



TRIBAL CONSULTATION IN CALIFORNIA UNDERSTANDING ACCELA

A TRIBAL GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA'S LAND USE PLANNING SYSTEM

Supplement to the By Tribes for Tribes Tribal Consultation Policy Template



INTRODUCTION

Accela is the primary software platform used by most California counties and cities to manage permits, planning applications, and land development projects. Understanding how to access and navigate Accela systems is essential for effective Tribal consultation because this is where agencies track projects that may affect Tribal cultural resources and ancestral territories.

With 95 percent of California's counties now powered by Accela, this platform has become the central system for land use planning across the state. Most projects that require Tribal consultation will be tracked through an Accela system.

WHAT IS ACCELA AND WHY ITS MATTERS FOR TRIBES

Accela is a cloud-based government software platform that automates and tracks permitting, planning, and code enforcement processes. The system handles everything from building permits and planning applications to zoning reviews, site plan approvals, and land use entitlements.

For Tribes, this means that virtually every development project with the potential to impact cultural resources will be documented and tracked within an Accela system.

Key Functions Relevant to Tribal Consultation:

- **Planning Applications:** Zoning changes, conditional use permits, subdivisions, and general plan amendments
- **Building Permits:** New construction, renovations, and demolitions that may involve ground disturbance

- **Environmental Review:** CEQA compliance tracking and document management
- **Code Enforcement:** Violations and compliance issues that may affect cultural sites
- **Public Works:** Infrastructure projects, road improvements, and utility installation.

The platform provides comprehensive project information including location data, project descriptions, timelines, applicant details, and review status, all information critical for Tribes to assess potential impacts to cultural resources.

HOW ACCELA SYSTEMS WORK IN CALIFORNIA

CITIZEN ACCESS PORTALS

Most agencies provide public access to their Accela systems through "Citizen Access" portals. Users do not need to enter anything under registration, it can be left blank. These portals allow the public to research permits and inspection results 24 hours a day without registration, though registered users can access additional features.

GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

Based on research, confirmed Accela users in California include:

- Counties: Sacramento, Santa Clara, Contra Costa, Placer, Kern, San Diego, Pima, and dozens of others

- Cities: Concord, Sacramento, Oakland, and hundreds of municipalities
- Special Districts: Many water districts, fire departments, and regional agencies

INTEGRATION WITH GIS

Accela systems integrate with Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to provide intuitive visualizations of land parcels, permit history, and zoning details. This mapping capability is particularly useful for Tribes to understand project locations relative to ancestral territories and known cultural sites.



HOW TO ACCESS PROJECT INFORMATION

STEP 1: FIND THE RIGHT PORTAL

Each agency has its own Accela portal.
Common URL patterns include:

- [jurisdiction].accela.com (e.g., concord.accela.com)
- permits.[jurisdiction].gov
- [jurisdiction]permits.gov
- Search "[Agency Name] Accela" or "[Agency Name] permits portal"

STEP 2: SEARCH FOR PROJECTS

Most portals allow searching by:

- Address or Parcel Number: Most useful for specific project locations
- Permit Number: If you have this from agency correspondence
- Applicant Name: Can reveal multiple projects by the same developer
- Date Range: Useful for tracking recent submissions
- Project Type: Filter by planning applications, building permits, etc.

STEP 3: REVIEW PROJECT DETAILS

Accela records typically include:

- Project description and scope
- Property location and parcel information
- Applicant and contact information
- Project timeline and milestones
- Uploaded documents (plans, reports, correspondence)
- Review status and approvals
- Inspection schedules and results



STRATEGIC USES FOR TRIBAL CONSULTATION

Early Project Identification

Regular monitoring of Accela systems allows Tribes to identify potentially impactful projects early in the planning process, before agencies are required to initiate consultation. This proactive approach provides more time for meaningful review and greater opportunity to influence project design.

