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Christmas trees free to fourth-graders this year

By Craig F. Eisenbeis, Correspondent

There is a new wrinkle to Forest Service Christmas-tree hunts this year. If you happen to be a fourth-grader, your tree permit can be obtained at no cost for this Christmas season. Of course, if you are not a fourth-grader – and don’t know one – your Forest Service Christmas tree permit is still only five dollars.

The free-tree program is an extension of the “Every Kid in a Park” (EKIP) initiative sponsored by the White House. EKIP entitles fourth graders to a free National Park pass, but National Forests are participating, too!

Fourth-graders were targeted for this program because, nationally, fourth grade is the school year in which state history is traditionally taught. As a result, it was felt that EKIP was a good fit for that age group because National Parks are an important part of each state’s heritage.

To claim a free Christmas-tree permit for your fourth-grader, first obtain an EKIP pass, by logging on to www.everykidinapark.gov, then take the pass to a Forest Service office.

With children increasingly tied to urban settings and a society that focuses on the electronic world, the goal of EKIP is to promote young people’s connections with nature and the outdoors. A great way to do that is through the experience of a good old-fashioned family Christmas-tree hunt in a National Forest.

With thousands of acres of National Forest surrounding Sisters, it is easy to make that Christmas-tree experience the centerpiece of a memorable outdoor family event. The first step, of course, is to obtain that Christmas-tree permit from the National Forest Service or one of the other outlets where tree-cutting permits are sold.

For generations, the Christmas tree has been a familiar symbol of the holiday season. Although the celebration of the Christian tradition of Christmas can be traced to the fourth century, Christmas trees as we know them today did not appear until about the sixteenth century. The Christmas-tree tradition is generally considered to have begun in northern Europe, with Germany most often cited as the point of origin.

Most people regard the Christmas tree as a suitable and festive way to celebrate the season. When the first settlers of European descent arrived in Central Oregon in the nineteenth century, obtaining a Christmas tree simply meant going out into the forest, cutting the perfect tree, and bringing it home to decorate. That was traditional then, and it still can be today. So, if your idea of a traditional Christmas does not include one of those artificial trees, people living in Sisters Country have a clear alternative

The Northwest’s Douglas fir tree is commonly considered the nation’s Christmas tree; and, in fact, Northwest Douglas firs are shipped all over the world for use as Christmas trees.

Douglas firs are common in many areas near Sisters, as are many of the true fir species such as noble, white, Pacific silver, and grand firs. In the Sisters area, fir trees are most often found at slightly higher elevations outside of



PHOTO BY CRAIG F. EISENBEIS

Local Christmas tree hunters show off their prize.

town.

Keep in mind that a Forest Service permit is valid only on Forest Service lands, so tree hunters must be certain that the selected tree is not on private land. If unsure, it is a good idea to have a Forest Service map that clearly shows forest boundaries. Other guidelines include selecting a tree that is no more than 12 feet tall. Trees taller than 12 feet require a special permit. The tree selected must be within 15 feet of another tree; so, if the tree is standing alone in an open space, find another tree.

Trees within 150 feet of state highways, picnic areas, campgrounds, or other developed sites should not be cut. Trees within 300 feet of streams and lakes are also off limits.

Up to five tree permits are permitted per household. Since the most suitable trees are usually found in higher elevations, it is always a bit of a balancing act as Christmas approaches because the snow line is also falling. If the Christmas-tree hunt is delayed too long, the best trees may become inaccessible.

Complete copies of Christmas-tree-hunting guidelines and regulations can be obtained wherever tree permits are sold. Forest Service personnel will also provide guidance on areas where cutting is permitted and where to find particular tree species. The Sisters Ranger District office is located at the corner of Highway 20 and North Pine Street, on the west side of town. For further information call 541-549-7700.

In addition to the Forest Service office, tree permits are also available at Sisters Ace Hardware, Bi-Mart, Sisters Mainline Station, Sisters Rental and the Camp Sherman Store.

Finally, be sure that your Christmas-tree hunt is a safe one; so, be sure you are properly equipped. Children often have a tendency to wander off, so keep a close eye on children while in the woods. If you travel any significant distance from your vehicle, you should be prepared for outdoor winter travel; and remember that winter weather conditions can change rapidly. Also, it is always a good idea to let someone know where you are going and carry appropriate emergency supplies.