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For Immediate Release

**Release: #040-15
April 21, 2015
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Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, U.S. Forest Service sponsor meeting to improve communication

WYANDOTTE, Okla. — The Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma and the U.S. Forest Service cosponsored a meeting Mar. 30 – April 2, with a focus on improving communication between federally recognized tribal governments and federal agencies.

The 14th annual To-Bridge-A-Gap meeting held at the Indigo Sky Hotel, in Wyandotte, Okla., enabled attendees to discuss and learn about improving consultations with Indian Tribes on a variety of cultural and natural resource management issues.

Attendees included several Oklahoma Tribes and those from other states, various government agencies, academic institutions, private industry and consulting firms that deal with archeological or engineering matters.

“The purpose of the To-Bridge-A-Gap is to provide a forum of open discussion between tribes and the National Forests of Arkansas and Oklahoma,” said David Journey, Ozark-St. Francis National Forests Heritage Program manager. “The main thing is to build a bond of familiarity, exchange information, find out when we can do direct one-on-one consultations, let them raise red flags and listen.”

Patti Hiram, the U.S. Forest Service’s Associate Deputy Chief, State and Private Forestry said that attending the meeting helps her by meeting people and learning how the Forest Service can best engage with some of its key partners.

“I thought the discussions were great, in that we came together to discuss common issues and opportunities.” said Hiram who has oversight for Coop Forestry, Forest Health Protection, and Tribal Relations. “I’m just here to learn as much as I can, and see where I can contribute.”

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For many of the attendees, the meeting provided an opportunity to learn about others' experiences working with tribes on a variety of issues.

“I think it has given me ideas as to how to handle certain circumstances that we come across,” said Sarah Hunt, a University of Arkansas graduate student and graduate assistant for the Arkansas Archeological Survey. “I believe we have a good relationship with the tribes we work with; I was also interested in seeing what approaches other organizations were taking towards getting the same responsibilities done.”

During the To-Bridge-A-Gap meetings, partnerships with the tribes are formed among some of the agencies that attend.

“The Bridge-A-Gap has been a model for showcasing those partnerships that have happened, many times, as a result of relationships that are made at the conference,” said Lexie Rue-Harris, the Poteau/Cold Springs Ranger District's archeologist. “There have been several memorandums of agreements that have come out of the meeting for various activities such as using Tribal knowledge in archeological surveys and giving free forest products to Tribes and other things that the Farm Bill gives us authority to do.”

A presentation on the Zaagkii Project by Dr. Scott Herron, professor Biology Education Program Coordinator; Jan Shultz, Forest Service Region 9 Regional Botanist; and Evelyn Ravindran, Hatchery and Nursery Manager for the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, provided an example of how partnerships with the Forest Service benefits the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community who are located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

The project builds environmental consciousness with Tribes, including tribal youth, to protect native plants and pollinators.

“I don't think you will find another venue anywhere that has as many federal agencies, private companies, state agencies, and tribal organizations that are all in the same room for the same purpose and that is to bridge that gap,” Rue-Harris said.

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