

## Latah County takes control of Moscow Mountain cedar grove

By Ryan Bentley, Daily News staff writer

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Latah County signed the final papers to lease the Moscow Mountain cedar grove on Wednesday.

Robert Barkley, with the Idaho Department of Lands, said this should be the last step for the county in its efforts to take control of the grove.

The Idaho Land Board could deny the county's request, but Barkley said he can't see that happening.

"It's a local entity running the show; they will take care of it and the state is making money off of it," he said.

The IDL requires a \$25 processing fee to send the paperwork up the chain of command. The county didn't have a check ready, so the processing won't go to the land board until it does.

The county will start paying the lease on the grove in January.

The Nature Conservancy, the previous leaseholder, paid about \$4,000 a year for the lease.

The price could change depending on what the county decides to do with the land.

The grove consists of 295.6 acres. The cedars, located on the east end of the Moscow Mountain ridge, are estimated to be between 600 and 1,000 years old. Previous leaseholders have developed a trail system through the giant trees, although no official trailhead or services exist.

Andy Grant, director of Latah County Recreation, said the county hasn't decided what to do with the land. The lease amount will hinge on that decision.

"If there's a campground up there that makes \$100,000 a year, the state's going to want a piece of that," Barkley said.

"In that case, the lease is going to be a lot more than \$5,000."

Grant said the county will hold open forums to explain how it wants to use the grove. Commissioner Paul Kimmell said it could remain a secluded, quiet grove, or become an official park with trails and an interpretive center.

Robyn Miller, manager for the Nature Conservancy, said it was great to have the county step up and take control of the grove. The county must now form a comprehensive plan for the area and submit it to the land board.

Barkley said the land board had designated the grove for education, recreation and research. Logging was not a realistic possibility under the current zoning.

The county wants to own the grove outright someday. To do that, it would have to shell out about \$500,000. Barkley said that's just a rough estimate.

Kimmell said the county might pursue a land swap. The state might accept agricultural land in exchange for the grove, but it would have to be of equal value.

"The problem is, no one really knows what it's worth. And what determines worth?" he said. "We'd have to make sure the land we traded for was the same value."

Kimmell said the county collectively has to decide how to use the grove and form a management plan.