

## County to manage mountain cedar grove

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Latah County will take over the management of 300 acres of ancient cedar trees on Moscow Mountain.

Latah County Commissioner Paul Kimmell said there are two options under consideration. The county could take over the existing lease and assume management of the land or it could draw up a new lease when the current one expires.

Kimmell said the first option is preferred because the second would take more time and might require a reappraisal, which could result in either an increase or decrease in property value.

He said he hopes the county will make a decision in the next 60 days, pending legal review.

A group of interested people met last week to discuss the fate of the land. The group included Mark Solomon, a resident of Moscow Mountain and member of the former Moscow Mountain State Park Campaign; Kimmell; The Nature Conservancy; Steve Hollenhorst with the University of Idaho College of Natural Resources; and Robert Barkley, a forestry specialist with the Idaho Department of Lands.

“The Nature Conservancy is fully in support of us taking over,” Kimmell said. He said his fellow commissioners also like the idea.

The Nature Conservancy is a national nonprofit agency dedicated to preserving natural resources and lands. The organization stepped in almost 10 years ago, during the last attempt to preserve the area. It leased the land with the idea that local people and officials would come up with a solution by the time the lease ended at the end of this year.

The state owns the 295.6 acres of land where the grove is located. Located on the east end of the ridge of Moscow Mountain, it would go to the highest bidder if the state decided to sell it — no matter what the buyer intended to use the property for.

Grassroots pressure from local residents and government officials over the past few months led the Idaho Department of Lands to look at options for preservation of the grove. An effort to turn the area into a state park was unsuccessful, but the idea of the county assuming responsibility stuck.

In mid-February, Latah County commissioners sent a letter to the Idaho Department of Lands seeking help to preserve the grove.

The department manages endowment trust lands to maximize financial returns for education institutions while protecting natural resources. The commissioners proposed a long-term lease with the state to protect and manage the area. The county can lease the land for up to 25 years for \$5,000 a year.

The money to pay for the land would mainly come from private funds rather than property taxes.

Kimmell said the county would be preserving the area to prevent it from overuse. The land's current designation is for recreation and research with a secondary designation for timber. The county would operate the land under the same designation.

The county would lease the land from the Idaho Department of Lands, Barkley said.

"Long term, the state wants to get rid of the property (on Moscow Mountain) and would welcome a land exchange, which is the preferable vehicle to get out of endowment lands," Kimmell said.

With the land exchange, the county could buy land and exchange it with the state for the land on Moscow Mountain.

"The ultimate goal of ownership by the county is ideal," Barkley said. He said that for now, the county taking over management is the best option.