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Forest cabins: Average Joes need not apply

New fees for cabins make them affordable only for the wealthy

April 08, 2009

There's nothing fair about the U.S. Forest Service's effort to set "a fair market value" on cabins in federal forests. The move instead adds to a disturbing trend of putting more recreational opportunities in the hands of the well-to-do at the expense of citizens of lesser means.

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At least previous increases in trailhead fees and national park fees were somewhat modest. But the plan to assess an across-the-board fee based on land value will increase the cost by more than 500 percent in the case of at least one cabin at Lake of the Woods.

The recreational cabins are a bit of an anomaly: The "owners" own only the structures; the federal government owns the land they sit on. For many, the cabins have been in their families for generations and now they're faced with being priced out of their own properties.

For the Alsing family, quoted in a Monday story in the Mail Tribune, the land lease prices at Lake of the Woods will increase from the \$1,000 paid a year ago to an estimated \$6,250 under the new formula. When they first bought their cabin in 1966, the annual fee was \$35 a year.

The increases came out of the questionably named Cabin User Fee Fairness Act. The intent of the act — and thus the use of the word "fairness" — was to establish a standard for charging users. That makes sense, but the standard makes sense only in a world where it's reasonable to spend \$500 a month for the right to live in a cabin you already own.

Remember, many of the cabin owners also are making payments for the cabins they purchased and they're all paying property taxes and the various fees associated with home ownership. The \$500 a month is on top of all that.

It is true that the cabin owners at places like Lake of the Woods and Union Creek — as well as thousands of other locations across the country — had the good fortune or foresight to gain possession of a relatively scarce commodity. Should they pay more than \$1,000 a year? Probably. Should they be hit with a five-fold increase that will make ownership too expensive for many? No.

The increase is simply too large to be put on an existing use in one fell swoop. Beyond that, the one-size-fits-all approach of the fee doesn't fit in many cases. For the cabin owners at Lake of the Woods, their properties are inaccessible because of snow for up to six months out of the year. Yet they face the same increase as other properties that can be used year-round.

Tom Knappenberger, a media specialist with the Forest Service, says the act is intended to produce a "fair market basis for the privilege of having these residences."

There are two problems with that statement: If the federal government is now trying to assign market value to its services, why stop with cabins? Why not just add a user-fee for anyone who wants to use any federal property or program? Can't afford to drive on that freeway or to use those V.A. services? Sorry, the fees are set on a "fair market basis."

And then there's the use of the word "privilege." In the new world being cast by the Forest Service, it will indeed be the privileged few who have access to all the recreational opportunities of this country's public lands. And that's just wrong.

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grampa
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