



# Morongo Band of Mission Indians Environmental Protection Department

## QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 2026—VOLUME 21, ISSUE 4

### Welcome Our New Climate Risk & Energy Resilience Specialist!

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Morongo's Environmental Protection Department is pleased to welcome Stefanie Mendoza as the new Climate Risk & Energy Resilience Specialist! Stefanie brings a background in environmental science, climate research, GIS, remote sensing, and Earth sciences to her new role, where she will support Morongo's efforts to assess climate risks and strengthen community and energy resilience.

Stefanie earned her Bachelor's degree in Geology from UC Riverside and her Master's degree in Environmental Science and Policy from Johns Hopkins University. She also completed PhD coursework in Earth and Planetary Sciences at UC

Riverside, where her research focused on climate and Earth system modeling.

Her experience with NASA began as an undergraduate, when she worked with the Mars Exploration Rover (MER) mission team, contributing to research involving imagery and geochemical data from the Mars rovers. She later participated in the NASA DEVELOP Program, working on applied Earth science projects that used NASA Earth observations, GIS, and remote sensing to address real-world environmental challenges.

Outside of work, Stefanie is a self-proclaimed foodie who loves cooking, traveling, and singing. She lives with her husband, Raymond, their 3-year-old son, Luke and their 100-pound German Shepherd, Fenrir. Stefanie and Raymond are also big *Star Wars* nerds—so much that they named Luke after Luke Skywalker!

Stefanie is excited to be part of the Morongo team and looks forward to contributing to the Tribe's ongoing climate, sustainability, and resilience efforts.



Our mission is to protect and preserve Morongo's natural resources, traditions, and tribal sovereignty. We promote self-governance, environmental awareness and environmentally considerate actions by exemplifying environmental stewards, fostering collaborative relationships, expanding education and outreach activities, and continuing to enrich and develop our programs.

# Morongo Native Plant Community Garden Takes Root

Written by: Jason Brooks, Environmental Director



On July 27th, the Morongo Environmental Protection Department, with help from the Cultural Department, Tribal Council representatives, and our dedicated garden volunteers, celebrated the ground breaking of the new Morongo Native Plant Community Garden.

Located at the corner of Morongo and Santiago, across from the new fire station, the garden has been eleven years in the making. The project began with the initial design and budget developed by then EPD intern Jolene Martin. Eleven years later, we have officially broken ground!

With irrigation already installed, EPD staff and volunteers are working to develop the site for future activities, including community raised bed gardens, one of the most requested features from the community.

The dedication included a blessing from Pastor Rob and a performance by the Morongo Bird Singers, led by Geronimo Holmes, along with fellow garden volunteers Brian Miguel and Lyle Necochea.

## What's Next?

Community members shared ideas for the garden, including:

- Gardening and native plant trainings
- Raised bed spaces for community members
- Opportunities to grow and learn about native plants
- Growing native plants that are becoming harder to find on Morongo land for future planting around the Reservation

Interested in volunteering? No experience is needed, just a willingness to learn and get your hands dirty! Contact [RCP@morongo-nsn.gov](mailto:RCP@morongo-nsn.gov) to get involved.



Left to right: Geronimo Holmes, Brian Miguel, Junaal Miguel, Joeline Martin, Council Members Jeanette Burns and Ryan Martin, and Lyle Necochea



Special thanks to Kim Lopponow for the photos.

# Used Motor Oil: Store It, Label It, Recycle It

Written by: Isabel Hughes, Environmental Specialist I

Used motor oil is a common household waste that can be recycled when handled and stored properly. Whether you are changing the oil in your car, truck, or other equipment, taking a few simple steps can help prevent spills, protect our environment and Reservation, and ensure the oil is safely managed.

## STORE IT RIGHT

Proper storage helps prevent leaks, protects our environment, and keeps our community clean and safe.

-  **USE A STURDY CONTAINER WITH A SECURE LID.**  
Use a sturdy bottle or bucket with a secure lid to prevent leaks and spills.
-  **DO NOT REUSE CONTAINERS THAT HELD CHEMICALS.**  
Chemical residues can contaminate the oil and create additional hazards.
-  **CLEAN CONTAINERS THAT HELD FOOD ARE OKAY TO REUSE!**  
Even laundry detergent bottles and pickle jars are suitable containers.

