



Tribal Pesticide Program Council

Summer 2026

TPPC Member Spotlight: Melanie Kirby

Melanie Kirby is a registered member of Tortugas Pueblo, a state-recognized tribal community in southern New Mexico. She considers herself to be Mestiza and explained, “I’ve got Tiwa, Mesclara, Apache, and Spanish. My father’s Caribbean, and I’ve also got Scottish & Irish...I’m a product of the melting pot.” She was raised in New Mexico, where she currently resides, and has close ties and continues to participate in tribal activities. She has built her career around pollinator stewardship, bee breeding, education, and advocacy.

“That had actually been my life plan at the time to move to San Francisco and be a DJ, and then the bees found me, and now they’re my DJs.”

Despite nearly 25 years in the field, Melanie’s pathway into pollinator conservation came about unexpectedly. When Melanie first ventured off to college, she studied marine biology and fisheries in Miami. After a few years, she returned to New Mexico and completed her undergraduate degree in liberal arts at St. John’s College. Upon completion, she joined the Peace Corps and served for two years in Paraguay.

The Peace Corps served as a pivotal point in her life trajectory. During her service in Paraguay, she was assigned to beekeeping and thus began her involvement with pollinators. Although she “knew nothing about it” before joining the Peace Corps, she learned much of her foundation from the Guarani farmers. She became fascinated with the way the subsistence Indigenous Guarani farmers “knew so much about the land, and about working with the land”. She was in awe of their knowledge and realized that despite her book smarts, she lacked real-life skills. Once her assignment ended, she wanted to learn more and decided to put off graduate school for a few years. As it turned out, a few years turned into twenty.

She started working for commercial beekeeping operations for the next six years. For some of these years, she lived in Hawaii, and it was there she was introduced to queen bee rearing and breeding and the genetic



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TPPC Member Spotlight: Melanie Kirby *(continued)*

study of bees. This experience would serve as an important foundation for her future. She also spent time working for a migratory beekeeper who would move his bees from Wisconsin and Florida. It was during this experience that she met her farm partner and shifted from working for commercial beekeeping to having her own bee breeding farm.

Melanie and her farm partner identify as “landless farmers” who don’t own any land. They run a small bee breeding farm called Zia Queen Bees Farm and Field Institute. She explains that they “develop relationships with different land stewards who, one, need pollination or are just really willing to share space.” An important component of her work centers around building and maintaining relationships with land stewards, as access to land is essential to maintaining Zia Queen Bees. Many of the land stewards she has fostered relationships with have been other Indigenous peoples and communities in northern New Mexico. Melanie always imagined she would work for someone else, stating, “I never anticipated having my own setup.” Now, 21 years into Zia Queen Bees, she has established herself as a seasoned individual in the bee breeding field.

“I really wanted to help build the bridge between the field and the lab”

Over time, as the farm became more established, Melanie became interested in epigenetics, explaining that she became “fascinated with epigenetics, how the environment shapes behavior, but also the genes of the bees and how we get different kinds of strains and what we call ecotypes.” This made her realize she was ready to return to graduate school, and in 2017 she attended Washington State University for her master’s degree in Entomology.



During graduate school, Melanie explained that “Agriculture extension had been sort of my goal.” After years of working with and developing relationships with the stewards in her region, she witnessed many of the challenges they were facing, and she “really wanted to advocate more.” Her work collaborating with farmers, tribal communities, and land stewards repeatedly highlighted the disconnect between the field and the lab. She recognized two groups existed: people with lived experiences “who really know the land and have spent years honing their craft,” and then scientists or academics who speak “a totally different language.” Her experience taught her that farmers and Indigenous communities have “years of

observations and basically data that they’ve been monitoring and collecting,” but were often overlooked because they lacked formal publications. Melanie hoped that learning more about the science and academic side of things could help her “be a better translator for farmers.” Graduate school provided her with the tools to help connect the two knowledge systems and be an advocate for a more collaborative interdisciplinary approach to conservation and pollinator protection.

