

Forest thinning project slated for Fields Spring State Park

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A forest thinning project at Fields Spring State Park over the next two winters, designed to lessen fire risk, will have little impact on ski trails and other snow-based recreation.

But some trails could be closed from time to time as loggers remove young grand fir and other trees that have grown beneath larger and older ponderosa pine and western larch.

Park officials will hold a public meeting about the project at 6:30 p.m. Thursday at the Puffer Butte Lodge. According to plans, forest thinning will occur on about 300 of the park's more than 800 acres. All of the work will be south of State Route 129 on flat and gently sloped land, said David Cass, forester for the Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission at Tumwater.

Cass described the scheduled work as a light thinning.

“In terms of biomass, we are removing maybe 30 to 40 percent in most areas and in some areas almost nothing,” he said.

For more than 100 years, fire has been excluded from the park, which sits on a timbered butte above arid breaks of the Grande Ronde River. Cass said young tree growth below the mature trees has made the forest there dense and susceptible to both insect and disease outbreaks and high-intensity wildfire.

“There is tremendous infill of small trees, and the park has had subsequent insect and disease outbreaks and some logging that has changed the natural history of that forest type from being a more open and large-tree dominated, mixed conifer forest to being a densely packed forest with lots and lots of small trees,” he said. “We are thinning from below, retaining large trees and removing small trees.”

Roughly 80 percent of the trees targeted for removal are grand fir, which are less tolerant of fire than other species such as ponderosa pine and larch.

“It’s a large area, so specific treatments will vary across the project area,” Cass said. “There are portions where we will only be leaving behind ponderosa pine and portions where we will be leaving behind a nice mix of species, including grand fir, that was historically part of the landscape too, just not in as much abundance.”

The logging is scheduled to occur in winter months, when the ground is either frozen or snow-covered, to lessen soil disturbance and environmental impact.

Fields Spring is a popular wintertime destination for cross-country skiers, snowshoers and sledders. Portions of the park, including some trails, could be temporarily closed during the work, although Ranger Joseph Rhoades said much of the work will be around cabins, not near the park’s network of groomed ski trails. Any trails subject to temporary closure will reopen when the logging is complete. Cass said the agency would like to begin the thinning this winter. The project previously underwent a review under the State Environmental Protection Act, and the agency’s forest practices permit for the project is under review.

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