 Keep containers closed to prevent leaks, spills, and contamination.

 Proper storage today protects our Reservation for tomorrow.



When storing used motor oil, **always use a sturdy bottle or bucket with a secure lid** to prevent leaks and spills. Do not reuse empty containers that previously held chemicals, as chemical residues can contaminate the oil and create additional hazards. However, clean, empty containers that previously held food can be reused for storing used motor oil. **Containers such as empty laundry detergent bottles and pickle jars can be suitable options** as long as they are clean, in good condition, and have a secure lid.

It is also important to **label containers when used motor oil has been mixed with other fluids**. Containers should clearly identify mixtures such as motor oil and gasoline, motor oil and coolant/antifreeze, or motor oil and grease. Proper labeling helps ensure the waste is handled and disposed of appropriately.

For those looking for a convenient recycling option, **many auto parts stores accept used motor oil at no cost, typically up to 5 gallons**

**per day.** Acceptance policies may vary, so check with your local store before dropping off used motor oil or oil filters.

## Who Can Use Morongo's Hazardous Waste Storage?

As a reminder, Morongo's Household Hazardous Waste Storage at Public Works is available for **Morongo Tribal Members, descendants, and individuals who live on the Morongo Reservation**. This resource is intended to help community members safely manage household hazardous waste.

Businesses operating on the Reservation have a separate responsibility. **Waste generated through business operations should be managed and disposed of by the business and should not be brought to Tribal facilities for disposal.** Businesses should make their own arrangements with an appropriate waste management provider to handle waste generated through their business operations.

## Where Can You Recycle Used Motor Oil?

For those living on or near the Morongo Reservation, the following locations accept used motor oil and oil filters:

|                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>O'Reilly Auto Parts #6117</b><br>2929 W. Ramsey Street<br>Banning, CA 92220<br>(417) 868-4215<br><i>Accepts used oil filters</i> | <b>AutoZone #2816</b><br>3453 W. Ramsey Street, Suite A<br>Banning, CA 92220<br>(951) 849-7626<br><i>Accepts used oil filters</i> | <b>AutoZone #2882</b><br>1151 East 6th Street<br>Beaumont, CA 92223<br>(951) 769-5842<br><i>Accepts used oil filters</i> |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

You can also find additional certified used oil recycling locations through CalRecycle's **Used Oil Certified Collection Center** search, <https://www2.calrecycle.ca.gov/UsedOil/CertifiedCenters/>.

By storing waste motor oil properly, using available recycling opportunities, and following appropriate disposal guidelines, we can help prevent pollution, protect our natural resources, and keep our community clean and safe.



# What is CRAM?

Written by: Oscar Perez, Environmental Specialist II



The Bog, a wetland at Morongo

This summer, the Morongo Environmental Department has been gathering skills to help with wetland management. In particular, CRAM for wetlands, or better known as California Rapid Assessment Method for Wetlands. This tool is used to monitor the condition of wetlands in California. Over the course of a week, we traveled to different types of wetlands and some class time to go over all of the important information. The CRAM method was developed by the California Wetlands Monitoring Workgroup.

As the name implies, CRAM is meant to be quick, with two or more trained personnel being able to assess a wetland in a few hours in the field. Additional time will be needed to gather maps and other critical information to run CRAM. CRAM is low cost, with minimal equipment needed and a good way to get a snapshot of the current conditions at the wetland quickly. Over time, you can compare the snapshots and see if the wetland is improving or degrading.

