



Bitterroot ski club ends volunteer work at Chief Joseph after dispute with FS



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HAMILTON – The Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club will no longer offer its volunteer services to operate and maintain the cabin it donated to the U.S. Forest Service at Chief Joseph Pass in 2001.

The announcement came days after the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest supervisor signed a decision that officially put the cabin up for rent on a national reservation system.

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

In an Aug. 14 letter to Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest supervisor Dave Myer, the club's president, Michael Hoyt, said the decision to rent the cabin broke faith with the volunteers who gave their time to establish the popular ski area and cabin for free public use.

Hoyt called Myer's decision a "slap in the face" to the club's members, the people who contributed to the construction of the cabin and all users of the Chief Joseph Ski Area.

"The quarter century of work that our all-volunteer club has invested in making the Chief Joseph Ski Area one of the most visited and successful cross-country ski areas in the state of Montana is obviously of no import and was ignored by you as a means toward enriching your agency and its career bureaucrats," Hoyt wrote.

Since the cabin was constructed, club members have volunteered to do weekly cleanings, remove trash, pack in water, cut wood, shovel snow and maintain toilets at the cabin, as well as other duties. In return, they were allowed to spend the night there.

In his letter, Hoyt said those chores will now be the responsibility of the Forest Service.

"However, it is difficult to believe the \$2,400 (120 nights at \$20 per night) the Forest Service will receive from renting the cabin will come close to covering the cost of the above tasks, which over the last decade have required several hundred hours per year to complete."

The controversy over the club's involvement at the cabin flared last February when Forest Service officials told the club it could no longer offer a night's stay at the cabin as a fundraising prize – days before the winning raffle tickets were drawn.

Agency officials said the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Ethics in Virginia had ruled that use of the cabin as a prize was an ethics violation. That office also questioned the club's method of allocating its host nights to its club members, saying it could be viewed as preferential treatment.

The cabin was conceived and constructed in 2001 by the club as a warming hut on the trail system after a communitywide effort raised more than \$100,000 in cash and materials.

Club members helped establish the Chief Joseph Ski Trail System in 1990 after its first members agreed to maintain and groom the trails at no expense to the federal government. The club continues to invest about \$10,000 a year in volunteer time and cash to maintain that trail system for the public.

In his letter to the club notifying it of the decision, Myers said he appreciated the time club members have spent working "on the future management of this great winter recreational resource."

In making his decision to place the cabin in the national reservation system, Myers said "it is important for the club to understand that the rental of a government owned facility located on National Forest System land is inherently a government function and that our previous method of reservations and allocation of canceled winter days was not viewed as being equitably distributed to the general public."

"This would continue to be a problem if the National Reservation System is not used," he wrote.

The \$20 nightly rental fee will be returned the Forest and used for operation and maintenance of the ski area and cabin, Myers wrote.

Myers' letter said he was "more than willing" to continue to authorize the club's grooming of the ski trails under a volunteer agreement.

Myers said his "primary consideration is what is of the best interest to the general public for the long-term management of the Chief Joseph Ski Area and cabin. The club has been instrumental from the beginning in providing public services as volunteers and I hope the club continues to do so."

Hoyt said club volunteers want to continue to provide preseason trail preparation and ski season grooming services. The club also wants to continue helping day users of the trail system during ski season.

"Our club wishes to continue a voluntary partnership – although at a much reduced capacity – with the Forest Service to provide a free-use recreational service for citizen use of public lands," Hoyt wrote.

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