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UC Cooperative Extension Tribal Extension Office opens at Middletown Rancheria

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Middletown Rancheria leaders, UC ANR and UC Cooperative Extension teams, and county officials gather to celebrate the signing of the historic agreement. Image by Ethan Ireland.

MIDDLETOWN, Calif. — A historic agreement between the Middletown Rancheria of Pomo Indians of California and University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources has created the first-ever UC Cooperative Extension Tribal Extension Office.

Located on tribal land at the Middletown Rancheria headquarters, the office opened on June 2.

It will facilitate culturally informed research and education projects on a variety of challenges facing local agriculture and natural resources.

UC ANR and Middletown Rancheria signed a strategic memorandum of understanding, or MOU, on May 23, formalizing a partnership deeply rooted in mutual respect, traditional ecological knowledge and community-driven scientific research — establishing a model for future tribal-academic collaborations nationwide.

"When we talk about collaboration, a lot of times it is just talking — you sit in a room, you go away from a meeting," said Middletown Rancheria Tribal Chairman Moke Simon. "That won't happen here at Middletown; all of our folks are genuinely dedicated to making things happen and improving our communities."

Simon specifically mentioned their collaboration with Mike Jones, UCCE forestry advisor. Jones already has developed a work plan for managing a devastating pest, Mediterranean oak borer, on tribal lands.

"Our Cooperative Extension offices in the counties — and the people that are sitting here — they're a conduit; they're a door to so many resources above and beyond just themselves," said Glenda Humiston, UC vice president for agriculture and natural resources, during the signing ceremony. "And we've got some amazing people that have joined us to serve in these county offices."

Humiston also noted that the agreement represents a "very comprehensive MOU" that will facilitate collaborations on a wide array of issues and opportunities.

The signing ceremony provided an overview of planned activities, reflecting both parties' dedication to environmental stewardship, cultural heritage, sustainable agriculture and resilience.

The historic signing event was attended by prominent community leaders, including Humiston; Brent Hales, UC ANR associate vice president for research and Cooperative Extension; Middletown Tribal Council members; Lake County Supervisor Jessica Pyska and Board of Supervisors Chair EJ Crandell, along with representatives from the offices of U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson and state Sen. Mike McGuire.

"We have been working toward co-managing this region together as partners," Pyska said. "When you talk about local government, it is all the local governments in this region sitting down together and working through a lot of the issues facing our people ... and working towards more climate adaptation for all of our communities, when we've got all of these threats that we are facing year-round now."

Collaborations are already underway on a range of critical environmental issues. Clebson Gonçalves, UCCE diversified agriculture advisor and Chris Chen, integrated vineyard systems advisor have initiated farm assessments, supporting sustainable agriculture and vineyard management practices.

Additional collaborations with Louise Pagone of the UC Master Gardeners of Lake County integrate local horticultural expertise and community gardening initiatives.

Looking to the future, an Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals student intern – guided by Laura Garza-Diaz, UCCE water resources management advisor – will lead a community-driven drought resilience assessment.

In addition, UC ANR hired Ally Sung-Jereczek in 2024 as the beneficial burning and land stewardship advisor. Sung-Jereczek has been actively engaging with tribes in Lake and Mendocino counties, and this new formalized partnership with Middletown Rancheria will provide a robust foundation for her continued work and broader initiatives.

UC ANR leaders anticipate this MOU to set a precedent, leading to expanded educational opportunities, research partnerships and dedicated tribal academic advisor positions within tribal communities across the nation.

"Beyond tangible projects, this partnership is fundamentally about building lasting relationships rooted in respect and shared vision," said Matthew Barnes, UCCE director for Lake and Mendocino counties. "It's a commitment to a brighter, resilient future."

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