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## **Technology Intrudes On Sacred Ground Fiber optic digs can ruin burial sites, Indians say**

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**(03-27) 04:00 PDT BAY AREA** -- While fiber optic companies race to lay connections for the Bay Area's future, some California Indians are trying to stay connected to their heritage.

Cutting into the earth to lay fiber optic cables can destroy "culturally sensitive" sites -- places that may contain Indian graves, artifacts or spiritual significance. In San Benito County, one fiber optic company allegedly tried to dig right up against Mission San Juan Bautista, which is surrounded by countless tribal artifacts and burial sites.

State officials, American Indian representatives and fiber optic companies will meet in San Francisco next week to discuss solutions to this growing conflict between ancient culture and new technology.

"It's a serious problem that's spreading in every direction, although there are signs that these diggers are beginning to wake up," said Patrick Orozco, tribal chairman for the Pajaro Valley Ohlone Council. "Everywhere you look, somebody is digging, and more and more it seems to be fiber optics."

Many California Indians -- including the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, whose ancestors flourished in the Bay Area at the time Europeans arrived -- put tremendous value on sites where their relatives carried out their lives and died, said Alan Leventhal, an archaeologist at San Jose State University.

He has worked with local tribes for more than 20 years to help them gain recognition from the federal government. Today, he said, many Indians are "reconnecting" to these sites -- of which the Bay Area has an estimated 6,000 -- as sacred places.

But especially in the Bay Area, many of those sites may be at risk because of a boom in laying fiber optic lines. As a rapid increase in online use strains the Internet, the networking industry is focusing on fiber optic technology, which allows data, voice and images to be transmitted through transparent fibers.

The Northwest Center at Sonoma State University, which keeps track of Indian sites in 19 California counties, provides assessments for projects on specific locations that may be considered culturally significant.

"Our workload has doubled in the last two years from 1,000 to 2,000 assessments of sites," said Leigh Jordan, the center's coordinator. "It has to do with all the fiber optic cable and cell phone

antennas, and in the last year, with the better economic situation."

Many fiber optic companies have probably been operating out of ignorance, said Rob Edwards, who teaches archaeological technology at Cabrillo College in Aptos. He said they have been laying cable or converting cable lines after assuring local planners that their digging would do no harm.

``They would say they were not going to disturb anything with their deep plows, which were not supposed to touch the surface," Edwards said. ``No one challenged them at first. But we found that it was like cutting through a cake with a sharp knife. The top of the cake looks fine, but down below is a large round hole.

``In one case, a fiber optic company wanted to cut right next to Mission San Juan Bautista, before they were stopped by state and local officials," Edwards said.

Another company, Qwest Communications, was barred in December by the California Public Utilities Commission from laying down any more fiber optic cable in the state after it was determined that the company did not locate possible Indian sites before digging.

``They were digging up in the middle of streets in San Jose, near San Luis Obispo, downtown Los Angeles and Sacramento without any prior research," said Peter Allen, a staff attorney for the commission, which regulates the state's privately owned utilities.

Qwest was allowed to resume digging last month after it came up with a protocol adapted from another fiber optic company, Allen said.

``We have now mandated training so our construction workers our contractors have hired are familiar with what a culturally sensitive area looks like," said Matt Barkett, a Qwest spokesman. ``We have also hired Native American monitors so they can be on the site wherever we do construction, as well as a team of researchers to go through the historical data."

Qwest is not alone, however, in running into trouble. During the past year, the Public Utilities Commission has issued stop-work orders to three other fiber optics companies: Level 3, Metromedia and Pacific Fiber, which is now known as Worldwide Fiber. All are now in compliance except for Metromedia, which is developing its own protocol, Allen said.

The state's Native American Heritage Commission, which monitors digging, is struggling to keep up. It has a staff of three, based in Sacramento.

``I am always hopeful we will get more staff members," said Larry Myers, executive secretary of the commission. ``We've been trying to get a handle on how many fiber optics companies there are out there digging and where, but we really don't know, except that it probably involves thousands of miles (of cable)."

Hoping to clear up any lingering confusion about what the companies are required to do before they dig, the Public Utilities Commission will host a roundtable discussion April 7 in San Francisco that will include telecommunications representatives, American Indians and state officials.

The goal of the state Public Utilities Commission, Allen said, is not to shut down the fiber optic companies but to encourage them to be aware of where sacred and historic sites are so they can either operate with extreme care or avoid the site entirely.

``People are sticking fiber optic in all over the place, and we want to encourage that," Allen said. ``But we also have a duty to protect environments and cultural resources. We want to make sure the rules are fair to all the companies and that all the companies, not just a few, follow them."

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