Comprehensive Project Understanding

Accela systems often contain far more detail than initial agency notification letters. Plans, environmental documents, and technical reports uploaded to the system provide the full context needed for informed consultation.

Timeline Tracking

Understanding agency review schedules helps Tribes plan consultation timelines and identify critical decision points when Tribal input will be most influential.

Pattern Recognition

Monitoring multiple projects over time can reveal development patterns, cumulative impacts, and areas of concentrated activity that may require broader consultation strategies.

Documentation and Accountability

Accela records provide an official trail of agency actions, timelines, and decisions that can be valuable if consultation processes are disputed or if projects are modified without proper notification.

PRACTICAL NAVIGATION TIPS

SETTING UP MONITORING SYSTEMS

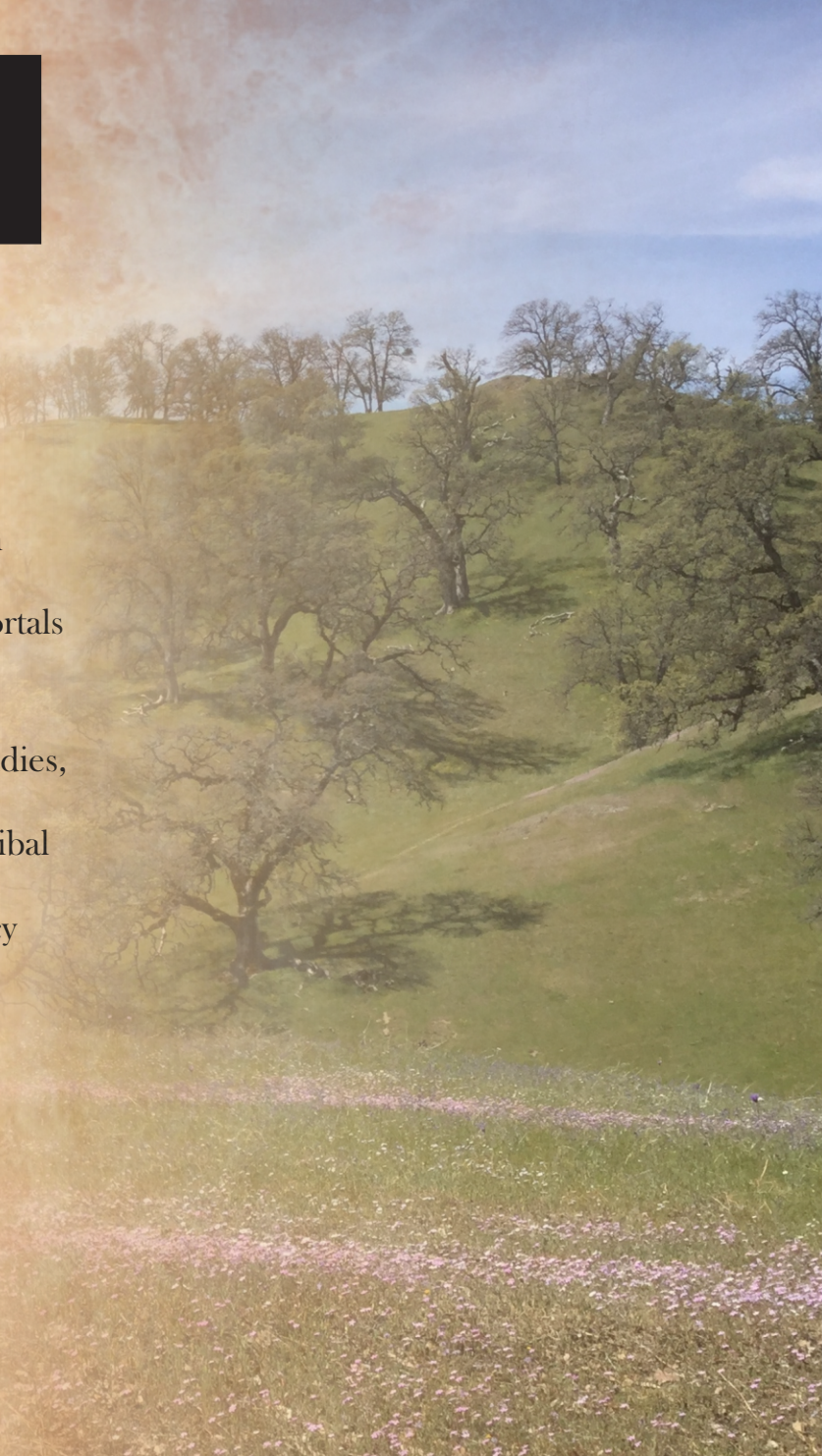
- **Regular Searches:** Establish monthly or quarterly search routines for your traditional territory
- **Geographic Filters:** Use mapping tools to focus on areas of highest cultural sensitivity
- **Keyword Alerts:** Some systems allow email notifications for new projects in specified areas
- **Staff Training:** Ensure Tribal staff know how to navigate relevant agency portals

