



Forest Service compromises on Gordon Reese Cabin rental

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Following an outcry from the public, Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest officials have decided not to implement a \$20 rental fee this winter at the Gordon Reese Cabin at Chief Joseph Pass.

But for the first time, overnight visitors will reserve the cabin through a national reservation service and there will be a \$9 fee.

In a letter earlier this month, Beaverhead-Deerlodge supervisor Dave Myers said he had decided to develop a long-term financial and operating plan for the ski area and cabin following "multiple conversations" with the general public and Bitterroot Cross Country Ski Club members.

Until that process is completed, Myers said the rental fee would be set aside.

But even the \$9 reservation fee is a hard pill to swallow for many ski club members who maintain the cabin and ski trail system was always meant to be free to the public.

The club helped develop the trail system starting back in 1995. In 2001, it raised more than \$100,000 to help pay for construction of the popular cabin that's used as a warming hut for skiers. Each winter, the club spends about \$10,000 to keep the ski trails around the cabin groomed.

"The club formed to provide free services for the public at the ski area," said the club's president, Mike Hoyt. "And now the Forest Service has decided to charge a fee. Most people don't like it and I don't blame them."

In the past, the people who stayed at the cabin for free served as hosts and performed a number of chores. Half of the nights were reserved for club members and the other half were reserved through a call-in system open to the public.

Then came the USDA Office of Ethics in Arlington, Va., which ruled last year that the club's method of allocating its host nights was viewed as preferential treatment.

Club members voted earlier to discontinue their volunteer host services after they learned of the agency's plans to put the cabin up for rent on the national reservation system.

Despite dropping the rental price, Hoyt said the club's decision to not officially provide those services will stand this winter since the agency hasn't backed away from the \$9 reservation fee.

“As of right now, a group of old-timers in the club have decided they will act as hosts this winter,” Hoyt said. “The club will continue to take care of the trail grooming and a group of people representing themselves will take care of the cabin.”

At this point, it’s anyone’s guess on how it will work next year.

“We are going to try to figure out some way for us to return the cabin back to free use by the public,” Hoyt said.

Since the agency’s bottom line appears to be income driven, Hoyt said the club will be looking for ways to supply the Forest Service with enough income to allow the cabin to remain free to public.

“That’s the bottom line for the club,” he said.

In a letter of his own, Hoyt has asked both Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell and Regional Forester Faye Krueger for confirmation that Myers’ decision is the final word for this year.

Hoyt’s letter said the agency’s actions in this matter have local, regional and national implications regarding the agency’s use of volunteers and the public’s use of national forests.

“Both the volunteers who comprise our club and the public in general deserve a direct ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer as to whether the public must pay, in any fashion, for the overnight use of the Gordon Reese Cabin this winter,” Hoyt wrote. “Mr. Myers works for you and you owe it to the public to tell them, straight out, whether Mr. Myers’ decision is final.”

As of Tuesday, Hoyt had not received a reply to a letter sent Saturday.

In his letter to the public, Myers said the agency will seek public input in developing its long-term plan for the cabin.

Anyone interested in participating in the planning process can contact Nate Gassman at the Wisdom Ranger District at (406) 689-3243 or email ngassman@fs.fed.us to be placed on a mailing list.

Reach reporter Perry Backus at 363-3300 or pbackus@ravallirepublic.com.