



Ski club unhappy with new management of Gordon Reese cabin



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With a little more than two months left in the cross-country ski season, Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest officials say they are happy with their first year of management of the Gordon Reese Cabin at Chief Joseph Pass.

“It’s really been going well,” said the forest’s recreation staff officer, Patty Bates. “It looks like we were booked about 95 percent of the

time.”

But not everyone is pleased with the new arrangement.

Bitterroot Cross Country Ski Club president Mike Hoyt said he’s fielded complaints this season from skiers arriving at the cabin only to find it cold and dark.

“The Forest Service doesn’t seem to be able to manage things quite as well as the club did in the past,” Hoyt said.

Hoyt said it seems that some people don’t follow through after reserving the cabin through the national reservation system the agency uses to book its recreational properties.

In the past, Hoyt said the club had a list of more than 200 people interested in staying at the cabin on short notice.

“Last winter, we were able to fill it every night except one,” Hoyt said. “It doesn’t appear like that has happened this year.”

Bates agrees that there have been a few nights when someone hasn’t stayed at the cabin. Some of those have been nights reserved for volunteers who agree to do the cleaning and snow shoveling at the site.

The volunteer nights are 100 percent booked through the rest of the season, which concludes on April 15, Bates said. There are only three nights that remain open through the national booking company that takes reservations for the site.

“This is our first year and we are monitoring it,” she said.

The agency plans to mail out a survey to people who rented the site this season. Bates said they want to get an idea of how many weren't able to use their reservation.

"We are pretty happy with the way that it's gone so far this year," she said.

The Forest Service took over management of the cabin this year, following a ruling by the USDA Office of Ethics in Arlington, Va., that the club's method of allocating its host nights were viewed as preferential treatment.

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

The club helped develop the popular trail system and raised more than \$100,000 to help pay for construction of the cabin that is used as a warming hut by skiers.

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

Hoyt said that last week, for example, there were only two nights when someone stayed at the cabin.

"If no one is there the night before, the stove goes out," he said. "Last week, we skied in at about 11 a.m. and it was 40 degrees inside the cabin. It doesn't seem like it's working out so well."

Former club president Sonny LaSalle said he's heard the same complaints about the cabin not being used or the people using it not doing the basic chores that they are asked to perform.

Even the people who pay to stay there are supposed to do a variety of duties, including keeping the wood box full and making an inventory of equipment, LaSalle said.

On the day LaSalle and his wife arrived for their night's stay, the wood box was half empty, there wasn't a fire in the stove and the previous folks had failed to keep the snowmelt water container full.

"I don't think people are as religious about doing those duties as they were under the old system," he said.

So far, the cabin has lost a couple of axes and a poker for the fire this year.

LaSalle would like to see the cross country ski club revisit its decision to walk away from having any responsibility in managing the hut.

"I personally feel that the club members, before next season, should take a vote on whether they want to take back responsibility for managing the hut," he said.

The club still spends about \$10,000 a year to keep the trails groomed around the cabin.

“We have been getting lots of compliments about our grooming,” Hoyt said. “We added over 12.5 miles of new multi-use trail that is shared between skiers, dog sledders and snowmobiles. We are really happy about that.”

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