UNDERSTANDING PROJECT TYPES

- **Environmental Reviews:** Look for CEQA documents, cultural resource studies, and mitigation measures
- **Public Hearings:** Planning commission and city council meetings where Tribal input may be needed
- **Appeal Deadlines:** Time-sensitive opportunities to formally object to agency decisions
- **Renewal Applications:** Ongoing projects that may have consultation requirements

WORKING WITH INCOMPLETE INFORMATION

- Many projects are submitted with minimal initial detail
- Environmental review documents are often uploaded later in the process
- Contact agency staff directly when Accela records lack sufficient detail for consultation assessment



BEST PRACTICES FOR TRIBAL STAFF

DOCUMENTS

Keep records of your Accela searches, including dates, search terms, and results. This helps track when you first became aware of projects and demonstrates due diligence in monitoring.

COORDINATE

Share relevant project information with Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPOs), cultural committees, and legal counsel as appropriate.

AGENCY RELATIONSHIPS

Use Accela information to ask informed questions during consultation meetings. Demonstrating familiarity with project details through the agency's own system builds credibility.

BUILD CAPACITY

Consider training multiple staff members to navigate Accela systems, as monitoring traditional territories requires ongoing attention.

LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Not All Projects Are Public: Some early planning discussions may not appear in Accela until formal applications are submitted. Maintaining relationships with agency planning staff remains important for truly early notification.

SYSTEM VARIATIONS

Each agency configures Accela differently, so navigation methods vary between jurisdictions. Tribal staff may need to learn multiple systems for comprehensive territorial monitoring.

TECHNICAL REQUIREMENTS

Accessing detailed plans and reports may require specific software (like Adobe Acrobat) and good internet connectivity.

CONSULTATIONS VS. PUBLIC PROCESS

Finding a project in Accela doesn't automatically trigger consultation rights. Understanding the legal consultation requirements for different project types remains essential.

CONCLUSION

A topographical map with a magnifying glass and a yellow pencil resting on a wooden surface. The map shows various colored regions (orange, yellow, green, blue) and a winding river. The magnifying glass has a black handle and a silver rim. The pencil is yellow with a silver band and a red eraser.

Accela systems represent both an opportunity and a necessity for effective Tribal consultation in California. Understanding Accela is not just about accessing information, it's about taking control of the consultation process and ensuring that Tribal voices are heard at the most critical moments in land use decision making. By learning to effectively navigate Accela portals, Tribal staff can shift from reactive consultation (responding to agency notices) to proactive engagement (identifying and addressing potential impacts early). This approach strengthens Tribal sovereignty, protects cultural resources more effectively, and often results in better project outcomes for all parties.

**This guide provides general information about Accela systems. Specific portal navigation may vary by jurisdiction. For technical assistance with specific agency portals, contact the agency's permit center or IT support directly.*



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Photos by Allison Rofo

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