“That position has been...it’s like heart work for me. I really like it”

Following graduate school, Melanie found a position at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in their Land-Grant Program, which she explained is their Agriculture Extension program. Given her knowledge, experience, and her ongoing work with Zia Queen Bees, she was asked to start a beekeeping program. She felt honored to be able to do that and stated, “I felt like I was at a point where I knew enough to be able to

TPPC Member Spotlight: Melanie Kirby (continued)

help share what I had learned, but also to guide folks who were interested, to just integrate in more pollinator stewardship with whatever their projects and aspirations are.” In 2020, she started the Thunder Bee Beekeeping and Pollinator Stewardship Program. They started with five hives on campus, and the following year they started doing a shadowing program where folks hosted some of the university hives. She would take students with her to go check on the hives, and this resulted in an educational and cultural exchange. She explained that “A lot of our tribal students get to learn a lot from each other. Some of them don't come from New Mexico, and so them having the opportunity to go visit another tribal community in the region was really fun for them.” This position has been fulfilling and enjoyable, and she describes it as “heart work.”

“I've been super appreciative of being able to be involved with the TPPC because I've learned so much”

Melanie's involvement with the Tribal Pesticide Program Council (TPPC) came shortly after a pollinator conference around 2022. Following the conference, she received an email from the TPPC Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) program officer asking if she would be interested in joining the TPPC. She decided to sit in on a meeting and learn more about the work the TPPC does. Since then, she has been involved and works mainly with the Pollinator Protection Workgroup. She mentioned, “One of the topics, which I believe is still an important one that we have been keen to work on, is developing a tribal pollinator protection plan. I had been working already with folks in my own state to help develop just one for the state and to get it through the legislature. So I was sharing initially a lot of info about that sort of process and some of the challenges.” In addition to the pollinator workgroup meetings, she has occasionally sat in on monthly TPPC group meetings and finds it “super enlightening” being able to hear what other TPPC members are having to deal with and what their concerns are.



Melanie's involvement with the TPPC has helped her realize the importance of understanding the pesticide component of things if one of her goals is to keep bees alive. She shared she has become more intrigued with pesticides in general and noted, “I feel like, especially as someone who works with pollinators, my whole goal is to keep them alive. But I don't know enough about what their challenges are, in terms of how lands are being managed, what they're being sprayed with, but also what does that even mean on the chemical side, the biological side, the economic side.” She is grateful for all that she has learned so far with TPPC and the ways it has complemented her pollinator goals.

One important connection she fostered through her involvement with TPPC is the relationship she built with several federal agencies. She explained, “Back in May of 2024, I was approached by a few federal agencies, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and I think USGS as well. And they had some funding...working through the previous administration's promotion of integrating in more Indigenous perspectives and consultations.” They reached out to her wanting to hold a workshop to learn what tribes' interests were and what their challenges were so they could better learn how to support tribal pollinator projects. They had funding to bring 35 tribal environmental professionals together, and IAIA hosted it. Melanie noted, “I think they [federal personnel] were also kind of hoping too that there would be opportunities

TPPC Member Spotlight: Melanie Kirby *(continued)*



for them to learn some IEK, or indigenous ecological knowledge, that could help to better inform what they could advocate for through their own agencies.” She explained some of the federal personnel “hadn’t necessarily realized how much knowledge had also been suppressed or lost because of colonial imprint” and it was “really enlightening for the federal folks to see how much work needed to be done to repair those relationships, which was good. They needed to hear that.” The workshop also allowed tribal folk to hear from each other and learn about other projects happening, and several TPPC members

were able to attend. Since then, they have held two additional workshops put on by local tribal organizations.

“My ultimate vision is to support Indigenous research through mentoring and higher education aspirations. My goal is to support Indigenous leadership for biodiversity conservation and regeneration.”

Long-term, Melanie hopes to pursue a PhD, and she is interested in researching high-elevation pollinator species. She explained, “I really want to do a PhD. My burning question that I want to look at is high-elevation bee species and how Indigenous stewardship supports or doesn’t support their conservation.” Her hypothesis is yes, Indigenous stewardship does support their conservation. One of the reasons she is interested in high-elevation areas is related to climate change and the increasingly warmer temperatures where there are “sort of pockets or refugia where pollinators will be able to have more potential to adapt or overlap.” With this research, her goal is to include folks from the TPPC who are interested in participating in this kind of project.

