

# Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

## Recreation Residence Program

National Forest System - Washington Office Lands, Minerals & Geology Management

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**Question 1: What are recreation residences and where can I find more information?**

Answer 1: The Forest Service Recreation Residence program gives individuals or married couples the opportunity to own a cabin (their own private personal property) in designated “lots” within “Tracts” on the National Forests. They are commonly called "rec res" – pronounced “rec rez”, "summer homes" or "recreation cabins", authorized by special use permit (not a lease), use code 123.

See the national SharePoint page for policy, law, training, history, and much more: [Special Uses - Recreation Residence](#)

**Q2: Where are these recreation residences located?**

A2: [Summary by State](#) or see “[Source](#)” tab for summary and use the sort function by specific unit.

FS Region	# Rec Res Issued in SUDS
R1	847
R2	1,191
R3	620
R4	1,360
R5	5,482
R6	2,597
R8	351
R9	742

**Q3: How much in annual land use fees does each rec res pay and how much has it increased the last 11 years?**

A3: Per the Cabin Fee Act and as [summarized annually](#):

Fee Tier – Cabin Fee Act	Approximate Percent of Permits Nationally	Fee Calendar Year 2015	Fees Calendar Year <b>2026</b> (per permit)	11 year increase (27% overall)
Tier 1	6 %	\$650	<b>\$825</b>	\$175
Tier 2	16 %	\$1,150	<b>\$1,459</b>	\$309
Tier 3	26 %	\$1,650	<b>\$2,093</b>	\$443
Tier 4	22 %	\$2,150	<b>\$2,727</b>	\$577
Tier 5	10 %	\$2,650	<b>\$3,361</b>	\$711
Tier 6	5 %	\$3,150	<b>\$3,994</b>	\$844
Tier 7	5 %	\$3,650	<b>\$4,629</b>	\$979
Tier 8	3 %	\$4,150	<b>\$5,264</b>	\$1,114
Tier 9	3 %	\$4,650	<b>\$5,897</b>	\$1,247
Tier 10	3 %	\$5,150	<b>\$6,532</b>	\$1,382
Tier 11	1 %	\$5,650	<b>\$7,166</b>	\$1,516

**Q4: What’s the future of the recreation residence cabin program? Aren’t uses supposed to be non-exclusive? Are we adding or phasing-out recreation residences?**

A4: Rec res remain a valid use of National Forest System lands and by the terms and conditions of their permit, are not exclusive. For example, the Forest Service could still issue an authorization for a utility line across a rec res lot and the public can walk along a shoreline trail of a lake that includes the permitted lot. It was the United States government who encouraged this program over a hundred years ago and then the Forest Service stopped authorizing new cabins to be built and to become part of the rec res program in the 1960s, largely because of the multiple use approach to managing public lands. Rec res are different than other special uses, but remain a legitimate and appropriate use of NFS lands with much of their own focused policy, forms, legislation, etc. The program should be preserved to the maximum extent practicable (FSM 2347.1). Historical literature is on our SharePoint page at the very bottom: [Special Uses - Recreation Residence](#).

**Q5: What would be the threshold for the 1-year permit (2700-4) to bring a rec res into compliance vs. the standard approach using the 20-year permit (2700-5a).**

A5: Issue a short term, 1-year permit for rec res in those cases where there's a noncompliance issue that the Forest Service authorized officer finds unacceptable and that needs to be remedied before issuing a term for up to 20 years. (FSM 2721.23c) The time of renewals is a practical time to address compliance issues, but needs to be strategic and reasonable. Consider what the permit and

attached Operating Plan say vs. what the noncompliance is and what it would take to rectify. Depending on the scope and scale, that will help plan the next steps. That is, the majority should be issued on the long-term permit and if we say something needs to be fixed, we need to be prepared to say WHY (cite your source) and provide a reasonable time frame to require action to bring them into compliance, and be willing and able to follow through on our end. Please coordinate with your Supervisor's Office (SO) or Regional Office if required.

Reminder to create authorizations in [SUDS](#); Forms [reference site](#).