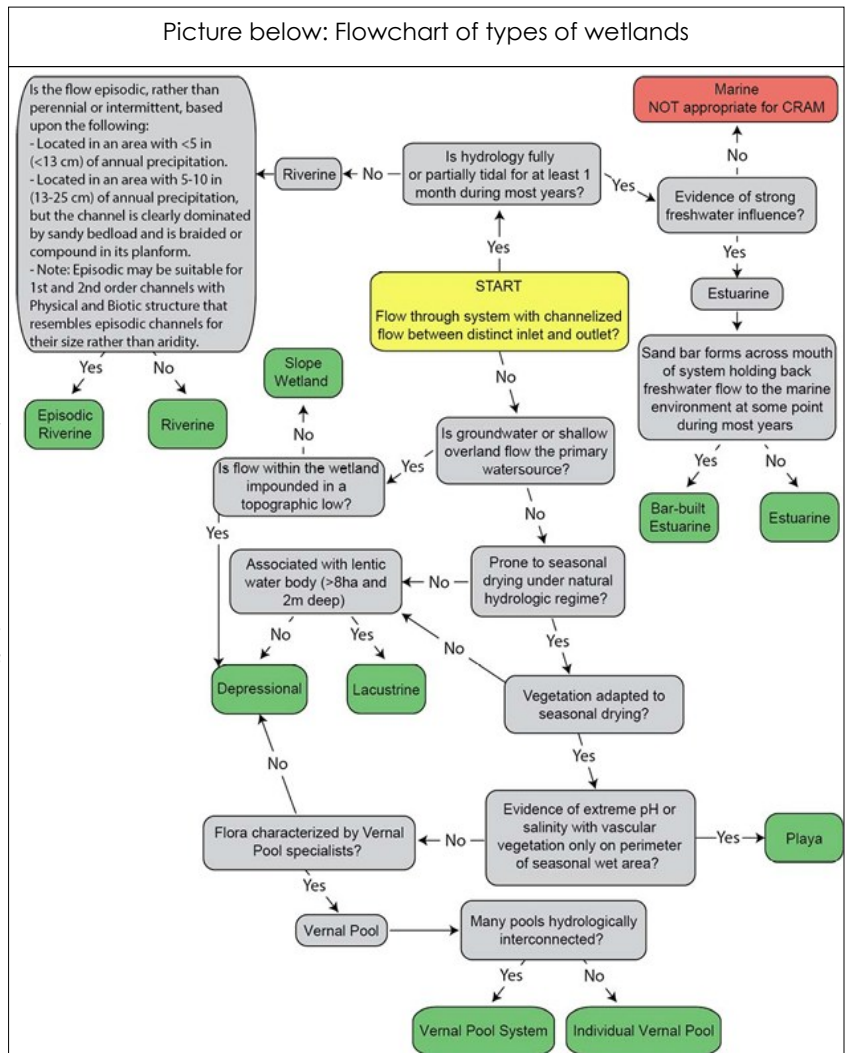
CRAM looks at different attributes: buffer and landscape context, hydrology, physical structures, and biotic structure to compile a score. This score ranges with the lowest score of 25, describing the worst conditions and function in California, to the most pristine wetlands that get a score of 100. Scores can be located on the EcoAtlas website to check your local wetland.

Each type of wetlands has different metrics to measure, so be sure to use the right paperwork. Not sure what type of wetland you have? Use the flow chart to the left and start at the yellow square. Answer the questions and eventually you will end at a green square with the name of the wetland type or sub-type. There are six types of wetlands:

- Riverine
- Depressional
- Playas
- Estuarine
- Lacustrine
- Slope

References: CRAM—  
<https://www.cramwetlands.org>

Picture below: Flowchart of types of wetlands



# Caring for Our Land: Cultural Burning and Wildfire Prevention

Written by: Pamela Atcitty, Tribal Air Program Manager

## Cultural Burning

As residents of Riverside County, we know that wildfires are a growing threat to our communities, homes, natural resources, and cultural lands. Hotter, drier conditions and the buildup of dry grasses, brush, and other vegetation can create fuels that allow wildfires to spread quickly and burn more intensely.

For Tribal communities, including the Morongo Reservation, fire is more than a threat—it has long been an important tool for caring for the land. Indigenous peoples throughout California have practiced cultural burning for generations, using carefully planned and intentionally set fire to maintain healthy ecosystems, support plants and wildlife, and reduce accumulated vegetation. These practices are guided by Traditional Ecological Knowledge passed down through generations and are designed to benefit the land, plants, animals, and people.

When conducted safely and under the right conditions, prescribed and cultural burns can:

- Reduce dry vegetation and wildfire fuels
- Support healthy native plants and wildlife habitat
- Promote ecosystem renewal
- Protect important cultural resources and gathering areas
- Reduce the potential for severe, fast-moving wildfires

Cultural burning is not simply about preventing fire, it is about caring for the land, maintaining healthy ecosystems, and preserving important cultural practices for future generations.

