



UI Extension Forestry Information Series II

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The People's Tree: U.S Capitol Christmas Tree Comes from Idaho

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For the past 52 years, a Christmas tree has graced the West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol for the holiday season. It all began back in 1964 when a live Christmas tree was planted on the west lawn of the U.S. Capitol. Even though this first tree didn't survive past its third season, the idea behind it stuck. Since 1970, the USDA Forest Service has selected and delivered a handpicked tree to represent the country as the U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree in Washington D.C. This year, the Payette National Forest, in partnership with the nonprofit organization Choose Outdoors, is providing and delivering this special gift from Idaho to Washington, D.C.

A gift from Idahoans to the people of America.

The U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree is no ordinary specimen. This year, the tree-hunting work was delegated to smokejumpers from the USDA Forest Service's McCall Smokejumper Base - believed to be a

first for these elite wildland firefighters. The mission? To find one perfect tree among the 2.3 million acres that make up the Payette National Forest - a tree that had to be between 60-85 feet tall, have rich green foliage, good needle retention and have that quintessential cylindrical shape we all associate with the perfect Christmas tree. AND it had to be located in an area accessible to a crane, semi-truck and trailer.

After several months of diligent searching the mission was accomplished. The chosen tree is an 80-foot tall Engelmann spruce that is 25-feet across at the base and weighs in at 12,500 pounds. The tree was harvested on November 2nd at the Little Ski Hill near McCall, ID, using a cross cut saw to honor traditional skills still used in wilderness areas. Lifted onto a trailer by a crane, the chosen one was gently placed into a specially constructed cradle and covered with a tarp with a window at the end so people can see the tree. The shining red truck and trailer have been



The 80-foot Engelmann spruce was harvested using a cross cut saw to honor traditional skills still used in Wilderness areas.

Photo from the US Capitol Christmas Tree Facebook page.



A crane was used to place the tree in a specially build cradle for its long journey to Washington D.C.

Photo from the US Capitol Christmas Tree Facebook page.



The shining red truck and trailer have been decorated with the U.S. Capitol Tree logo, as well as sponsor logos and signatures from thousands of well-wishers that have come to each stop to see this special tree.

Photo by Yvonne Barkley

decorated with the U.S. Capitol Tree logo, as well as sponsor logos and signatures from thousands of well-wishers that have come to each stop to see this special tree. Each evening, USDA Forest Service and Choose Outdoors employees water the tree using a special bladder that holds 60 gallons of water. The tree usually takes up between 15-20 gallons per day, depending on the weather.

In addition to the U.S. Capitol Christmas tree, Idaho is sending 70 companion Christmas trees that will be placed in federal offices across Washington D.C. Grown by Forever Green Tree Farm and The Sandpoint Ranch, both located in north Idaho, these companion trees are traveling separately to our Nation's Capitol.

A tree wouldn't be a Christmas tree without ornaments.

Once the tree is in position, the U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree, as well as the 70 companion trees, will be decorated with over 18,000 hand-made

ornaments. The Payette National Forest worked with local artists and organizations to develop prototypes, incorporating state symbols, landscapes, wildlife, and symbols of the many heritages and cultures of Idaho into their designs. From classrooms to nursing homes, Winter Carnivals to County Fairs, Idahoans from every corner of the state used these prototypes as inspiration to create their own personal contributions.

"The People's Tree"

What makes this tree "The People's Tree" is the extraordinary effort and support it receives as it travels across the country and the connections it builds between people. Accompanied by ambassadors from the Payette National Forest and Choose Outdoors for the journey to the U.S. Capitol, the tree will travel approximately 4,000 miles and make stops in 27 communities in eight states before reaching its final destination late in November.

Tradition dictates that one youth from the state providing the tree serve as the Tree Lighting Helper who, along with the Speaker of the House and other officials, formally illuminates the tree during this year's December 6th ceremony on West Lawn of the U.S. Capitol.

This fall, Senator Mike Crapo sponsored a statewide, multimedia contest open to Idaho students in grades 1 through 6. Entries had to be original and capture this year's theme - "An Idaho Mountain Gem" - and also highlight the importance of our national forests. Isabella Gerard, a 5th grade student from Boise, was selected from over 200 contest participants.

Isabella's entry, a poem titled "Pristine Idaho Mountains," is based on personal experiences she has had while enjoying nature in the Payette National Forest (see box on next page).

The U.S. Capitol Christmas tree serves as a window through which the rest of the country can see the interconnectedness of the Idaho communities we call home and the natural landscapes that surround us. Our national forests not only provide clean water and air, wildlife habitat, outstanding scenic wonders, world-class recreational opportunities and economic opportunities, but also sustain and inspire us.

U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree page: <http://www.capitolchristmastree.com/tree.html>

*Pristine Idaho Mountains
Isabella Gerard*

*"Idaho is blessed with beautiful mountains and immense forests.
In the winter the mountains and forests are covered with snow,
making the landscape look like never ending clouds with skyscrapers covered in snow.*

Big tall trees.

Beautiful to look at.

Amazing to see.

Pristine mountains.

As I sit in the forest I find peace.

*As the wind blows through the tall ponderosa pines I feel a sense of solitude and peacefulness.
To someone that has never been in an Idaho forest, it is hard to understand the size and beauty.
If only you could be here looking at these beautiful Idaho scenes."*

The U.S. Capitol Christmas Tree made a 4,000 mile journey from Idaho to Washington, D.C., making stops in 27 communities across 8 will be lit on December 6th, 2016. Please check your local listings for the time and channel.



Cascade, ID.

Photo from the US Capitol Christmas Tree Facebook page.



Nez Perce, ID.

Photo from the US Capitol Christmas Tree Facebook page.



Moscow, ID.

Photo by Yvonne Barkley.



Coeur d'Alene, ID.

Photo from the US Capitol Christmas Tree Facebook page.

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