

USDA Forest Service Botany in the News

Plumas National Forest – Bear Grass Prescribed Burn for California Indian Basketweavers

Who (Partners): Plumas National Forest Feather River Ranger District botanists, archaeologists, fire personnel and California Indian Basketweavers Association

What: Two and a half acres of bear grass, *Xerophyllum tenax*, was burned on Friday May 18, 2007 on the Feather River Ranger District of the Plumas National Forest. This prescribed burn was at the request of the California Indian Basketweavers Association. Prior to the burn, monitoring transects were established to compare the total number and percent cover of plants before and after the burn.

When: May 2007

Where: Rock Island Ridge, Feather River Ranger District, Plumas National Forest

How: Prior to the burn, monitoring transects were established in the bear grass. Fire lines were also established around the 2.5 acre burn site. A test burn was conducted to determine if the prescribed fire met the management objectives. It is critical to maintain the duff layer, as the sensitive growing tissue is located at or below the duff. The prescribed fire was then ignited using propane torches to ignite the burn itself. On May 23, 2007 the bear grass burn site was visited with our partners. The duff layer was not burned but the bear grass and small woody debris did burn. The monitoring transects were read immediately after the burn and will be read in upcoming years.

Why: California Indian basket weavers have used bear grass for thousands of years and the plant is an essential element in traditional Maidu basketry art and culture. Bear grass that has not been burned is not useable for basket weaving. Many weavers in this area are currently out of bear grass due to the shortage of suitable populations to gather. Bear grass must be burned in order to produce flexible, strong leaves from the new growth that occurs 1-3 years after burning.

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Other Forest Service Personnel involved in design and planning: Karen Hayden, District Ranger; Deborah Tibbitts and Kevin McCormick, Archaeologists; and, Chris Christofferson, Botanist.



Native Maidu using propane torch to start prescribed fire of a bear grass area.



Bear grass flower.



Old bear grass leaves that were recently burned.