## Protecting Our Community

Reducing wildfire risk requires planning and community involvement. Safe burning must be conducted under appropriate conditions and in coordination with the fire department and air quality agencies to protect public safety and minimize smoke impacts.

Community members can also help by maintaining defensible space around homes and buildings, removing excess vegetation, following fire restrictions, and participating in wildfire-prevention efforts.

By combining Traditional Ecological Knowledge with modern fire-management practices, Tribal communities can help protect homes, cultural resources, wildlife, and the land we depend on.

Fire can be destructive, but when used responsibly, it can also be a powerful tool for renewal, stewardship, and protecting our land for generations to come.



UC Davis students participate in a cultural burn in Northern California. (Alysha Beck/UC Davis)



Dr. Frank Lake, Karuk, Seneca, and Cherokee, using a pitch stick to start a fire. Source: Indigenous Leadership Initiative

References: <https://www.ilinationhood.ca/blog/is-it-a-cultural-burn-or-a-prescribed-fire>,  
<https://www.nature.org/en-us/magazine/magazine-articles/indigenous-controlled-burns-california/>,  
<https://www.ucdavis.edu/climate/news/rethinking-wildfire>

# Protecting Your Indoor Air During Wildfire Season

Written by: Bianca Sandoval, Environmental Specialist I

## Ever wondered what happens to the inside your home during a wildfire, and what could be done about it?

Wildfire smoke doesn't just stay outside. Even when doors and windows are closed, smoke can still enter your home through tiny gaps, ventilation systems, and whenever the doors are opened momentarily. The goal isn't to necessarily make your home perfectly sealed, but more so to reduce how much smoke gets inside.

## Why does indoor air quality matter?

Wildfire smoke is a mixture of gases and particles mainly from the burning of trees and plants. But if the fire spreads into nearby communities, the smoke can now contain pollutants from the burning of human-made materials and structures. Of these air pollutants, fine particulate matter (PM 2.5), is the most concerning. These particles are so small that they can travel deep into your lungs and possibly enter your bloodstream.

While most healthy people will recover quickly from wildfire smoke and not experience immediate or long-lasting health effects. Those that are children, elderly, pregnant, suffer from heart or lung disease, or those with higher exposures will have a higher risk of experiencing health effects.

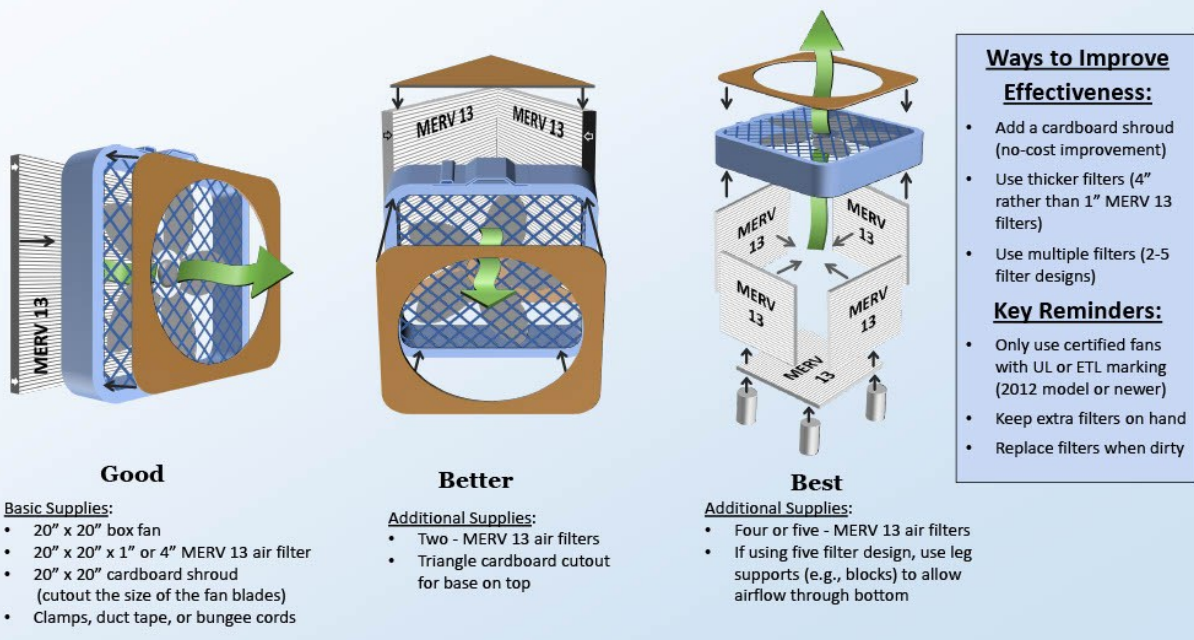
## An air purifier can be a great way to improve your indoor air quality in your home.