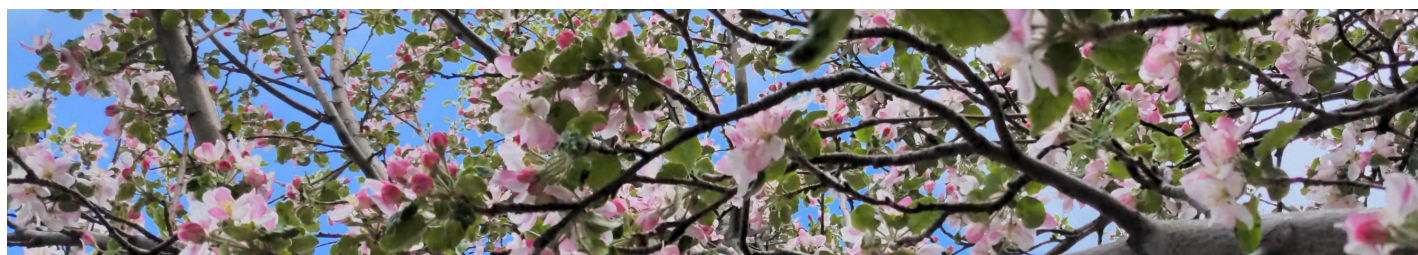
Melanie discussed how she feels she has lived three lives, “One as a professional beekeeper in a very white male-dominated industry, and then also as a woman scientist, and then also as an indigenous person.” She is now allowing these worlds to intersect, and she stated she wants to “try and advocate for Indigenous, not only presence, but real, meaningful opportunities for us to be a part of.” She recently attended a conference where, to her knowledge, she was the only Indigenous person there. During her presentation, she said to her audience, “I really encourage you all to include Indigenous peoples in your projects, in your research studies, in your storytelling efforts, and in your approaches to work on policy.” She feels collaboration is essential, and she takes an interdisciplinary approach, hoping to bring in the social sciences with the biological sciences. Ideally, she wants to see where IEK and Western regenerative or sustainable science can not only intersect but integrate. She states, “If we quit canceling each other, what can we bring together to advance all of our efforts to just keep life habitable on this planet, for now and future generations?”



TPPC Executive Committee Vacant Positions

The Executive Committee consists of TPPC Members elected by their peers to represent their regions on the Council. When fully staffed the Executive Committee includes the Chair and Vice-Chair, representatives from each of the ten EPA regions as well as one from Alaska, and four At-Large positions. Executive Committee members are responsible for ensuring that their region's tribes are represented at TPPC meetings in order to determine and raise issues of importance to these tribes, and relay information back to them. Executive Committee members are encouraged to communicate with their Regional Tribal Operations Committee (RTOCs) and EPA Regional Offices prior to TPPC meetings in order to identify pesticide program needs and issues.

The TPPC is currently seeking regional representatives to fill several vacancies on the Executive Committee and represent their Tribes' and/or Tribal Organizations interests' related to pesticides and environmental concerns. Representatives must be nominated by a TPPC member from their region or may nominate themselves, and the representative must have an authorization letter on file. Current vacancies include Regions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and Alaska. If you are interested in representing your region or have questions about participating in the Executive Committee, please contact TPPC Coordinator Mark Daniels at mark.daniels@nau.edu or (928) 523-8897.



Updates and Announcements

Conferences and Meetings:

ASPCRO Annual Conference

The Association of Structural Pest Control Regulatory Officials (ASPCRO) will hold their Annual Conference **August 10-14** in Colorado Springs, CO. For more information click [here](#).

Trainings and Courses:

Non-Agricultural Pest Control Issues PREP

PREP will provide a training course on non-agricultural pest control in Fort Collins, CO **August 3-6**. For more information click [here](#).

Endangered Species Combo PREP

PREP will provide an endangered species combo training **September 21-24** in Fort Collins, CO. For more information click [here](#).

Inspector Basics PIRT

NASDA will provide a training on inspector basics and investigation training **October 6-9** in the Twin Cities, MN. For more information click [here](#).

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The TPPC is a member-based organization with more than 106 members from 67 Tribes and tribal organizations as of July 2026, whose activities are funded by a cooperative agreement with the EPA. The Council serves as a tribal technical resource, and provides a forum for dialogue between Tribes and the EPA on program and policy development relating to pesticides issues and concerns. Assistance provided to Tribes includes support in building tribal pesticide programs and conducting pesticide education and training, and the preparation of resources for Tribes interested in specialized issues such as Integrated Pest Management and pollinators. Through its interaction with the EPA, the TPPC keeps Tribes informed of developments in the regulation of pesticides and pesticide use, and provides feedback to the EPA on such matters from a tribal perspective (though it is important to note that communication between the EPA and the TPPC does not substitute for direct government-to-government consultation).

For information about how to join the TPPC, contact Mark Daniels at mark.daniels@nau.edu or (928) 523-8897.

