

Rooms with a view will cost more

Updated appraisals for cabins on national forestland drive fee prices up 400 percent in some cases

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Mail Tribune

April 06, 2009 6:00 AM

The cost of owning a cabin on national forestland will increase — in some cases dramatically — under a Forest Service effort to update appraisals across the country to meet new regulations.

For 219 cabin owners at Lake of the Woods, the newly modified Cabin User Fee Fairness Act will mean an increase of up to 400 percent in annual fees paid to the Forest Service, leading some to fear cabin ownership will become a privilege only of the affluent.

"It looks like we can't make it," said Al Alsing, who purchased his cabin on the west side of the lake in 1966, when the cabin user fee was \$35 a year.

Alsing's cabin, built around 1928, was chosen as one of 10 "typical lots" appraised last July by a contractor for the Forest Service. Alsing's lot was appraised at \$125,000 just for the land. Before this appraisal, Alsing paid a little more than \$1,000 a year to lease the land. Now he will pay about \$6,250 a year.

"Our pleasure is in having other people use it," said Alsing's wife, Kay. "This will deprive families of recreation and relaxation."

Kay Alsing said it doesn't seem financially sensible to pay that price for a cabin that can be used only part of the year because of snowfall.

The CUFFA of 2000 directed the Forest Service to establish a more consistent method to be used nationwide to determine cabin user fees. At that time, fees were based on appraisals done about 25 years before. The new arrangement set permit fees at 5 percent of the raw land value as decided by local market information.

"It (CUFFA) is trying to set a fair market basis for the privilege of having these residences," said Tom Knappenberger, the Forest Service's regional media liaison.

The CUFFA will affect 14,000 recreation residences on national forestland. The Oregon-Washington region has the second-highest concentration of these cabins in the nation, with 2,800 residences.

"Location is a very large part of the evaluation," said Jim Sauser, regional special uses coordinator for the Forest Service. "Anything that borders water is at a premium."

In July, the Forest Service paid between \$6 million and \$8 million to have "typical lots" across the

nation appraised. The "typical lots" are decided based on lake access, forest setting, east or west side, lot size, slope and typography, said Brad Aspell, president of the Lake of the Woods Recreation Association. Other lots will be adjusted based on their similarities or differences to the lots already appraised.

The 10 lots at Lake of the Woods were compared to lots along the Sprague and Williamson rivers in Klamath County, Aspell said. These comparable properties had year-round access and were a short distance, 20-30 minutes, from Klamath Falls.

Aspell said some Lake of the Woods cabins are inaccessible from Nov. 15 to May 15 (depending on snowfall) and are built in much more primitive situations, some without indoor plumbing or year-round road maintenance, and are about 45 minutes from Klamath Falls and Medford.

In the Union Creek area, 49 cabin owners will see "a substantial increase" in their annual fees, said Cliff Conner-Coash, president of the Upper Rogue River Cabin Owner Association, though he declined to give specifics until he'd read the full report.

Conner-Coash said he's perceived several flaws in the CUFFA, including that appraisals don't take into account that cabin owners must meet myriad Forest Service regulations, from cabin size to color to landscaping, must pay for the upkeep required and cannot restrict public access to the grounds.

He also said the appraisals are based on land values from June 2008 back, which doesn't take into account the current recession and decrease in values.

Permittees who do not feel the appraisal was fair have 60 days after the Forest Service's review to seek reappraisal, but the cost will have to come out of their own pocket.

"One of the effects may be that people of modest means will be forced out of there," Aspell said.

Conner-Coash said he, too, believes the increase in fees will price some people out of cabin ownership.

"Once they pay the property taxes on the structure itself, the lease and the maintenance, they'll say it's too much," he said.

The fees will begin in 2011 and be phased in over three years. Twenty-five percent of the revenue will be given to the county and 75 percent will be put into the federal government's general treasury.

"A number of members of Congress have recognized that the CUFFA regulations and fees are unreasonable," Aspell said. "Our principal concern is if these fees remain as the CUFFA regulations suggest, they will change the Forest Service from a management agency to a federal leasing agency."

The Cabin Coalition 2, which includes the National Forest Homeowners, is eliciting congressional help to revise the current appraisal process, said Mary Clarke Ver Hoef, executive director of the NFH.

"Nobody will buy it (the cabin) with that kind of fee attached," Ver Hoef said. "The system has broken the market and we are trying to rectify that."

Ver Hoef and others in the coalition are working to get hearings set before Congress for May or June.

"We have no choice but to implement that act," said Sauser of the Forest Service. "The discretion is out of our hands."

"When an appraiser says it's equivalent to a fancy second home they're wrong," said Ver Hoef. "It's supposed to be a program that the general public can afford."

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