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Camp Sherman cabin owners bridle at fees

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Camp Sherman cabin owners face significant fee increases. *photo by Oenta Gentry*

Cabin owners in Camp Sherman are feeling the pinch of increasing annual fees.

The Metolius River Forest Homeowners Association (MRFHA) is seeking reform of the fee structure for private homes on Forest Service land.

Homeowners are offering a proposal, to no avail if they don't get a congressional hearing next month, on their proposed Cabin Users Fee Fairness Act (CUFFA) reform.

Bonnie Ashenbrenner, President of the MRFHA, said, "It was not the intent to have these cabins only owned by people who have money. My fees last year were \$1,500. This year they are \$3,024.38."

Jeff Sims, Forest Service Administrator for the 108 Metolius properties said, "It (CUFFA) came to be an appraisal of the lot without a cabin. Five percent of the appraised value was the land fee. Appraisals were done every 20 years. In the mid-'90s, the 20-year period was up and new fees were set.

"For years inflation was low, but in recent years real estate values have skyrocketed.

"The Forest Service started doing appraisals every ten years after 1999," Sims added. "We don't appraise each lot, just typical lots. So lots with a good view of the river would be one category, or more congested lots another. The 2008 appraisal is the first 10-year appraisal."

Last December 17, 2008, Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon along with Senators Tester, Cantwell, Barrasso, and Crapo wrote to Mark Rey, then undersecretary of natural resources and environment, requesting a hold be put on the increasing fees to give the cabin users a fair chance to appeal the increases.

"Many cabin owners believe that this current threat (fee increases) is the result of the failure of the Cabin User Fee Fairness Act of 2000 to fulfill its stated purpose of preserving the opportunity for individual and family-oriented recreation," they wrote.

Before he left office, Rey approved delaying payment of fees, pending a review, but Congress rescinded his ruling on the basis that he didn't have the authority.

Mary Clarke Ver Hoef, executive director of the National Forest Homeowners, feels they are getting no sympathy from the Forest Service.

"In my area, it's very rural. There is no electricity, people use gaslights. These are summer cabins only; they are not habitable in winter. If you have a place next to a ski resort, even though you can't use it in winter, you get these huge fees based on the resort," she said.

"We may not ever be able to get it appraised right because there are no comparable properties that are bare lots to compare it with," Ver Hoef stated.

She noted that there are many restrictions in use.

"CUFFA says assessing five percent (of the appraisal amount) adjusts for all the restrictions." Ver Hoef said. "The NFH says they should adjust for the restrictions first, then assess the five percent."

Lobbyist Aubrey King said, "The appraisal process with these unique properties really does not work. Unlike commercial real estate, the land is never sold and the appraisal is based on the land."

After several months, the NFH published a proposal they hope will be a problem-solver. While the proposal screams of current CUFFA problems, including the permit restrictions and high fees, it also acknowledges the high cost to the Forest Service in terms of time, effort and money.

"The Forest Service says they need \$20 to \$25 million to manage the 14,000 homes nationally," said Ver Hoef. "Our proposal meets those numbers and in another four to five years will bring in \$35 to \$45 million.

Part of the proposal includes the Forest Service being the direct recipient of the permit fees, which have previously gone to the Treasury.

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