

Cedar grove lease to county; Plan details still need to be worked out for trees on Moscow Mountain

By Ryan Bentley, Daily News staff writer
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Latah County should take over the lease for nearly 300 acres of cedar grove on top of Moscow Mountain by Aug. 1.

The county is working with the Idaho Department of Lands to take over the lease from Nature Conservancy, a national nonprofit organization that leases the property through December.

County Commissioner Paul Kimmell said the commissioners are not aware of any problems that would knock them off the Aug. 1 deadline. The agreement would protect the grove from logging and is the first step in the county's attempt to create a park or preserve for recreation and education.

"I think the Department of Lands and the board feel a lease is not a long-term solution," Kimmell said. "This lease will go through and the people support it but it is just a start. The grove is a very unique place and it merits special recognition.

"Whatever happens, it will be important to have local input to create an area that is unique to Latah County."

The grove, located on the east side of Moscow Mountain, has 295.6 acres of land surrounded by privately owned timber. The grove of cedars is estimated to be between 600 and 1,000 years old.

The Nature Conservancy is a national agency dedicated to preserving natural resources and lands. The organization stepped in almost 10 years ago 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 land where the grove is located. 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.

Although logging would be an option, Kimmell said, the Department of Lands recognizes the social and educational value of the grove. He said that is one reason why the lease exchange has gone so smoothly.

“From what I have seen, everyone seems to agree, even people in the logging industry, that logging the grove is probably not the best solution,” said Commissioner Jack Nelson. “People have told me that if they chopped down some of those big boys, they would just explode on impact.”

For the county to take more control of the land besides the lease, the county will have to work out a land swap with the Department of Lands.

Kimmell said the county is looking at land currently used for agriculture to swap with the state.

Although trading forest land for agriculture land hasn't been done before in Idaho, Kimmell said it could work as long as the land yields the same amount of revenue.

“They are doing it in Washington,” Kimmell said. “As long as the state is making a 5 percent return, they should be happy.”

If the county takes permanent control of the grove, the commissioners said they would work with local organizations to figure out how best to open it to the public.

One of the biggest issues is how to get there.

“It's difficult to get there,” Kimmell said. “Not everyone can find it, or get to it.”

A lot of the area surrounding the grove is owned by Bennett Lumber Inc., and the company is responsible for the upkeep on the roads that service the area. Kimmell said the county and Bennett will have to discuss the best options to access it.

The county also has to decide how easy the access should be.

“It has to be open to the people, but you can overdevelop a park, and the area can lose its draw,” Kimmell said. “It's a balance.”

The commissioners will have to meet with the county's parks and recreation department to work out the details, but that could still be a few years away.

“The Cedar Grove is a part of the nature of Latah County,” Commissioner Tom Stroschein said. “I think the nature of the park should reflect that.”

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