with the 19th-century increase in settlements and the establishment of the Yosemite National Park, the Southern Sierra Miwuk were expelled, and the property’s magnificent pines were clear-cut by the Yosemite Lumber Company.

“When we were first approached to conserve this land over 20 years ago, we recognised immediately how important it was to protect and conserve. As we’ve protected it from development, strengthened its role as a buffer to Yosemite, and prioritized both conservation and cultural restoration, this is an extraordinarily fitting and positive outcome!” said Laurie Wayburn, cofounder and president of Pacific Forest Trust.

“Having this significant piece of our ancestral Yosemite land back will bring our community together to celebrate tradition and provide a healing place for our children and grandchildren,” says Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation’s Tribal Council Chair and elder Sandra Chapman. “It will be a sanctuary for our people.”

“This transfer reunites our people to this unique area of our homeland after 175 years of displacement,” said Tara Fouch-Moore, Tribal Secretary. “We will be able to harvest and cultivate our traditional foods, fibers, and medicines and steward the land using traditional ecological knowledge, strengthening our relationships with plants and wildlife, and benefiting everyone by restoring a more resilient and abundant landscape.”

The transfer will enable the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation to restore biodiversity and climate resilience using traditional ecological practices such as cultural fire, cultivation of native plants, forest restoration, and protection of water quality feeding the two tributaries of the Wild and Scenic South Fork Merced River. The project will also facilitate movement across private-public corridors for plants and animals

adapting to climate change, and provide a unique platform for public education on the multiple benefits of indigenous “climate-smart” land stewardship, given the property’s proximity to Yosemite National Park and its 4 million annual visitors.

In 2018, the property was heavily impacted by the Ferguson Fire. With a significant portion of the property burned, Pacific Forest Trust restored almost 500 acres by removing dangerous snags, thinning overstocked areas, improving access and other conditions for reforestation, and planting 125,000 native seedlings.

In addition to re-establishing the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation as the stewards of Hennes Ridge, this project will support and strengthen the Tribe’s case for federal recognition, an ongoing pursuit since 1982.

About Pacific Forest Trust

Since 1993, the Pacific Forest Trust has been dedicated to conserving and sustaining America’s vital, productive forest landscapes. Working with forest owners, communities, and an array of partners, Pacific Forest Trust advances innovative, incentive-based strategies to safeguard our nation’s diverse forests. In doing so, we’re ensuring forests continue to provide people everywhere — from rural communities to urban centers — with a wealth of benefits, including clean water, sustainably harvested wood, green jobs, wildlife habitat, and a livable climate.

About Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation

Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation are people indigenous to Yosemite and the greater Mariposa County. They are the first and continuing stewards of this special region, and are committed to the preservation of community and landscape health through culture and tradition. To learn more about the SSMN and their 40-year fight for federal recognition, visit www.southernsierramiwuknation.org.

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