**Q6: Is there a training for the Impoundment process for abandoned Rec residences?**

A6: There's nothing unique to rec res for impoundment, but see [36 CFR 262.12](#). The cabin and related improvements are personal property on public lands and law enforcement, property management and Regional Office Special Uses staff should be able to help, often requiring involvement from the Office of General Counsel (OGC). Make sure we've followed proper due process, following what the permit language itself says we'll do and have ample documentation to show we've exhausted our efforts to get the private owner of the cabin to sell or otherwise take responsibility. Retained recreation residence fees may be used to address abandoned cabins and endeavor to maintain the use as a recreation residence with a new qualified holder as the best and first option. Other options include adding the cabin to the forest's cabin rental program if the forest obtains ownership of it and then listing it on recreation.gov or demolishing the facility if in such poor condition that it is unsafe to use (provided that it is not eligible to be listed on the National Historic Register and your heritage staff has been involved). Engage the assistance of Forest Service engineering for facilities support; ensure that if retaining the use, that it's incorporated into facility master planning.

**Q7: What guidance can you offer to completing inspections/monitoring for the reissuance/renewal process? Do engineers need to be involved since there's a building (e.g.: the cabin) and permit administrators aren't qualified to review buildings?**

A7: Note that our national policy and forms have mostly been updated to limit the use of the terminology "inspecting" and "inspections" to now be "monitoring". Because inspecting implies potential technicalities, we're clarifying that our "monitoring" is limited to compliance with the terms and conditions of the authorization. So please use the terminology "monitoring" for all special uses unless conducted by the holder themselves or a specific technical specialist.

We should rarely require the assistance of an engineer when conducting routine monitoring. Our monitoring should be limited in scope and more in terms of ensuring that what's on the ground is authorized and specific to anything in the permit and Operation and Maintenance Plan. For national policy on monitoring and inspecting, see: [FSM 2716.5-2716.54](#)

Some Operation and Maintenance Plans have instructions or guidelines, depending on your unit, so start by reviewing the authorization itself. Standard/national forms: Monitoring (formerly considered inspecting): [FS-2700-1 092020.docm](#). Self-inspections, completed by the permit holder themselves, focused on rec res: [FS-2700-6b](#).

"Self-inspections" completed by holders of special use permits can directly streamline Forest Service administration to strategically plan where to focus their limited time in the field (FSM

2716.53). A self-inspection would not necessarily replace the need for Forest Service monitoring, but rather compliment and facilitate more efficient and effective Forest Service administration of the authorized uses. The goal is to increase compliance with the terms and conditions of the authorization and decrease the administrative workload by having base-line inspection information/photos to start with for Forest Service monitoring. Where there is not enough personnel to visit every authorization on the ground, particularly to facilitate timely transfers, which is often the case ([2011 OIG audit 08601-55-SF](#), page 16), having a self-inspection would often be better than having nothing at all. Self-inspections may help administrators prioritize their limited use of on-the-ground efforts based on information provided by the holder. Self-inspections were also recommended in the national study: [Special Uses Reengineering Implementation Team Final Report](#), September 1999, Stretch Goal 1 – Item 6. Self-inspection documentation back to the FS should include holder provided photos and ensure that contact information is up to date, including back-up contacts.

**Q8: If a recreation residence (the cabin itself) is modified to be larger and/or upgraded, does that mean that the permit holder will pay a higher land use fee to the Forest Service since the cabin will be bigger, better and worth more? Does it need to be reappraised?**

A8: No, the fees charged by the Forest Service are not based on the value of the private improvements, but were based on the value of the land authorized (the lot), which was categorized into a fee tier as prescribed by the Cabin Fee Act. Appraisals are no longer required ([FSM 2701.1](#), item 24). Counties/States often tax recreation residences based on the value of the private improvements, but that is distinctly separate from fees the Forest Service charges and are a matter between the cabin owner(s) and local government.

**Q9: Is there such a thing as a 99 year lease?**

A9: No, recreation residences are issued a special use permit, which is not automatically transferable or assignable, for a maximum of 20 years. There are not any 99-year recreation residence permits authorized.

