

# Tree-thinning project good for inmates, forest

[Becky Kramer](#) The Spokesman-Review



Tyler Tjomsland photo

**Darin Glassburn, a logger with Airway Heights Corrections Center, sizes up a tree in Riverside State Park on Thursday before cutting it down with the assistance of other inmates. The thinning yields winter firewood distributed to needy families through SNAP.**

Toppling trees at Riverside State Park is helping create a healthier forest of native ponderosa pines.

The thinning project is also providing work experience for 50 inmates from Airway Heights Corrections Center while producing winter firewood for low-income families.

Trees came crashing down last week as inmate crews culled spindly pines from dense stands along the Spokane River, creating openings that should increase growth rates for the remaining trees. About 21 acres are targeted for thinning near Plese Flats. The logging will produce about 500 cords of firewood.

“We’re getting people trained; reducing idleness; getting wood to the needy; and we’re lowering fire risk,” said Risa Klemme, a corrections center spokeswoman.

A \$3,000 grant from the Washington Department of Natural Resources is paying for the project, which also involves State Parks and SNAP’s energy assistance program, which delivers the firewood to families. Inmates are paid between 42 cents and 62 cents per hour for the thinning.

“It’s a chance to get inmates outside the gate, to get a little freedom and help out the community,” said Darin Glassburn, 43, one of the inmate workers.

Aside from the red shirts identifying them as offenders, the inmate laborers looked like typical loggers. They wore heavy leather boots, ear protection and hard hats. During a break, they sharpened chain-saw blades.

The inmates go through an extensive screening before they can take part in forestry jobs, said Patrick McCarren, Airway Heights correctional specialist.

Glassburn, for instance, is part of a firefighting crew at Airway Heights Corrections Center. He and his crew members passed state-mandated training and they’re looking forward to fighting wildfires this summer. Cutting down trees helps them hone their woods skills, Glassburn said.

“I like the fresh air. They put a lot of trust in us and I like that idea,” said Shawn Grenzebach, 43, who is part of the same firefighting crew.

The inmates are also getting work experience, said Charles Colgive, 30, another inmate crew member. “It can be something on our résumé when we exit,” he said.

After several weeks of rain showers, the inmates labored under sunny skies Thursday. Mourning doves cooed in the park, wildflowers bloomed underfoot and a breeze stirred the treetops. Among the pines the inmates left standing was a snag with a nest of fledgling pygmy nuthatches. The birds flitted around the tree, tiny but vocal.

“Offenders can have a very compassionate side to them, especially when they’re away from the business of prison,” Klemme said.

When they’ve finished serving their sentences, inmates who’ve worked on forestry and firefighting crews tend to integrate more easily back into society, she added. The jobs require a strong work ethic and the ability to take orders from authority figures. Communication skills and teamwork are also vital.

“Teamwork is something that you and I take for granted, but it’s not natural for people in prison, who are used to looking out for themselves,” Klemme said.

Riverside State Park benefits from the inmate labor, said Brian Frahm, a park ranger. The park covers 10,000 acres and the sheer size makes it difficult to keep up on the forestry work, he said.

Historic photos show open, parklike stands of ponderosa pines, thinned by creeping fires that burned through the stands about once per decade. Park visitors have become accustomed to seeing thickets of trees. That’s not a natural condition.

Some park visitors question the thinning operations. “You’re ruining our forests by taking out all the trees,” they tell Frahm.

But “the trees themselves are killing each other,” he said. “They’re too close to each other. They’re not getting enough nourishment.”

According to tree-ring counts, the trees felled were 80 to 120 years old. They were skinny with a frizz of green foliage instead of a lush crown. Culling the stands should produce more-robust trees, better adapted to survive droughts and bark beetle outbreaks.

Wider spacing will also create “aerial fire breaks” in the stands, said Guy Gifford, a Department of Natural Resources forester. When treetops touch, a crown fire can blaze quickly through the stands. Since most of the park is surrounded by houses, an uncontrolled fire could spread to residential neighborhoods.

Green logs from the thinning operation are trucked to Airway Heights Corrections Center, where they are dried and split. Ponderosa pine doesn’t burn as hot as Douglas fir or western larch. “You have to feed the fire more frequently,” said Larry Stuckart, SNAP’s energy program administrator. But it still makes acceptable firewood, he said.

If the project produces 500 cords of wood as anticipated, that’s about a two-month supply for 500 families, Stuckart said.

Colgrove, one of the inmate workers, has helped deliver firewood to SNAP clients in the past.

“It was good to know that we were helping people,” he said. “Each person who got the wood was grateful.”