Good Fire Returns to Minnesota Point

On October 8, 2026, a historic moment occurred along the shores of Lake Superior in Duluth, Minnesota. For the first time in 180 years, good fire was brought back to a fire-dependent pine forest on Minnesota Point. The 17-acre burn unit is located on ancestral and contemporary homelands of the Ojibwe people, which today is being managed by the City of Duluth and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resource's (DNR) Scientific and Natural Areas Unit. The burn was implemented by crews from the DNR, the City of Duluth, and the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. A large collaborative team referring to itself as *Zhaagawamikong-neyaashi Azhenamaw Manidoo-Ishkode* (Returning the Spirit of Good Fire to Minnesota Point), representing 12 agencies and organizations, worked together for over a year on cooperative agreements, community engagement, communications plans, and habitat monitoring. This investment of collaboration and public relations all contributed to a well-planned and successful burn operation that was received positively by the public. The return of *ishkode* - good fire - has deep significance in this location both ecologically and culturally.

Minnesota Point, or *Zhaagawamikong-neyaashi* in the Ojibwe language, is the largest freshwater estuary sand dune in the world, a landscape formed by the movement of the St. Louis River as it enters Lake Superior. Over time, grasses stabilize the sandy banks, allowing trees such as red pine (*Pinus resinosa*), white pine (*Pinus strobus*), and paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*) to establish. The red and white pine woodlands on Minnesota Point and neighboring Wisconsin Point are significant landscapes for the Ojibwe people, many of whom today are enrolled members and descendants of the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. According to oral and written history, the sites were popular seasonal gathering places for harvesting blueberries, for collecting red pine pitch for canoe-making, and historically hosted homes and cemeteries for many Ojibwe families. Ojibwe communities regularly burned the understory of these pine woodlands, which served to rejuvenate the forest, cleanse excess dead material, regenerate food and medicine plants, and kept gathering spaces open. A recent research article combined dendrochronology (tree ring) records with Indigenous oral history to daylight the significant role these Indigenous reciprocal relationships had in shaping and maintaining this unique woodland ecosystem. Such relationships were disrupted with the forced removal of Indigenous communities after the Treaty of LaPointe in 1854 which ceded the lands to the United States Government. Since that time, until fire was intentionally returned just this fall, fire had been actively prevented and suppressed, resulting in the overgrowth of understory trees and shrubs, reduction in blueberry production, and lack of red pine regeneration which requires fire to germinate. Minnesota Point is currently documented as an old growth forest and part of it is protected as a Scientific and Natural Area by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Although the towering red pines are beloved by many visitors, because the forest formed under a fire regime of regular low- to moderate-intensity fire, the ecosystem was in the process of transitioning away from red-pine dominance with the ongoing absence of fire.

Thus, the return of *ishkode* to Minnesota Point harkens the renewal of both the active human stewardship and ecological vitality of this unique sandbar pine forest ecosystem. As our Fond du Lac elders communicated to us, in the Ojibwe belief, fire is a spirit and it brings healing to the land and to the people. Future burns are planned in adjacent units within the pine forest as soon as 2027. You can read

more about the burn and the partnership that made it happen in an MPR news piece dated October 10, 2026, and on the Minnesota Point 50 website.



A trained burn crew implements the first culturally informed prescribed burn on Minnesota Point on October 8, 2026. Photo credit: Abby Andrus, Dovetail Partners



Dovetail Partners' Abby Andrus (second from right), alongside other project representatives, sharing information about the burn at a press conference on Minnesota Point. Dovetail Partners is the contracted project manager for the Returning the Spirit of Good Fire to Minnesota Point effort, focusing in particular on partnership building, community engagement, and community science.



Mature red pine, with fire scars, the day after the October 8, 2026, prescribed burn on Minnesota Point. Photo credit: Kelly Randall, MN DNR