**Q10: Why are recreation residences not allowed to be used as a primary place of residence for the permit holder? What do we do if the holder is living in the recreation residence full-time?**

A10: The recreation residence program was established to provide for recreation , vacation experiences, not permanent residency. *Direction at FSM 2470 states that “As recreation facilities, they are vacation sites and may not be used on a permanent basis.”* The permit explicitly states in the terms that the cabin is not to be used for full-time occupancy. Roads accessing rec res are not maintained for primary residential access and in the event that there is an area closure, such as for fire, we don’t want to displace permit holders from their primary residence. The Cabin Fee Act and respective fees were not assessed to account for full-time occupancy.

It should be a “low bar” to demonstrate that the cabin owner has another place of residency and in the big scheme, that is not a high priority to address unless there are complaints or other compliance issues. If it is determined that a recreation residence is being used for full-time occupancy as their primary residence, consider following up for non-compliance as well as engaging law enforcement to issue warnings and citations ([36 CFR 261.10\(l\)](#)).

**Q11: Is there anything that would prevent an individual from being approved for a recreation residence permit if they purchased a cabin with an existing authorization that is currently in good standing?**

A11: As long as the new cabin owners can comply with the terms of the permit (pay the annual bill and maintain the private improvements), there should not be an issue. A person is only able to have 1 rec res permit in their name, so if they already have one, that would be against policy (FSM 2721.23). If there are non-compliance issues that have been documented in the past that need to be remedied, that could be a hurdle to overcome as a contingency to obtaining a new permit.

**Q12: What does it mean to be conditionally approved or conditionally accepted?**

A12: There may be improvements that were completed on a rec res that were done without approval from the Forest Service, are out of compliance, and/or otherwise are a use that is to be phased-out (since it does not follow policy or is not authorized in the permit, Operations and Maintenance Plan, or other attachments). Examples may include having a deck that exceeds the square footage limitation allowed in the Operation and Maintenance Plan specific to a Ranger District, or having additional sleeping quarters/guest cabins on a lot. These violations would be specific to the Forest Service unit and identified in writing in the attached Operation and Maintenance Plan and/or Forest or Regional policy supplement.

To be conditionally approved or conditionally accepted means that the undesirable use or violation is temporarily accepted until some future event occurs that would provide for the opportunity to fix or cure the issue. Examples of those opportunities may include: when the structure needs to be replaced (deck is old and needs to be redone) or when damage occurs to the improvement, such as from a tree strike. In some cases, the Forest Service has prescribed in non-compliance letters or in the purpose statement of the permit itself what that future event would be, such as upon change in ownership, meaning that at the time when a new owner comes into the picture, that there is a requirement for remedy.

For administration, ensure that there is ample documentation and written communications with the permit holder in order to support any action and if not documented, then you are starting from the beginning. It is often challenging to address these issues, so be sure to engage your SO or RO as needed. Be practical, and do not take action unless you are committed to follow through.

**Q13: Maintenance of access roads for recreation residences are the responsibility of the permit holder, where does that responsibility begin?**

A13: Most rec res are accessed from a county and/or unrestricted (open) Forest System road. Where the spur road or private driveway is no longer open to the public for vehicle use and is not part a Forest System road, then it becomes a private road. That private road or driveway should be listed as an ancillary use in the purpose statement to the cabin and that segment of road is private responsibility. Do not charge any additional fees for the ancillary use as it is part of the primary use (cabin). The private access may include a privately owned bridge, which is also not the government's responsibility to maintain or keep open. Rec Residences may perform road maintenance on open Forest System roads, such as plow snow or otherwise do improvements that are above and beyond the needs of the Forest Service, but those maintenance activities should be authorized by a 7700 Engineering Road Use permit.

It is not appropriate for the Forest Service to maintain or otherwise invest any funds on non-Forest System roads, bridges or improvements that are used solely by recreation residence permittees to

access their lots. Recreation residence permits explicitly state in the terms and conditions that road maintenance by the Forest Service is not provided, meaning it's not guaranteed, as to avoid legal obligations on the part of the government (protection against anti-deficiency). Annual land use fees are not assessed to account for government maintenance of access roads unless they provide access to the public to other Forest Service sites or for other Forest Service needs.

