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STORYTELLER

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New Years Edition

2025

In this edition of the G&G Storyteller, as we close out the first month of 2025, we highlight the change in national leadership with the 2024 election. We reflect on the impact of the Biden Administration on Indian Country as well as Tribal Nations under the new Trump administration. We then shift gears and look at the recent Fox News Anchor blaming Native people for the Los Angeles Area wildfires. Lastly, we highlight cultural burning and how these traditional Tribal practices can be implemented for multiple uses including the prevention of extreme wildfires.

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BIDEN'S IMPACT ON INDIAN COUNTRY



The Biden-Harris administration set a higher bar in federal-tribal relations, demonstrating a strong commitment to addressing the needs and priorities of American Indian and Alaska Native communities. While no administration has a perfect record in navigating the complicated relationship between the federal government and Indigenous nations, this administration's deserve recognition.

From the appointment of Deb Haaland, a member of the Laguna Pueblo, as the first Native American to serve as Secretary of the Interior, to record-breaking investments in tribal communities, to appointing more than 80 Native Americans to federal positions, the Biden-Harris administration has consistently lifted Indigenous voices and prioritized tribal sovereignty. The American Rescue Plan (ARP) provided \$31 billion specifically for tribal governments and programs—the largest one-time investment in history. The administration's Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act also dedicates billions to critical tribal needs, including broadband expansion, clean water access, and climate resilience projects. The administration has worked with Indian Country on issues of sovereignty, treaty rights, and environmental justice.

The White House Tribal Nations Summit, revived under this administration, provided a place for tribal leaders to voice their concerns directly to the highest levels of the federal government. These summits have resulted in executive orders on improving public safety in tribal communities and addressing the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous People. In October 2024, Biden traveled to the Gila River Indian Reservation to give a formal apology to Native People for the federal Indian boarding school system, and the harms it caused Tribal communities. Shortly before leaving office, Biden commuted the life sentence of Native American Activist Leonard Peltier, who has been imprisoned for almost 50 years.

History has shown that administrations can make promises to Indian Country but fail to follow through. The Biden Administration set a new bar for building relationships and

working with Tribal Nations. It's now up to tribal leaders and communities to continue pushing for change while holding the incoming administration accountable to Indian Country.

TRIBAL NATIONS UNDER TRUMP



There is a lot of uncertainty in how Trump's administration will engage tribal nations during the next four years, leaving Indian Country to wonder what will be gained or lost by January 20, 2029. In his first few days in office, Trump signed a memorandum to submit a plan for federally recognizing the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina.

Trump has repeatedly said "drill, baby, drill." Trump has made it clear that he will support oil and gas development. Oil rich tribal nations could see an increase in production and profits. According to a 2014 report by the Property & Environmental Research Center, Indian reservations have nearly 30 percent of the country's coal reserves that are located west of the Mississippi River, 50 percent of possible uranium reserves, and 20 percent of the oil and gas reserves that are known. These resources, at the time, were worth nearly \$1.5 trillion, or \$1.5 million per tribal member.

Trump nominated North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum to Interior Secretary. Burgum has a strong history of working with tribes and engaging in regular consultation with tribal leaders. He signed North Dakota's version of the Indian Child Welfare Act into law and has been credited with improving the relationship between state and tribal governments.

Trump also chose Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the Department of Health and Human Services. Kennedy has a strong record of supporting and engaging tribal leaders and nations when it comes to environmental issues. He comes from a line of politicians who understood and supported Tribal Sovereignty. In 2016, he stood with activists during

the No DAPL protests in North Dakota. Kennedy has stated often that Treaties with Tribal Nations are the law of the land.

Indigenous nations have engaged with 46 United States presidents, some of whom, committed what would be considered today, acts of genocide against Native people. Angelique EagleWoman, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, Indigenous law professor at Hamline University states “Tribal nations are very resilient and often offer to collaborate, work closely with every U.S. administration, and I think that won't be different here with the Trump administration”

TV HOST BLAMES NATIVE PEOPLE FOR WILDFIRES



Recently, Fox News host Jesse Watters connected dam removals requested by Native American tribes to California's wildfire crisis, saying Governor Gavin Newsom removed four dams “because the Native Americans told him to do it.” During the January 8 broadcast of “The Five,” Watters criticized California's fire response, noting that crews “have contained 0% of this fire.” He then pointed to dam removals, saying Newsom “tore more dams down — four — than anybody in the history of this country. Because the Native Americans told him to do it, because it would save some salmon. Now look at this.”

The dam removals Watters referenced are part of the long-planned restoration of the Klamath River ecosystem, which is supported by tribal nations, environmental groups, state and federal officials. These dams are located along the Klamath River on the Oregon/California border hundreds of miles north of the current fire zone and nowhere near the Los Angeles Basin. Meanwhile, Native American firefighters from outside the region are on the ground in Southern California joining the effort to fight the fires. Tribal

fire departments from at least eight tribes from around the state of California joined Native firefighters from tribes in Oregon, Arizona, Washington and Montana.

Despite these baseless accusations from Fox News Host Jesse Watters of Tribes contributing to the fire crisis, the focus is supporting our communities and neighbors in crisis. "From ancient times to now, Southern California has always been and will always be our home," Mark Macarro, tribal chairman of the Pechanga Band and president of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), said in a statement. "The loss and devastation that continues to take its toll on our region from these catastrophic fires is heartbreaking. Our reservation has been impacted by fires in the past, and we know the importance of coming together to lift up people in need."

WHY WE NEED INDIGENOUS CULTURAL BURNING



In the last few years we have seen the intensity and severity of large wildfires in the Western United States like we have never seen before. Currently the large wildfires North of Los Angeles in the middle of Winter bring to our attention climate issues, water management and also cultural burning practices of Indigenous people. Cultural Burning has only been taken seriously and implemented by the Forest Service in the last several years, but likely this practice will actually be taken more into consideration as Western states look for solutions to address these catastrophic wildfires.

For thousands of years, Indigenous communities have been caretakers of the land, using fire as a tool to manage ecosystems, maintain biodiversity, and reduce the risk of more extensive, uncontrolled wildfires. These cultural burning practices, passed down through generations, offer a wealth of knowledge that can significantly inform modern fire management strategies.

Cultural burning is the intentional and controlled use of fire by indigenous peoples as a tool for managing the environment. Unlike destructive wildfires, these fires are low-intensity and carried out with a specific purpose, often based on extensive knowledge of local ecosystems and cultural practices. Cultural burns are used to enhance food sources, maintain habitats and prevent large wildfires. By removing dry underbrush and reducing the buildup of flammable material, cultural burns help prevent the occurrence of large, uncontrolled wildfires, essentially serving as a natural firebreak.

In recent years, governments and fire management agencies in the United States have begun to recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge in fire management. Collaborative projects with Indigenous fire managers are helping to reintroduce cultural burning practices in areas that have experienced devastating wildfires. These partnerships offer a way forward in reducing wildfire risk while respecting Indigenous peoples' cultural traditions.

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