

Missoulian

SKIING

Bitterroot ski club to ask USFS chief to intervene in cabin dispute



AUGUST 08, 2012 9:15 PM • BY PERRY BACKUS
RAVALLI REPUBLIC

HAMILTON – The Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club will ask the U.S. Forest Service chief to intervene in a dispute over how the cabin it built at Chief Joseph Pass is used.

Its members hope to be joined by Montana's congressional delegation and people who use the trails and warming hut at the popular cross-country ski destination.

Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest

Supervisor Dave Myers said Wednesday he plans to sign an administrative decision this week that will cut the number of free nights offered to the club in half.

Myers said his decision follows complaints from the public that the club was receiving preferential treatment.

Club members say the cabin was built with the understanding that it would remain free to the public and the agency's move to rent it in winter months is a violation of that original agreement.

The issue flared last February when Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest officials informed the club it could no longer offer the Gordon Reese Cabin as fundraising prize days before the winning raffle tickets were to be drawn.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Ethics in Arlington, Va., had ruled the use of the cabin as a prize was an ethics violation.

The ethics office also ruled the club's method of allocating its host night to club members was viewed as preferential treatment.

During winter months, volunteer hosts staff the cabin. Half of those host nights are allocated to the club and the other nights are reserved through a call-in system open to the public.

Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest officials now want to cut the club's nights in an effort to offer more opportunity to the general public. The plan calls for placing the open nights on the national reservation system at \$29 per night.

The agency also wants to require the club's volunteers to complete safety training exercises before doing any grooming or other work.

Ski club president Mike Hoyt said members have attempted to negotiate with the agency since February, but hit an impasse after a series of unproductive meetings.

Under a Freedom of Information Act request, the club asked for the agency's file that documents the history of the cabin and interaction between the two groups.

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.

Every year since, club volunteers have used equipment purchased by the club to maintain about nearly 17 miles of trails open free to the public. The club invests more than \$10,000 a year in volunteer time and cash outlays to accomplish that task.

The Gordon Reese Cabin was conceived, designed and built in 2001 by the cross-country ski club as a warming hut on the trail system after a communitywide effort that raised more \$100,000 in cash and materials.

Club members said the Forest Service made an agreement at that point that it's now attempting to back away from.

"This was all built with the notion of free public use," said club member George Corn. "The club did all this work and volunteered all this time and now the Forest Service has literally broken its faith with the club and the public."

Under the terms of the new agreement, Corn said the agency is asking the club to cover all the costs, while it takes the profit.

"It's created a mockery of the whole nature of volunteerism," he said.

Patty Bates oversees the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest recreation program.

"We want to continue our partnership with the club while at the same time continue with our objective to provide a great winter opportunity for the whole public," Bates said.

The proposed changes would provide additional opportunities for everyone who wants to stay there in the winter, she said.

Bates said there is high demand for the nights open to the public. When the current call-in reservation system opens, all of those nights are usually filled within the first three hours.

Under the Forest Service proposal, the agency would reserve 30 free nights through the ski season for club members to perform heavy maintenance at the cabin, including general cleaning, cleaning the toilet, removing snow and trash, and refilling the drinking water supply.

The club has traditionally had about 60 nights to accomplish those tasks.

Corn said the agency has no idea of the scope of activities that club members undertake during their stay at the cabin. Those include everything from helping someone get their skis on correctly to making sure the fire doesn't get the warming hut too hot for visitors.

Hoyt said club members feel a sense of responsibility when it comes their turn to be the cabin's caretaker.

"We feel responsibility for it because we built it," Hoyt said.

Corn said the agency did not have to take this course. The former Ravalli County attorney said the legal opinion issued by the agency's ethics office was flawed and not binding on the forest supervisor.

In a 13-page opinion, Corn wrote that the congressional delegation "should find it appalling that the Forest Service would willingly use a bogus legal opinion to bludgeon a group of volunteers in order to upset an arrangement that has worked so well for the public for almost a quarter of a century."

Once the complaint was filed, Myers said he didn't have any other choice but to consider it.

"They did build the cabin, but when they built it, it became government property under an agreement with the national forest system," Myers said. "I have to follow the laws and regulations on national Forest Service lands. You can not have preferential treatment."

Myers said he did take the club's concerns into account when writing his decision, including opting not to open the cabin during hunting season.

"The club has great ideas," he said. "We'll continue to support them."

At this point, Hoyt said the club is uncertain of its next move.

When the first news reports about the issue were generated in February, the club received a lot of support from around the state.

"People were ready to write letters of support to newspapers or call up their congressman," he said. "People really care about this place."

Initially, Hoyt said the club hoped that negotiation would work.

"It seems like we've reached the end of the road with these folks," he said.

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