Bitterroot ski club to cease volunteer efforts at Chief Joseph cabin

August 16, 2012 6:30 am  •  By PERRY BACKUS - Ravalli Republic  (9) Comments

The Bitterroot Cross-Country Ski Club will no longer offer its volunteer services to operate and maintain the cabin they 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 cancelled 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 pre-season 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.

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

Tags  Bitterroot Cross-country Ski Club, Michael Hoyt, United States Forest Service, Beaverhead-deerlodge National Forest, Myer, Forest Service, Chief Joseph, Ski Club, Volunteer Services, Beaverhead-deerlodge National Forest Supervisor, Beaverhead-deerlodge Forest, Beaverhead-deerlodge Forest Supervisor, Hoyt, United States National Forest, Public Services, Ski-season Grooming Services

(9) Comments

Sanity  - August 18, 2012 9:36 pm
I don't get it. The community put up money to build this place and now it's just being taken over by the federal government as THEIR property? Can they sue for the cost to build/materials? Doesn't the Ski Club own the actual structure? If so I would dismantle every log and not give the forest service the opportunity to rent it out.

DA____  - August 17, 2012 7:46 pm
What a shame. Dealing with the Forest Service is nothing more than making a deal with the Devil. Some big shot can come along a change everything that has been accomplished and everything that has worked so well.
On top of that who gives a d#$% what anyone in Virginia thinks about the way things are done here. They should be looking at all of the morons in DC.

Downstream Observer  - August 16, 2012 12:22 pm
It looks like a good agreement or memorandum of understanding before starting construction of the cabin might have prevented some of the current disagreement. I agree that a workable
model has now been taken away. What if the club rents the cabin for a whole year by getting all the reservations then gift it out as they see fit. Just sayin......

bigger picture - August 16, 2012 10:17 am
Comment Not Approved-
Your position on this confuses me. The Club was participating in a socialist activity. As a rugged individual, you of all people, should be bashing them. Every man for himself, right? Isn't this an example of how every benefit from the government should be on a voucher system? Why should a community, group effort get any special consideration?

My forefathers were Union members, just sayin'
I'll be praying for you.

Darby1 - August 16, 2012 9:07 am
I'd like to add that the club should not groom anymore - the FS wants their cake and to eat it too --- "Myers’ letter said he was “more than willing” to continue to authorize the club’s grooming of the ski trails under a volunteer agreement"

Let the Beaverhead Deerlodge figure out how they're going do that one

Darby1 - August 16, 2012 9:01 am
Rebecca - I totally agree with you. Thank you ski club for all your dedication. Shame on the Forest Service for not holding up their end of the agreement. I stay at the cabin once a year through the call-in system but I guess I stayed my last. There's no way I'm going to give the Beaverhead money now. Good luck Forest Service in providing the awesome service that the club gave the public!

Comment Not Approved - August 16, 2012 6:44 am
Thats it? No fight or lawsuit against the forest circus, just roll over and admit defeat.

Very disappointing that such acts of government tyranny go unchallenged.

Prepare and pray.
Our forefathers would be shooting by now.

shackrat101 - August 19, 2012 6:32 am
This is just one reason why the USFS, DNRC and the MFWP can not be trusted. They wonder why no one waves or wants to talk to them in the forest.Every one of their employees think they own OUR forests.Every one of them has to have a title before their name and every one is an expert on something.They all smile to your face then stab you in the back.
I think this is sad. My family and I spent many nights in the cabin hosting it. The thing that made me not mind doing chores and even extra was that it was a free night and I always felt like my pay was in keeping the snow shoveled and keeping the place as spotless as possible. It also made for a very affordable winter trip and it was wonderful to get to know so many people. I think the ski club kept the cabin in such great condition. There seems to be a difference between this cabin and the other's on the forest that I've stayed in and I think it was the personal investment of all those who gave so much. Thank you for your hours of service. It will be missed by many.
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