



Baucus gets involved in ski cabin dispute

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Sen. Max Baucus has asked the chief of the U.S. Forest Service to intervene in an ongoing controversy over the use of a ski cabin at Chief Joseph Pass.

The Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club notified Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest officials last week it would no longer offer volunteer services to operate and maintain the Gordon Reese Cabin.

The club's announcement came days after Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest supervisor Dave Myer signed a decision that put the cabin up for rent this winter on a national reservation system.

Club members say that move violated its longstanding agreement with the agency that the cabin would be open and free to the public in the winter months.

The club has maintained and operated the cabin it donated to the Forest Service in 2001. The club raised more than \$100,000 to build the popular cabin and spends close to \$10,000 a year to groom the trails around it.

In a letter to Forest Service Chief Thomas Tidwell dated Aug. 21, Baucus asked Tidwell to consider the unique nature of the history of the ski club's work to establish the Chief Joseph Ski Trail system and construction of the cabin.

"Given the dedication and sacrifice that ski club members have offered for more than a quarter century, it is unfortunate that a beneficial relationship is being jeopardized by what many would see as rigid bureaucracy," Baucus wrote. "I call on the Forest Service to redouble its efforts to engage the Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club to work toward solutions that honors the ingenuity and downright hard work that club members have dedicated to the Gordon Reese Cabin."

Since its construction, the cabin has been offered free to people who agree to serve as hosts. Some of those nights are used by club members and the remaining nights are filled through a call-in reservation system managed by the Wisdom Ranger District.

Hosts were required to perform a variety of tasks for the privilege of spending a night there, including snow shoveling, light cleaning, keeping the fire going and making hot chocolate for skiers who use the cabin for a place to warm up.

It's unclear if people who rent the cabin under the new system would be required to do any of those tasks and, if not, who would do them.

In a letter to Myer, club president Mike Hoyt said the supervisor's 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.

On Wednesday, Myer said that no such agreement ever existed.

Original club members and the Forest Service officials they worked with decided not to charge for the cabin at the beginning, but agreed that could change in the future, said Myer.

Myer said he agrees with the club on most issues, including continuing to offer free skiing at Chief Joseph and keeping the cabin open for free to the public as a warming hut.

Club members can continue to groom the trails and the agency will provide workers' compensation coverage in case of injury, Myer said. And he's offered club members 30 free days at the cabin to do maintenance.

The only place they don't agree is his decision to put some nights under a national reservation system that would open it up for rent to the public – just like the other 24 cabins on the national forest – at a cost of \$20 per night, plus a \$9 reservation fee.

"There is such great public interest in the cabin, there won't be any problem filling it," he said. "That \$20 goes right back into maintaining the cabin or grooming the trails."

"I think all of that is getting lost in the message," Myer said. "It's disturbing that the public is not getting the real information."

Myer said he plans to continue to work with the club or anyone else who wants to volunteer to help out at the ski area.

"The original members of the club had great vision and foresight in what they created there," he said. "It's still open to the public. They can ski for free. They can warm up for free. It's what the cabin was all about. It was a place to warm up."

Hoyt said club members have heard from Sen. Jon Tester and Rep. Denny Rehberg's office on the issue as well.

"Everyone seems to be ready to do something about this," Hoyt said. "We've been getting quite a bit of support from a lot of different people."

On Wednesday, Hoyt said he was standing on a street corner and someone rolled down their car window and shouted: "I'm glad you're fighting the Forest Service."

In the meantime, Hoyt said the club is uncertain what the agency's decision means for the upcoming ski season. During the first two weeks of September, he said club members had planned to do their annual trail clearing work at the ski area.

"We've heard nothing from the Beaverhead-Deerlodge about it," he said. "I asked Myer to tell us what we need to do to be able to do that work, but we haven't received any answers from him."

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