



USFS disregards ski club volunteers

1 HOUR AGO • [MISSOULIAN EDITORIAL](#)

First the U.S. Forest Service yanked the rug out from under a dedicated, long-serving group of volunteers when it forbid them from using a night's stay at the Gordon Reese Cabin as the grand prize in their annual fundraiser.

Never mind that these same volunteers had paid for the cabin's construction in the first place and continued to pour countless volunteer hours and thousands of dollars each year into its maintenance. Never mind that a night in a Forest Service cabin had been offered as a prize by the Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club for going on 19 years. Never mind that the Forest Service's Ethics Office in Virginia notified the club of its decision a mere seven days before the winners were due to be drawn – after thousands of tickets had already been sold.

And never mind that the club was given no opportunity to comment on or contest the decision, let alone the option of working with the Forest Service on a mutually agreeable solution.

No, the Forest Service's utter lack of appreciation for the work done by ski club members to enhance the public's use and enjoyment of the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest – that was bad enough.

But last week, it added insult to injury with an announcement that the much-loved Gordon Reese Cabin would no longer be free and open to the public. Instead, it is now part of the agency's national reservation system, and all those who wish to spend a night there must pay \$20 for the privilege – even Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club members who spend their time at the cabin cleaning toilets, shoveling snow, removing trash and performing dozens of other necessary tasks.

It's no wonder the Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club has opted to stop pouring their money and energy into maintaining the cabin. For all their hard work, they've gotten back nothing but heartburn from this agency.

The sad thing is that the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest greatly benefited from this group's involvement, and now it will no longer. And that is a tremendous loss to everyone who enjoys recreating there.

For years, the Bitterroot Cross-County Ski Club has coordinated volunteers and raised money to maintain 24 kilometers of groomed ski trails on Chief Joseph Pass. It maintains these trails using equipment it bought and paid for itself. It offers a day of free instruction, and leads hikes through the trail system during the summer months. Club members even print thousands of ski trail maps for public distribution.

The cabin? That was the brainchild of Bitterroot Cross-County Ski Club members. They raised more than \$100,000 to build it. And they have continued to invest more money and volunteer time every year to maintain the building for public use.

Despite the recent spate of poor form, poor timing and poor communication on the part of the Forest Service, ski club president Michael Hoyt pledged to work on improving the club's relationship with Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest authorities. The Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club created a small committee dedicated exclusively to working with national forest leadership.

Meetings between the two organizations apparently hit a wall. Certainly, club members did not applaud the Beaverhead-Deerlodge's announcement earlier this month that its leadership was seeking to cut down the club's number of "host nights" from 60 a year to 30. And they found no way to work around last week's decision that officially put the Gordon Reese Cabin up for rent on a national reservation system.

It's understandable that this was the last straw for the club – which, by the way, insists that it would still like to offer its all-volunteer services to help maintain recreational use of the area. And it would be completely understandable if other volunteer groups viewed this as a cautionary tale in how big federal agencies can run over small local groups, no matter how much they give or how much good they do.

Hopefully it's not too late for the chief of the Forest Service to intervene. It would help if Montana's congressional delegates would urge such an intervention. And it would help if the many Montanans who support the work done by the Bitterroot Cross-County Ski Club, and all the local organizations like it, would stand up now and demand an end to this nonsense.

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