

2013: Big Birthday, Big Budget Woes for WA State Parks

Local News

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ELMA, Wash. - The Washington State Parks system has its 100th birthday this year, and park workers are hoping the occasion will help rally public support.

The future of 116 state parks is up in the air, with budget cuts that already have eliminated some jobs, shifted full-time workers to part-time and left a maintenance backlog of \$100 million.

Gov. Chris Gregoire has recommended \$19 million from the General Fund to shore up the parks. Without that funding, predictions are grim, says Brian Yearout, president of the Washington Federation of State Employees Local 1466, the union that represents the park workers.

"What they've said is that you can't just close parks. It would have to be a combination of park closures, seasonal closures, campground closures, reduction in services. The initial numbers they're rolling out are between 40 and 70 parks would have to close."

Yearout says state parks boost local economies by attracting visitors and by using local workers for construction and maintenance. The state park system maintains more than 700 historic structures as well as trail systems, campsites, and boat ramps, he says.

It will be up to the Legislature to decide whether to accept the governor's recommendation.

State parks have gotten some funding from the Discover Pass, a user fee created in 2011 to replace

revenue lost to budget cuts, but Yearout says it hasn't taken off the way they had hoped.

"I don't think we ever imagined it would be quite this bad - but we probably should have. But what we didn't take into account is that a program like this takes two, three, sometimes four seasons to stabilize and get to a level where you can actually project, year after year, what that revenue stream's going to be."

State parks receive 84 percent of the Discover Pass revenue, and 17 "friends" groups help with maintenance and fundraising for certain parks around the state. Volunteers already put in an estimated 280,000 hours a year for the park system. Those park-system "friends" groups are listed online at parks.wa.gov/volunteers/friends.