**Q14: If there are projects that need to be approved to maintain the cabin (foundational repairs, seal log replacement) and the lot (drainage improvements) that are fairly large or involved projects, what is the timeline the FS is held to for review/authorization of the proposed maintenance?**

A14: There's no set deadline in law, regulation or policy, but we should be timely in our replies, especially now that we have fee retention to pay our salaries. Prioritize those improvements that are requested to mitigate damage, provide for health and human safety, or otherwise that are needed to avoid any further damage to resources/property. Err on the side of swift approvals and do not delay, particularly when there is imminent or demonstrative threat to property, resources, or health and human safety. Pay close attention to what the permit itself says about the topic, and any attachment to the permit.

**Q15: What do you do when a cabin owner requests to cut hazard trees? Do we monitor or inspect hazard trees?**

A15: We should swiftly be allowing hazard trees to be cut, which are the responsibility of the recreation residence permit holder per the permit. There should not be delays in approval as there is often personal property and/or human safety at risk. This is explicitly true in cases where there is imminent and/or a demonstrative threat. If the permit holder believes there is a risk, then it is incumbent on the Forest Service to allow them to mitigate. The Forest Service should err on the side of allowing trees be cut and it should be very rare that we would object or not approve a tree be cut in a short period of time. Cabin owners may be required to obtain a firewood permit, but the value of the trees is a distance second in terms of priority when considering safety. If there is doubt about whether or not a tree or trees present a hazard, qualified forest service staff should do a site review or if the need is imminent, ask the holder to provide pictures showing the hazard. It may be appropriate to allow the trees be cut and documented with photos, measurements of diameter and later followed up on by administrators for any needed valuation. The agency and administration are prioritizing active forest and timber management.

The Forest Service should not be identifying specific trees on the rec res permitted lot that may be hazardous, even though we often have that skill-set, there is potential liability to the government.

**Q16: Where can I get training on recreation residences?**

A16: For general training, see: [Special Uses - Training and Procedure](#). For rec res related training,

see the [Res Res SharePoint page](#) (screen shot below).

#### Training

- [Rec Res Administration](#): SharePoint tools, Administration, Fee Retention spending, Jeopardy! w/ Enterprise - 1 hour (12/2025)
- [Map Viewer for Recreation Residences](#), 38 mins, WO's Rob Ahl - 7/2025
- [Rec Res Fundamentals](#) - 58 minutes (full video of items below), Enterprise, R2 & WO (4/2024)
  - [Inspections & Survey 123](#) (11 mins, Pablo Martinez)
  - [Notice of Non-compliance](#) (7 mins, Sommer Moyer)
  - [Digital Folders](#) (4 mins, Tony Papa)
  - [Permit Transfers](#) (7 mins, Terinda Whisenant)
  - [SUDS Reports & User Views](#) (6 mins, Amy Schaefer)
  - [Billings & Dunnings](#) (3 mins, Joe Holzinger)
  - [Line Officer Communication](#) (6 mins, Stan Helin)
  - [Recap of Actions for 20-year Renewals](#) (5 mins, Christine Brown)
    - [PowerPoint With Links](#)
    - [Additional Rec Res Resources](#)
- [Spot Training 1 hr 25 min video & PowerPoint](#) (1/2023)

#### **Q17: May a cabin be owned by multiple people who are not married?**

A17: Yes, the cabin is personal property and that ownership “behind the scenes” is a matter between the private parties. A key distinction is that the single permit itself will only be issued to an individual, married couple, or trustee of a valid Trust to ensure the Forest Service has a clear understanding and relationship for who is responsible to comply with the terms and conditions of the permit. The Forest Service relationship and administration is a matter between the agency and the permit holder. That is, the Forest Service should not be playing “referee” amongst the various co-owners or responding to individuals who are not the holder. In the event other co-owners want the permit changed and issued in their name, that would require the completion of the documentation to demonstrate ownership ([2700-3a](#) & [SF-299](#)) and necessitate a transfer fee. Reference FSM 2721.23 and FSH 2709.11, section 14.1(2).

