

Recreation Residence Program

Program Overview

National Forest Homeowners in collaboration with the USDA Forest Service

This document is meant to inform both current and prospective cabin owners about the Recreation Residence Program (RRP) on National Forest System lands. This unique ‘Cabin in the Woods’ program was established by Congress in 1915 to facilitate family recreation experiences on our National Forests. A cabin and its improvements are the personal property of the owner who pays an annual fee for the use of the National Forest land the cabin sits on. Existing in 24 states and Puerto Rico, the Program has a deep history within the Forest Service and among generations of cabin owners. It is open to all people willing and able to purchase a cabin from a current owner and meet the qualifications necessary to obtain a permit from the Forest Service. Historically, over 3% of cabins turn over each year nationally, with that number being higher in some regions. Nearly 14,000 cabins, on 114 National Forests, are in the Recreation Residence Program.

Program Benefits and Rewards:

- Rustic ‘back to nature’ experiences for family and friends.
- Backwoods cabin lodging for kids, parents, and grandparents, alike.
- Forest stewardship opportunities and outdoor education experiences.
- Natural world recreation activities that embrace a multi-generational environment.
- A respite from urban congestion, our modern culture and the digital world.
- Small community relationships and a step back in time... a time to *Re-Create*.

Basic ‘Recreation Residence Program’ Tenets:

- The Term Special Use Permit is issued by the local Forest Service district every 20 years (next renewal in 2028) and may be subject to non-renewal under certain conditions. The permit does not convey property rights like a lease does and is subject to revision by the Forest Service.
- Annual Forest Service permit fees are due, in addition to state and local taxes. As of 2016, the Cabin Fee Act (CFA) has *permanently* placed each cabin into 1 of 11 fee tiers that range from \$650 to \$5,650. Future fees can only increase by inflation (IPD-GDP index).
- Currently, the land use fees collected by the Government are deposited into the U.S. Treasury and represent the payment for rights and privileges for use of National Forest land and not for any services related to the cabin (i.e. road maintenance, etc.). Beginning in 2025, RRP permit fees will be retained by the Forest Service for use in administering the RRP and other recreation programs on National Forest System lands.
- Commercial or time-share use is not allowed. Rental policies are intentionally restrictive by Region to ensure the ‘cabin in the woods’ nature of the program is maintained.
- Full-time or permanent occupancy is not allowed and is subject to maintaining a permanent residence elsewhere.
- If designated as historic, the cabin’s exterior appearance, color and materials must maintain the historic nature of the structure, site and cabin tract, and proposed improvements must be approved by the Forest Service and the State Historic Preservation Office.

- Cabin owners are often responsible for road maintenance and utility services and assume risk of loss of the cabin.
- Sellers must provide a copy of their Term Special Use Permit to all prospective purchasers. Also, a Transfer Fee of \$1200 indexed to inflation, is due when cabin ownership changes and a new permit is issued.
- Purchaser must apply for a new Term Special Use Permit. Permits are not transferrable.
- The Term Special Use Permit can be held by 1) an individual, 2) a married couple, or 3) the trustee of a Forest Service-approved single asset trust owning the cabin.
- Shared or multiple ownership of a cabin is not authorized by the permit, however, due to family inheritance, and other factors, multiple ownership is common. Regardless of how ownership of the cabin is structured legally, the permit can only be held by *one* of the owners (the permit holder) who assumes all responsibility and liability for following the terms of the permit.
- Regional and National guidelines, written to maintain the rustic nature of the program, direct and restrict development and use of the cabins and their surroundings.
- Prospective buyers and current owners are highly encouraged to discuss and review permit terms, policy, and guidelines with the local District Ranger and staff prior to completing a sale.

National Forest Homeowners (NFH) Representation and Leadership:

- NFH is your representative voice with the Forest Service and Congress regarding all RRP issues including: permit fees (CFA), permit language, dispute resolution, and other agency decisions.
- NFH provides an extensive reference source for Program and historical knowledge.
- Your membership in NFH is a small cost to ensure that the Program remains viable and affordable for coming generations.
- Participation in local tract organizations is essential to maintaining strong program representation and is encouraged by NFH.
- It is imperative that every cabin owner stays fully informed and understands what the RRP actually is by law, what it provides experientially and that the Forest Service, the landlord, is charged with administering the Program with limited resources.

Forest Service Responsibilities and Administration:

- The RRP is subject to USDA Forest Service administration, decisions and interpretations, often addressed in the Forest Service Manual and Handbooks. Most decisions are made at the local level, but federal laws guide those decisions. For example, the Endangered Species Act, National Historic Preservation Act and other legislation impacts the RRP.
- Changes in federal legislation and changes in personnel within the Forest Service often affect program oversight and how local districts administer their cabin tracts. The Program has evolved over its 100-year history, so we should expect modest program changes as we confront future challenges on our National Forests.
- NFH encourages collaborative relationships with *all* Forest Service personnel in all interactions.

For more information, please visit www.nationalforesthowners.org