

Cabin fee increase lowered

Owners will now pay only 2 percent more to Forest Service than last year

By [Scott Hammers](#) / *The Bulletin*

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Owners of cabins on U.S. Forest Service land are likely to get a break this year on the fees they pay to the federal government. On Thursday, U.S. Department of Agriculture Undersecretary Mark Rey told The Associated Press and Awbrey King of the National Forest Homeowners organization that a scheduled fee increase would be suspended, and that cabin owners' payments would be only 2 percent higher than in 2008.

Current annual fees average about \$1,300, according to the Forest Service. King said the fees were expected to increase by 50 to 500 percent this year, and he credited Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., for leading the effort to reverse the fee increase. Wyden led a group of five senators in writing a letter to Rey asking him to hold off on collecting the fees based on reappraisals of the cabins.

Jeff Sims, lands forester with the Sisters Ranger District, said there are around 15,000 privately owned cabins on Forest Service land around the country, and about 300 in Central Oregon. The largest concentration of cabins locally is along the Metolius River, where there are 108, followed by about 80 at Crescent Lake, Sims said. Cabins also are located at Elk, Odell and Paulina lakes, and along the Deschutes River.

The construction of cabins on Forest Service land was first authorized in 1915, Sims said, and the first cabins in Central Oregon were built a few years later. Cabins were reappraised every 20 years, and new fees were established and set to adjust upward by the rate of inflation. The fees are intended to represent 5 percent of the value of the land the cabins are built on.

Sims said the long periods between appraisals lead to big jumps in fees that can be burdensome for some cabin owners.

"In the late '90s, the value of rural parcels started going way up, and that's when the sticker shock first started happening," he said.

Cabins in the Deschutes National Forest are currently assessed fees based on appraisals performed in 1980. This year's fees were to be based on inflation-adjusted 1999 appraisals that had yet to be implemented.

Some cabin owners in the Metolius area have already received bills from the Forest Service indicating their 2009 payments will be going up by around 85 percent.

“We at the very least are telling cabin owners if they have received their 2009 statements but not paid them, to hold off,” King said. “They will be getting revised fee statements from the Forest Service.”

King said there’s reason to think Congress may be ready to revisit the Cabin User Fee Fairness Act, which was passed in 2000 and requires that cabins on Forest Service land be reappraised every 10 years. But the act was never fully implemented. If Congress does not change the act, King said, it’s possible that the fee increases scheduled for the beginning of this year will become law in 2010.

Sims said appraisers hired by the Forest Service conducted appraisals of local Forest Service cabins in 2008, with the expectation that their findings would be used to set new fees from 2010 or 2011 on.

Roger White, who runs a small store in Metolius, said a number of cabin owners are concerned that dramatic increases in fees could change their community. Some of the cabins have been bought and sold at high prices in recent years, he said, but others have been passed down through four or five generations of a family. Families of modest means could be forced to sell if fees go up too fast.

Compared to many other groupings of cabins on Forest Service land, Metolius is a well-kept area, White said.

“The Metolius basin here is one of the best, most well-kept-up, obedient group of folks. They’re real happy they’re here,” he said. “Other places, I guess they have the old ’58 Buick sitting in the side yard, and the ’67 Oldsmobile sitting in the front yard, and three water heaters out back. Kind of a Dogpatch operation.”

King said cabin owners should expect a formal announcement on this year’s fee schedule from the Forest Service within a week or so.

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