

Governor's 2011-13 budget moves State Parks off general fund tax, supports user-based fees to keep parks operating

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

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The start of the 2011 legislative session finds State Parks at a crossroads, as the State Parks Department potentially moves from an agency that relies on general fund state tax dollars to one that may rely primarily on user fees. In response to the state budget crisis, the Governor's budget makes dramatic reductions in basic health, social and education programs and in the mix proposes a reduction of 70 percent of the agency's general fund tax support in the 2011-13 biennium, which begins July 1, 2011. This would leave \$20 million in one-time tax support to help the agency transition to a funding base built on new user fees. Under the proposed changes, in 2013-15, there would be no general fund tax support, and State Parks would rely on user fees alone. Faced with the prospect of losing tax support for parks operations, the Parks Commission said they believe that user-based fees are the best and fairest option they have to operate the park system, because it relies upon those who use the parks to pay for them. As part of this effort, State Parks, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and Department of Natural Resources are exploring the idea of charging a reasonable fee for a single permit that would provide access to state parks and recreation lands. If the Legislature includes the permit/fee in its final budget this spring, one model being considered would enable vehicle owners to buy their recreation permit at reduced cost when they renew their vehicle license tabs through the Department of Licensing. Without the permit/ fee in the next biennium, parks all over the state could be reduced to zero service.