

Vast storm damage to parks in Northwest

By Shannon Dininny, Associated Press Writer

YAKIMA, Wash. — Hundreds of trees blown down by wind exceeding 100 mph. Roads and campgrounds washed away by swollen rivers. Damages still unknown to be repaired on backcountry trails.

Winter storms have devastated the Pacific Northwest's popular national parks each of the past two years, causing damage that has run into the millions of dollars.

After last year's enormous repair effort in nearby Mount Rainier National Park, the major repairs this year are taking place in Olympic National Park, which offers visitors miles of Pacific coast in addition to craggy alpine peaks and forested lowlands.

But while Olympic is the focus of the major storm repairs this year, teams also have new damage to fix at Mount Rainier and North Cascades national parks, hopefully before summer visitors arrive.

"It starts to kind of become a blur," said Sue McGill, acting superintendent at Olympic, which draws an estimated 3 million visitors a year.

This season's biggest storm struck in the first week of December, pouring more than 10 inches of rain on some areas in 24 hours. Two people were killed, dozens were stranded in flooded homes, thousands were left without power.

The deluge even overwhelmed Olympic National Park, accustomed to receiving as much as 14 feet of rain annually. Campgrounds flooded, slides swept away stretches of road and wind up to 100 mph blew down hundreds of trees along a single 2-mile stretch of the scenic North Fork Road. Some areas may remain closed for the near future.

Total damages have been estimated at more than \$4 million. That's on top of the \$5 million still being spent to fix damage caused by last year's storms.

Repair work continues at Mount Rainier National Park, the crown jewel of the Pacific Northwest, where damage from a storm in 2006 was estimated at about \$24 million. The 2007 storm narrowly missed the park, Superintendent Dave Uberuaga said.

The park will reopen its popular Paradise Inn at the foot of Mount Rainier in May following a two-year refurbishment project, Uberuaga said. Workers struggled to stay on schedule this winter after 162 inches of snow fell in just 10 days.

"It's been a challenge getting up to Paradise. We lost more days because of the snow than we did last year because of the flood," Uberuaga said.

Just south of the Canadian border, 684,000-acre North Cascades National Park has reopened miles of trails that had been impassable since the 2006 storm. Campgrounds also have been repaired, Superintendent Chip Jenkins said.

Several conservation and recreation groups banded together following the 2006 storm to recruit volunteers and raise money for repairs at the region's parks.

"Our park system is the most recognized park system in the world, and these are environmentally important areas that need to be protected and preserved for current and future generations," said David Graves, northwest field representative for the National Parks Conservation Association.



Andrew Pratt, of Quigg Bros. Construction, based in Aberdeen, Wash., uses backhoe Friday, March 7, 2008, to build a rock wall on a bank of the Quinault River where it washed out a portion of North Shore Road in Olympic National Park in Washington state. Even though volunteer crews are making the park the focus of their efforts this year -- joining workers at Mount Rainier and North Cascades national parks in their storm clean-up efforts -- summer visitors will still have to sidestep some storm damage. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)