

Superior National Forest and northern Minnesota tribes make 'historic' agreement

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The Superior National Forest and three northeastern Minnesota Chippewa tribes have made a first-of-its-kind agreement, one that gives the tribes a stronger voice in managing national forest and federal trust

land that was ceded to the federal government nearly 170 years ago.

The Fond du Lac and Grand Portage bands of Lake Superior Chippewa and the Bois Forte Band of Chippewa signed an [agreement](#) with the U.S. Forest Service recently to protect the bands' treaty rights within the Superior National Forest.

Bois Forte Chair Cathy Chavers called the agreement "historic," with three bands within the 1854 Treaty boundaries coming together as one to protect natural resources. Area Chippewa ceded land to the United States in 1854 in exchange for hunting, fishing and gathering rights in northeastern Minnesota.

"These bands have been on this landscape from time immemorial, connected to the work of how we sustain these lands," said Tom Hall, supervisor of the Superior National Forest. "This is really us standing shoulder to shoulder with the bands, knowing we're going to face issues and making sure we're having the right conversations early and together."

More than 3 million acres of 1854 Ceded Territory—about half—fall inside the [national forest](#).

The agreement recognizes the sovereign bands as original stewards of that land and outlines ways to ensure tribal input is included early in decisions made by the Forest Service, including those that impact treaty rights. It stipulates training from both sides, coordination with the bands on management priorities, and provisions for protection of culturally sensitive areas within the [forest](#).

"It's been 169 years since the signing of the 1854 Treaty. (The treaty) says shared resources—that is true today," Fond du Lac Band Chair Kevin Dupuis Sr. said in a news release. "Our tribal leadership has an

obligation to the ones who came before us, and we are here today to make sure that our unborn can exercise our inherent rights given to use by the Creator."

The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe and the Chippewa National Forest have a similar agreement.

While the tribes and the Forest Service have long worked together, the agreement lays out a plan for making meaningful change in how that happens, for things like prescribed burns or restoration activities for hunting, fishing and gathering, Hall said.

Tribal forest management differs from federal management, said April McCormick, secretary and treasurer of the Grand Portage band.

Tribes take a more holistic, all-encompassing approach to caring for the forest, rather than managing a [single species](#), she said. They place importance on what's culturally significant about each species, and take care that treaty-reserved resources are protected for future generations.

For example, to ensure [maple trees](#) are healthy so that [tribal members](#) can continue their sugarbush traditions—harvesting maple sap for syrup-making—"there is a whole set of tribal cultural values that our foresters use to manage the landscape," McCormick said. "Everything is interconnected. If (the Forest Service) could really understand and incorporate that into their decisionmaking, then we are empowering the Forest Service to make good decisions."

The agreement—a memorandum of understanding—is part of a 2021 federal initiative to foster healthy communication and relationships with tribal governments, to better protect treaty rights as they relate to federal lands and waters, according to the U.S. Department of the Interior.

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