

Old-growth cedar grove a state park?; Group of advocates hope to win the designation to preserve acreage on Moscow Mountain

By Megan Doyle
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Moscow Pullman Daily News, 1/24/06

Protecting old-growth cedars on Moscow Mountain has been a source of contention for more than a decade. A group of interested in the trees' preservation is hoping for a permanent solution this week.

The unique area, with an old-growth cedar tree grove, will be in limbo once a 10-year lease agreement ends Dec. 31. The agreement is between the Nature Conservancy, a nationwide nonprofit organization dedicated to preservation of natural areas and the wildlife within them, and the state of Idaho. The Nature Conservancy's decision to not renew the agreement spurred into action those who'd like to see the area remain as it is.

One idea is to designate the area as a state park.

"I dreamed this up the other night while I was skiing the mountain in the dark," said Mark Solomon, a resident of Moscow Mountain.

Solomon, a member of the Moscow Mountain State Park campaign, will meet with Latah County commissioners at 2 p.m. Wednesday to discuss the idea. He hopes commissioners will pass along their support to state legislators and the governor, who would make the declaration.

Gov. Dirk Kempthorne already has ties to Moscow Mountain, Solomon said. He was married on the property prior to becoming governor.

Latah County resident Ashley Martens also is working on the state park campaign. There was a lot of support for turning property on Moscow Mountain into a park previously, Martens said. "I think the record has shown people aren't going to give up on this."

This is the second attempt to declare the acreage a state park. A 1990 attempt failed.

The land, originally part of an endowment from the state, has existed in temporary classifications since then.

There was a land trade between the government and Bennett Lumber in 1992, with the company acquiring property on the mountain, some of which has been clear-cut.

The Nature Conservancy entered into a lease with the state in 1996 for the

remaining 295.6 acres, keeping it from the auction block. About \$6,000 was paid by the Nature Conservancy to the state for the property last year. The hope was that the 10 years would give everyone time to find a permanent solution for preservation of the acreage, said Lou Lunte, the director of conservation programs for the Nature Conservancy in Idaho.

"I think we made it very clear in the beginning not to perpetually lease the property," Lunte said. He said the decision to not renew the lease was made early in the year to give others, such as Solomon, time to try other approaches.

"I think the time is right to bring a variety of stakeholders in the community together with the state department," Lunte said. It needs to be a locally driven mission.

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