

OPTIONS FOR ADDRESSING AND SAVING NEGLECTED & ABANDONED CABINS

Overview

All of us have noticed them in our cabin tracts -- cabins whose paint seems to get a little worse each year, whose fire clearance work doesn't get done, that never have a light on or a visitor from one year to the next. These are the signs of a neglected cabin, one that could be on its path to becoming abandoned and, if not given a new life, possibly default and removal.

At the same time, with increasing frequency, forests are having to deal with permits for which there is no valid contact information and cabins are being abandoned and fees unpaid. Due to staff shortages, little is done presently to follow up on these permit holders, however, when staff time does become available, the potential exists for these permits to be terminated, the cabins removed and permits canceled.

The purpose of this memo is to provide cabin tract leaders with tools to recognize neglected cabins, suggest strategies for approaching and working with these cabin owners, and to provide and explain options to address and resolve abandoned/derelict cabins, thereby preventing the loss of these cabins from the Recreation Residence Program.

We recognize that these discussions will be difficult in many cases and that cabin ownership is an emotional issue for many cabin families. Like the traditional family home, cabins can be wrapped in family memories and heritage, making them difficult to let go of. Like that family home, cabins require regular maintenance and attention, and also represent an overlooked capital resource that can ease the decision to move on.

We also recognize that the presented options won't be possible or even applicable to each abandoned cabin, however, they may suggest other possible actions that will apply to your situation. This is a developing issue and we welcome your additional ideas for recovering neglected and abandoned cabins.

Symptoms of a Neglected Cabin

- Failure for several years to comply with fuels clearance requirements. Fuels clearance is an annual requirement for all cabin owners. Depending on your forest and Operations and Maintenance Plan, this usually includes clearance of pine needles and leaves from the roof and gutters, removal of needles and leaves 30' from the cabin and other structures and 10' from propane tanks.
- Failure to carry out needed cabin maintenance. Are there broken windows, missing shingles, broken or loose boards in decks and railings, sagging porches?

- Failure to remove pests. Is there evidence that creatures have taken up residence in the cabin such as hovering nests of wasps, large quantities of droppings from small rodents, indications that cabin stuff like insulation and mop heads have been pulled apart and used as nesting materials, etc.
- Failure to maintain secondary structures. The cabin is borderline and the secondary structures like shed, garage, dock, etc are clearly in disrepair.

Suggestions for Approaching the Owner of a Neglected Cabin

- **Begin With An Indirect Approach.** Rather than directly confronting specific cabin owners, perhaps begin by raising the issue of cabin maintenance and lack of use as a general issue through tract communications and newsletters. Noting the problems that neglected cabins pose for their neighbors as well as the need to keep on top of maintenance and clean-up could prompt offending cabin owners to realize that work is needed.
- **Become More Specific in Maintenance Requirements.** Some cabin owners may not see themselves in descriptions of general problems, so sending a listing of Forest Service maintenance requirements might spell out the issues more clearly. Most Forests have a “Cabin Self-Inspection” form that would serve this purpose.
- **Initiate a Tract-Wide Cabin Inspection Program.** If individual cabin owners aren’t responsive to indirect encouragement, another suggestion would be to organize an inspection program within your tract which would use trained volunteers to inspect every cabin and provide the results and recommendations to each cabin owner.
- **Direct Compassionate Approach.** Find a cabin neighbor who agrees with respect to the assessment of neglect and who is a personal friend of the permittee or someone in the permittee’s family. Ask that friend to start a conversation with the cabin family to gain an understanding of why the cabin has fallen into neglect. Maybe the family needs some help but has been unwilling to ask. The help could be volunteers from other cabin owners or facilitating hiring local workers to remediate the situation. Often issues (such as failing health, divorce, etc.) keep a family from having the bandwidth (physical, financial or emotional) to care for the cabin or make a decision to sell it.
- **Local Maintenance Person Solicitation.** Often there is a local individual who is employed by various cabin owners to do maintenance and repairs. With a testimonial from a cabin neighbor, the local handyman can do a soft sell to the neglectful cabin permittee.
- **Local USFS Cabin Realtor.** In areas with many cabins there are realtors that specialize in selling USFS cabins. They know the responsibilities and family

connection of cabins. Have a cabin neighbor talk to the permittee of the neglected cabin about recent successful cabin sales. Not so much the money angle, but the family angle. The cabin next to mine was falling into disrepair after 90+ years in the same family. They didn't want to sell but made that hard choice and the new owners are so grateful for the cabin and are pouring love back into it. The family that had it for almost a century sees that the cabin has a new family for the next century. With a "feel good" story the permittee might be more willing to talk to a cabin realtor.

Options for Addressing Abandoned Cabins

- **Contact cabin neighbors and long-time owners for family contacts other than the named holder.** If the named holder cannot be contacted or is not responding to mail, phone and email communications, the problem may be clarified by making contact with other family members who can shed light on what's going on with that person. In some cases, the contact data used by the Forest Service may simply be wrong or the owner may be unwilling to respond to official communications for some reason. Or maybe they've moved or believe they've passed responsibility for the permit to another family member.
- **If the permittee can be located through family or friends but, for some reason, no longer wants to be the responsible party, encourage the family to effect a transfer of the permit to someone else in the family.** It's a fact of life that some families move away, lose interest in having a cabin, or simply can't maintain a remote cabin. Another family member may have a desire to become the cabin permit holder on behalf of the family, which can be the easiest way to reinvigorate a cabin and bring it back into use. Be aware, however, that a transfer fee will be charged for the issuance of a new permit and, if permit fees and any taxes have not been kept up to date, the new permittee will be required to bring fees and taxes current.
- **If the permittee can be located through family or friends but, for some reason, no longer wants to be the responsible party and no family members are available or interested in assuming the permit, the permittee can quitclaim the cabin improvements to the Forest Service, which can then auction those improvements to a new holder.** This process has been successfully carried out on the Olympic National Forest in Washington State, resulting in the new permit holder and recovery of a cabin that had fallen into severe neglect. This process requires a commitment of time on the part of the local Forest Service staff and the General Services Administration, which administers the auction process. [NFH has detailed information on this process. Contact the Executive Director.]

- **And then there's the option of simply selling the cabin to a third party.** In most cabin areas there are real estate agents who specialize in handling recreation residence cabins. If the permit holder can be found and the cabin isn't too run-down, there will generally be a willing buyer if the price is reasonable. In a situation like this, the Forest Service should be asked to do a compliance inspection so that prospective buyers know what they're getting into before making an offer. Upon such a permit transfer, the new permit holder would most likely be issued a one- or two-year term permit to give them time to bring the cabin into compliance. Once that's done, a new permit would be issued for the remaining term of the original permit.
- **Worst Case: the permit holder or their family cannot be located.** This is the most difficult situation because it involves a great deal of Forest Service process and staff time. If the permit holder cannot be located or contacted, Forest Service regulations require a series of documented notices to the permit holder before the permit can be revoked and the improvements sold to a new holder or removed. This requires a significant investment of FS staff time, which is why little action has been taken on abandoned cabins in most forests.