

Mountain cedar grove gets reprieve Committee to hammer out preservation plan

By Omie Drawhorn, Daily News staff writer

A small committee will decide the fate of 300 acres of ancient cedar trees on Moscow Mountain.

Winston Wiggins, director of state lands, is sending Latah County Commissioner Paul Kimmell a letter outlining the base framework of an agreement for preservation. Kimmell said the letter will direct a steering committee to develop a plan for the area over the next few months, including representatives from state and local government, landowners and the Nature Conservancy, a national nonprofit organization leasing the property through December. A local entity, likely Latah County, will take over management of the cedar grove under the new plan.

Grassroots pressure from local residents and government officials over the past few months led the Idaho Department of Lands to authorize the four-person committee.

The county can lease the land for up to 25 years.

“This is great. I wanted to see the cedar grove protected, and this is a workable solution,” said Mark Solomon, Moscow Mountain resident and spokesman for the Moscow Mountain State Park campaign.

In mid-February, Latah County commissioners sent a letter to the lands department seeking help in preserving the grove. The department manages endowment trust lands to maximize financial returns to educational institutions while protecting natural resources. The commissioners proposed a long-term lease arrangement with the state to protect and manage the area.

“This is absolutely what we were hoping for,” Kimmell said. He hopes the land will be managed in a similar way, with recreation and research as its primary use. Today, the site is managed by the Nature Conservancy as a recreation and research use, with timber as a secondary use. Fear of losing the land in a sale after the lease expires inspired many local residents into action.

Republican State Rep. Tom Trail said Wiggins was encouraged to write the letter of support after “200 people jumped on him with all four feet.”

The state owns the 295.6 acres of land that contains the cedars. Located on the east end of the ridge of Moscow Mountain, the grove of cedars estimated at between 600 and 1,000 years old would go to the highest bidder if the state decided to sell it — no matter what the buyer intends to use the property for.

“I’m pleased with the (Department of Lands’) willingness and cooperation,” Kimmell said. “There has been no sort of opposition or roadblocks.”

He said the lands department must consent to the lease agreement the committee hammers out.

Kimmell said the county commissioners are hoping to work with the Palouse Land Trust, University of Idaho College of Natural Resources, local residents and adjoining landowners, including Bennett Lumber Products.

Both a bill to set aside Moscow Mountain as a state park and a separate resolution of support of the idea died in committee a couple of weeks ago, but Trail introduced the resolution and bill again in Republican State Sen. Gary Schroeder’s committee. It received support there and passed in committee.

Solomon came up with the idea to turn the area into a state park when he learned the cedar grove’s future was up in the air. Two previous efforts to create a state park on the mountain have failed. The first was in the early 1990s when supporters hoped to preserve the trees by commemorating the state centennial with a state park designation.

The Moscow City Council showed their support for protection of the area by passing a resolution Feb. 6. The Nature Conservancy stepped in as a stopgap measure during the last attempt to preserve the area. It leased the land for 10 years with the idea that local people and officials would be able to come up with a workable solution by the time the lease expired.

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