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Christmas tree hunting in Sisters Country

— By Craig F. Eisenbeis, Correspondent —

Although we saw the first signs of Christmas creeping into our lives even before Halloween arrived, the Christmas season is now officially headed into full swing. And, for many of us, one of the first things that comes to mind is finding a Christmas tree.

Oregon is, by far, the nation's largest producer of commercial Christmas trees, nearly doubling the production of its nearest rival, North Carolina. Still, news stories currently circulating warn of a 2019 Christmas tree shortage and skyrocketing prices. Purportedly, shortages stem primarily from recent droughts and reduced plantings at the depths of the recession a decade ago.

Yet, those of us living in Sisters Country are surrounded by potential Christmas trees. So, what do we have to fear from a tree shortage? The answer, of course, is "nothing!" Each year, the U. S. Forest Service throws open its gates for private Christmas tree hunters; and there is no better way to obtain your Christmas tree than by staging a family hunt for a wild Christmas tree in our neighboring National Forest.

The first step, of course, is to obtain a Christmas tree permit from the local Forest Service office or one of several commercial outlets. "When we think of holiday traditions, this is a great one," says Cassidy Kern, public affairs specialist for the Deschutes National Forest. "I have a 4-year-old son; and we're already talking about making some hot chocolate, taking along the sled and making a morning of it."

For many Central Oregon residents, a forest hunt for a Christmas tree is a long-standing family tradition, with a hint of adventure. "Since we've had a relatively light snow year to this point," Kern noted, "many areas remain accessible now that, in years past, would have been blocked in by drifts, and you would've had to snowshoe or ski in. That's pretty tough for little kiddos, so my family has gone pretty close to main roads. This year I look forward to being prepared—but also perhaps being a little more adventurous about where we're able to go...."

The culture of tree hunting in our local forests is hardly a secret. According to Kern, "The Deschutes National Forest sold more permits in 2018 than any other forest in the Pacific Northwest; nearly 12,000 Christmas tree permits were sold both by the agency and by our

many vendor/retailers who partner with us on this program.

"While 12,000 trees seems like a lot, this sort of thinning of smaller-diameter trees helps the dominant trees in a stand grow taller because they don't have to compete as much for the available resources (sun, water, etc). This is why we ask that you look for a tree in a thick stand; removing a tree to enjoy in your home actually improves the health of our forest."

Christmas tree permits cost \$5 each, and up to five permits are permitted per household. The Northwest's Douglas fir tree is commonly considered the nation's Christmas tree. In fact, Oregon's Douglas fir Christmas trees are shipped all over the world. Douglas firs are common in many areas near Sisters, as are true fir species such as noble, white, Pacific silver, red, and grand firs.

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. Trees selected for cutting must be at least 150 feet from state highways, picnic areas, campgrounds, or other developed sites. Trees within 300 feet of streams and lakes are also off limits.

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 to be cut must also be within 15 feet of another tree; so, if the tree is standing alone in an open space, find another tree.

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 (Chevron) Station, Sisters Rental, and the Camp Sherman Store. For the first time, this year permits can also be obtained on-line under the Open Forest

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The 24th annual festival will be held September 11-13, 2020, and will feature more than 40 acts on 11 stages spread throughout the town. Help your loved ones discover — or rediscover — a musical experience like no other, one that has garnered Sisters an international reputation.

Visit www.sistersfolkfestival.org for more information, and be sure to sign up for our newsletter to stay up to date with our concerts and events all year long!

