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Public discussions focus on recreational use in Naneum Ridge State Forest

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer
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The entrance to the Naneum Ridge State Forest, northeast of Ellensburg, Wednesday, April 25 2012. (Brian Myrick / Da Brian Myrick

Well before a massive, public-private land swap created the Naneum Ridge State Forest in 2008, the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club realized the importance of keeping public access open to Naneum Creek basin lands.

"We knew if something wasn't done to somehow acquire the private lands up there for public use, they (Idaho-based Western Pacific Timber) had plans to sell off their checkerboard ownership to private owners," said Bill Essman, club board member and former president, recently. "What little public access there was would then be closed off completely."

The land swap between the timber company and the state Department of Natural Resources in 2008 consolidated DNR ownership in the Naneum forest and greatly reduced the checkerboard ownership pattern that makes land and wildlife management difficult.

State Department of Fish and Wildlife lands also were involved in a later, larger swap.

Although individual field and stream club members may have differing views on the specific uses and plans for the 131,000-acre Naneum forest, Essman said the club's overall concern always was that the public's access for recreation be maintained.

In late April, the DNR kicked off a year-long planning process for the Naneum Ridge State Forest, researching what plants, wildlife and topography exist, along with how the public now uses the land.

The goal is to bring diverse recreational interests together, along with adjacent property owners, to agree on a plan for the forest's use and preservation for the next 20 years. Planners also want to look at possible improvements for recreation in the future.

Big fear

Lee Davis, president of the club, said the nonprofit club put its money where its mouth was by donating \$5,000 to the DNR to help pay for research, appraisals, surveying and legal work associated with the land swap.

"The DNR and fish and wildlife (department) really didn't have much money available to do all that was needed," Davis said recently. "We and other a lot of other groups knew we had to step up and help."

The club also put up another \$5,000 and challenged other private outdoor groups to match it. A total of \$15,000 went to DNR.

"Our big fear, of course, was if there was no swap, Western Timber would sell its Naneum land for rural housing development," Davis said. "This area is such a beautiful area, and important to deer and elk herds and other wildlife. There was the threat we'd lose the chance to put the lands into public trust."

The DNR's Naneum lands straddle the Kittitas-Chelan county line, with about 71,000 acres on the Kittitas County side.

Former Ellensburg-area DNR employee George Shelton was the main coordinator of the huge land swap, which included trading lands between the DNR and wildlife department to better consolidate their holdings, making them contiguous for efficient management.

Shelton recalls the nonprofit Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation donated the equivalent of \$200,000 to the swap costs, much of it made up of in-kind services such as mailings, printing and others.

Support for the swap also came from the Yakama Nation, Audubon chapters, the Nature Conservancy, the Wildlife Foundation and a host of other outdoor and conservation groups.

Part of the process

Davis said the in-depth planning process, now under way, is the next, crucial step now that the land is in public ownership.

"We (the field and stream club) want to be part of guiding the process of deciding on how that beautiful area can be used wisely for years and years to come," Davis said. "I believe (the club) doesn't want to see the elk there to be pushed away by unwise uses."

Essman, also a retired state wildlife department enforcement officer, said the Naneum Creek drainage basin is an extremely popular and scenic area for outdoor recreationists starting about 15 miles northeast of Ellensburg.

It also takes in parts of Cooke, Coleman, and Wilson creek drainages that can be fished, as well as beaver ponds. It's a summer area for elk, as well as an elk calving area.

"It has nearly every type of outdoor experience you could want," Essman said.

There's the scenic vista all around, starting at an elevation of about 2,500 feet going to more than 7,000 feet, Essman said. As one hikes, mountain bikes or rides on a horse uphill, the surrounding area goes from a shrub-steppe habitat to sub-alpine pine forests.

Access questions

One of the big issues facing the planning process will be the level of public access, Essman said.

Unofficial access points cross private lands, which the landowners, at this time, are not completely blocking, he said. That access is only by non-motorized means.

Colockum Pass Road, on the east end of the Naneum is the one public access point that also allows access to the state green dot roads for motorized use, he said.

Most use the closer, private access points for non-motorized use, Essman said, and utilize the many closed logging roads for hiking, biking and horseback riding.

In winter, the area is used by snowmobilers.

"There's a lot at stake in figuring out access," Essman said. "More access is needed, but how much? What's needed to be worked out with the private landowners? There's a lot of questions."

Essman, speaking only for himself and not for the club, said he prefers to not see more roads or new trails in the Naneum, as the closed logging roads are enough.

He also would prefer not to see new campsites put in or a central parking area. Essman believes the area is mostly adequate for recreationists. Many individual, dispersed campsites have been maintained by campers through the years.

"I really don't want to see the Naneum lose its unique qualities with an overload," Essman said.

Naneum Ridge planning

For information on the state Department of Natural Resource's planning for Naneum Ridge State Forest or to become a member of a citizens' planning committee:

— Go to

www.dnr.wa.gov/RecreationEducation/Topics/RecreationPlanning/Pages/amp_rec_naneum_rec_planning.aspx

— Contact Mike Williams, the the DNR's southeast region recreation manager in Ellensburg, at 509-925-0973 or email naneumridgerecplan@dnr.wa.gov.

— Contact DNR state recreation planner Dana Leavitt at 360-902-1606 or email dana.leavitt@dnr.wa.gov.

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