- **Consider purchasing a portable air cleaner.** Make sure to purchase one that is sized for the room in which you plan to use it in. Also make sure that the air cleaner does not produce ozone.

If a portable air cleaner is not available or affordable for you, you can make your own!

- **Make a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) air cleaner.** These are a great temporary solution.

## DIY Air Cleaner Designs: Beyond the Basic



For more details on how to build your own DIY Air Cleaner, check out our department front desk for the brochure or on our Morongo EPD YouTube Channel on how to build one!

References: EPA — Wildfires and Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) <https://www.epa.gov/emergencies-iaq/wildfires-and-indoor-air-quality-iaq>

Photo: EPA — <https://www.epa.gov/emergencies-iaq/diy-air-cleaner-reduce-wildfire-smoke-indoors-infographics>

# Western Burrowing Owls

Written by: Zane Tatro, Environmental Specialist I



The Western Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia hypugaea*) is a small, ground-dwelling owl that inhabits open landscapes throughout the western United States, including portions of Southern California. Unlike most owls, Burrowing Owls spend much of their time on the ground and nest in underground burrows. They are easily recognized by their long legs, bright yellow eyes, and brown plumage marked with white spots.

Burrowing Owls rely on existing burrows created by animals such as California ground squirrels and other burrowing mammals. These owls prefer open areas with low-growing vegetation, including grasslands, desert scrub habitats, agricultural lands, and undeveloped open spaces. Their presence on or near the Morongo Reservation is an important

indicator of healthy open-space habitat and ecological diversity.

Western Burrowing Owl populations have declined throughout much of their historical range due to habitat loss, development, and the reduction of burrowing mammal populations. Because of these declines, Burrowing Owls receive legal protections under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and are considered a Species of Special Concern in California. Protecting both the owls and their habitat is an important part of conserving native wildlife in the region.

## How You Can Help Protect Burrowing Owls

- Stay on designated roads and trails when traveling through natural areas.
- Avoid disturbing burrows or allowing pets to approach active nest sites.
- Report observations of Burrowing Owls to the Tribal Environmental Department or Resource Conservation Program.
- Support the conservation of native grasslands and open spaces that provide suitable owl habitat.

**Be aware of Burrowing Owl habitat before beginning construction, maintenance, or ground-disturbing activities.**

## What To Do If You See a Burrow

- Maintain a safe distance and observe quietly.
- Do not block, enter, excavate, or otherwise disturb the burrow.
- Look for signs of occupancy such as an owl standing near the entrance, whitewash (bird droppings), feathers, or prey remains.
- Record the location, if possible, and notify the Tribal Environmental Department or Resource Conservation Program.
- If the burrow is located near a planned project area, stop work in the immediate vicinity and coordinate with environmental staff before proceeding.

By remaining aware of Burrowing Owl habitat and reporting sightings, community members can help ensure this unique species continues to thrive on and around the Morongo Reservation for future generations.



We've got many ways you can stay informed about our department programs, events, and alerts. We encourage you to sign up, like, & follow us in the following ways:



**Quarterly Newsletter**—Sign up for digital or paper copies at



[www.morongonation.org/contact-environmental/](http://www.morongonation.org/contact-environmental/)



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**YouTube** — Morongo EPD



**Website** — [morongonation.org/environmental-protection-department](http://morongonation.org/environmental-protection-department)



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