#### **Q18: Can a recreation residence permit be issued to a Trust?**

A18: Yes, recreation residence permits are unique from other special uses in that a permit may be allowed to be issued to a Trust. This can be complicated due to the legal nature of Trusts. A transfer fee is required to issue a new permit to a Trust. OGC may need to review the trust to ensure it meets certain requirements before a permit can be issued. For details on Trusts, see the WO SharePoint page (screen shot below): <https://usdagcc.sharepoint.com/sites/fs-rec-suts/SitePages/Recreation%20Residence.aspx>

#### **Trusts & Adverse Actions**

- [Trust Guidance & Template](#) - R1
- [Sample letter: Notice of Noncompliance for violating terms](#) (Enterprise & WO)
- [Sample letter: Unauthorized Sleeping cabin](#)
- [Sample letter: Revocation](#)
- [WO to ROs on Living Trusts](#) (2002)
  - [WO Letter on Trusts](#) (1995)

**Q19: What is the intent of the nationwide expiration of recreation residence authorizations on 12/31/2028?**

A19: National policy is to issue permits for the max term allowable (20 years) and have them expire at the same time to lump that body of work together (renewals). In addition, policy in FSM 2721.23a states “*Issue all recreation residence permits in a tract, or in logical groups of tracts, with the same expiration date, to the extent possible.*” The goal is not to have all different versions of permits and Operating Plans, but have them be reasonably consistent.

**Q20: What are consistency reviews?**

A20: Consistency reviews are noted in [national policy](#) to ensure that the recreation residences are still considered appropriate/desired in their respective locations. Unless there is something explicitly documented in the specific Forest Plan and/or otherwise being pursued in terms of relocating a rec res due to resource or other concerns, it is a very “low bar” to consider the rec res to be in an acceptable location. It should be very rare that we would document or otherwise take action to consider a rec res to be inconsistent with the purposes for which the National Forest is managed. In other words, the continuation of use and occupancy is given as acceptable unless otherwise documented to the contrary.

**Q21: What are isolated cabins?**

A21: Isolated cabins (use code 121) are very different from recreation residences (use code 123) and are those cabins that were often allowed on a short-term basis to address a historical trespass or similar situation. They are often issued for a term of 5-15 years or set to expire upon the death of the permit holder. There is specific policy to isolated cabins in FSM 2721.21 and by policy, are intended to be phased-out. They are authorized under different legal authorities. Note that there are valid recreation residences that are stand-alone and are not surrounded by other rec res, but that does not mean they are “isolated cabins” in the sense as use code 121.

**Q22: How are recreation rental cabins different from rec res?**

A22: The Forest Service owns and manages numerous recreational cabins that are available for the public to rent on a nightly basis (example: [Pike-San Isabel](#)). These are distinctly different from the privately owned rec res cabins that are authorized by permit and not government property.

**Q23: Why are recreation residences not allowed to rent their cabins?**

A23: The standard permit language in the recreation residence permit (2700-5a) identifies the use of recreation residences to be “non commercial”. The permit further notes that incidental rental *may* be allowed with approval from the Forest Service. Some Forests and Ranger Districts have addressed this specifically in the Operation and Maintenance Plans that are attached to the permits, including protocols for coordinating with the Forest Service. The [Internal Revenue Service](#) considers commercial rental to be 15 days or more each tax year, meaning that renting of 14 days or less each year does not cross the “commercial threshold” and *may* be allowed. The Forest Service commonly adopts the IRS interpretation of what may be allowed, unless otherwise specified in the specific Plan. This allows for an incidental amount of rent that may help defray maintenance and other costs. The standard permit limitation is in place because the recreation residence program was never intended to allow permit holders to profit from the use of public land, nor are the annual fees assessed accounting for commercial use (fees would be higher if commercial). Many cabin owners are opposed to their neighbors renting out their cabins because that can change the dynamics/security of the single-family use.