

Changes to the Elk Meadow Park Dog Off-Leash Area

Users of the Elk Meadow Park Dog Off-Leash Area were made aware of some Open Space changes being made through the posting of signs within the Park. The activity that has many people's concern is general park management that includes responsible forestry and directing people to appropriate areas of the park. Of the comments we received, most fell within the topics of Trail Access and Forest Management. So all users may have the same information, we've addressed these issues below:

Trail Access:

"No longer able to use the "South Hill" that my big breed dogs need to use to exercise." Unknown

"I agree that from looking at the plan, the trails have gone rampant. Rein in, but leave us some joy in taking our dogs for a pretty hike." J.S., Evergreen

"I hate what is being done. I live within walking distance to the park and now that the trail up from Stagecoach (near Quarter Horse) is closed, I can no longer walk into the park." K.W., Evergreen.

"Don't close off existing trails until you have created the new trails." G.W., Evergreen

First, let's define social trails. These paths have not been constructed by Open Space staff, but are created by repeated off-trail activity. Sometimes social trails (a.k.a. undesignated/unmanaged trails) just don't work where they have been created. When park visitors wander off the hardened trails, it creates social trails that increase erosion and allow for weed infestations. These social trails have also directed users to private property where trespass occurs by both people and their dogs. These social trails have created a web of unsustainable paths that have a damaging effect upon the land, vegetation and habitat. Regarding the areas where social trails have been covered by timbers/branches/slash, this is a physical impediment to restrict public use of an area or path that was not intended to be used as a trail.

Although these actions aren't always popular, we take such action with Jefferson County citizens and park users in mind. To prevent people from trespassing – many times without their knowledge, Open Space is reclaiming these social trails, or user-created trails, that lead off the park onto private property. Open Space is also closing some of the trails that lead visitors and their dogs to the stream where they worsen the erosion and possibly contaminate water run-off.

The steepness of some slopes compromise the feasibility of constructing trails that can be maintained and don't increase erosion. Next year, our crews will be determining final trail alignments at the Dog Off-Leash Area and begin work on constructing and improving those trails we feel are appropriate to the landscape and our ability to maintain them for the safety of our visitors. While the trails are plentiful in the Dog Off-leash Area, only one was developed by staff, that being the ADA accessible segment from the parking lot to the fenced dog park. The remaining trails were created by park users.

Open Space is pleased that so many people have come to love and appreciate the Dog Off-Leash Area at Elk Meadow and we take the management and balance of multiple objectives very seriously. We also encourage all our park visitors to accept their responsibility to care for the parks as well by observing and following our rules and regulations. Once formal trails have been completed, we encourage you to stay on trails constructed or improved by staff for everyone's safety and the sustainability of the natural setting.

Forest Management:

"I think the fire hazard is increased with all the dead tree limbs and pine needles left behind." S.P. Evergreen

"They cut down trees and stacked logs...litter the hill sides with thrash...It really looked more like vandalism than forestry." J.H., Evergreen

*"The trees were ripped out of the ground by massive machinery, gouging ravines into the earth."
J.S., Evergreen*

The mission of Open Space is to preserve open space lands and natural and cultural resources, and to provide for quality park and recreational experiences. Preserving the natural resources include activities such as forest and vegetation management (thinning of trees to increase the health of remaining forest), controlling weeds, minimizing erosion where possible and maintaining habitat for all sorts of wildlife.

Forest management is very important to achieve a healthy forest. Human occupation in and around forests no longer allow for the natural cycle of wildfire to create a balance. Too many trees create an unhealthy forest where all stands begin to suffer and become targets of pine beetle and other disease. Thinning removes weakened trees allowing the remainder to be more vibrant and able to ward off disease and pests. These activities also mitigate wildfire danger by providing a more defensible area for fire fighters. By opening the canopy, grasses and forbs can take hold and return vital elements to the forest floor. Scattered slash helps to hold soils in place, snags provide cover for small mammals and nesting places for birds, decay returns nutrients to the soil. Staff spent considerable time in thinning trees within the Dog Off-Leash Area and the timber was made available to the public as low cost fuel wood in an annual permit sale that occurred during September and early October.

Yes, trees were cut, slash was on the ground and our equipment paths were noticeable. But the job is not yet done. Once the natural resource team finishes treating an area, we devote time to do any necessary reclamation. We have found that after two growing seasons, these areas recover to the point that it is difficult to tell they were treated. In time you will find an increase in grass cover, new types of flowers and healthy mature trees with plenty of young trees growing on the forest floor.

We do our best to be good stewards of the natural resources within our jurisdiction, including Elk Meadow Park and the Dog Off-Leash Area. Help us to be good neighbors to the private property owners around us and trespassing will not be tolerated. Acknowledge and adhere to our regulations posted at the Park; they are there for you and your pet's safety and the continued access to this popular community facility.

We hope you and your dog continue to enjoy Elk Meadow Park and use the Off-Leash Area responsibly.

