

Missoulian

Ethics review: Forest Service nixes night's stay at ski cabin as raffle prize

By PERRY BACKUS Ravalli Republic | Posted: Wednesday, February 15, 2012 2:00 pm

HAMILTON - For the past 19 years, the Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club has offered a night's stay at a Forest Service cabin and a gourmet meal as the grand prize of its annual fundraiser.

All of the money raised by the raffle was spent on the club's volunteer efforts to care for the popular trail system at the top of Chief Joseph Pass.

On Feb. 2, seven days before the winning raffle tickets were to be drawn, Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest officials informed the club that it could no longer offer the Gordon Reese Cabin as a prize.

The USDA Office of Ethics in Arlington, Va., had ruled that the use of the cabin as a prize was an ethics infraction, officials said.

In a letter, Wisdom District Ranger Russ Riebe said while he strongly supports the club's work to provide winter recreational opportunities at Chief Joseph, the department had determined that use of the government property associated with the fundraiser was not allowed.

"I regret any inconvenience this may cause," Riebe wrote.

In a letter back to the agency, ski club president Michael Hoyt said the group felt like it had been blindsided.

The club had already advertised the prize and sold thousands of tickets for the 19th annual event and the agency's decision had been made without any opportunity for the club to comment or consider the efforts it has made to establish and maintain the popular trail system over almost two decades, Hoyt said.

The Chief Joseph Ski Trail System was established in 1990 after the club's first members agreed to maintain and groom the trails at no expense to the federal government. All of the trails are open to the public.

Every year, the club invests more than \$10,000 in volunteer time and cash outlays to maintain and groom the trails.

The Gordon Reese Cabin was conceived, designed and built by the cross-country ski club as a warming hut - and as part of the trail system.

The club raised more than \$100,000 in cash and materials to construct the popular cabin, which is now on the agency's rental program. Its members volunteered more than 5,500 hours to build it over a two-year period. Club members continue to volunteer time in the summer to maintain the building and fill its basement with firewood.

In addition, the club prints 4,000 copies of ski trail maps which are free to the public each year and offers a day of free instruction to anyone who wants to attend.

"With this history, I ask you, what are the ethics, where is the fairness for the Forest Service delivering such an unexpected and dictatorial command to cease and desist at virtually the last minute?" Hoyt wrote. "My question is rhetorical, of course, because the Forest Service's actions in this matter are grossly unfair and highly unethical."

Ski club board member George Corn said he is most frustrated because the club was offered no opportunity to respond before the decision was handed down.

"Now we've got an uphill battle facing us without the Forest Service taking the time to hear our side of the facts," Corn said. "This isn't over. I don't think we could sit still on this."

Forest Service ethics specialist Jack Fisher of Arlington, Va., told Riebe in an email that the agency has a duty to protect its employees from criminal and administrative sanction as a result of ethics infractions.

The agency did not do a good job of ensuring the agreement with the club was ethically sound, Fisher said.

"I attribute this to the fact that 20 years ago the agency did not have a dedicated ethics office, nor were our agreements/partnership folks as ethically savvy as they are today," he wrote.

Neither Fisher nor Riebe returned calls from the Ravalli Republic.

Patty Bates oversees the recreation program on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest. She said the club has been an "amazing partner" and the agency has been as supportive as possible.

"And now we've learned that this is something that can't be done," Bates said. "For the last 19 years, we didn't know that. ... Now we want to concentrate on a solution. What are we going to do next year?"

Bates said no one is sure who lodged the complaint that started the investigation.

"We don't know who it came from," she said. "It could be a whistle blower. It could be a member of the public. Once it came to our attention, then it had to be dealt with."

The issue has created some dissension within the club over how Hoyt and other officers handled disseminating the information.

The club met last Thursday and drew the winners of the raffle. Members were notified the next day in an email about the controversy.

Gordon Reese - namesake of the Gordon Reese Cabin - drew the winning tickets. He is discouraged that he and other members weren't told the cabin's use was being withdrawn.

"In my opinion, to not tell the club members about this was ethically challenged," Reese said. "They should have just stood up there and told the club there was a problem."

On Thursday night, Hoyt said he was still hopeful that something might be negotiated with the Forest Service. He said the issue has been kept quiet in an effort to try to ensure that "the Forest Service doesn't end up with egg on their face ... I really thought we would be able to work out something."

Hoyt said he has contacted the raffle ticket winner and that person has agreed to accept an alternative.

"We have lots of friends who like what we do," Hoyt said. "They come out of the woodwork when there is a crisis to help us out."

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