



Cabin Program Restoration Act

CABIN LOSS: FOREST SERVICE POLICIES AND WILDFIRE...

A Century of History. The Recreation Residence Program (RRP) was established by Congress in 1915 to encourage family recreation on our National Forests. By the 1960s, there were over 19,000 permits for cabins on fewer than 10,000 acres of the 193M acres of National Forests. As of 2022, less than 13,800 permitted cabins remain. Furthermore, the Forest Service is now poised to implement permit language changes which will further erode permit-holder rights, making the Program less sustainable. The accelerating erosion of this valuable and successful, family-oriented recreation program will continue unless the Forest Service changes current policies and practices.



A Severe Decline. The loss of cabins on our National Forests has accelerated due mostly to wildfires and restrictive, punitive Forest Service (FS) policies. Cabin owners face difficulties in rebuilding due to lack of insurance, age and will to navigate the FS process. Owners who suffer wildfire losses are not allowed to sell their remaining improvements and infrastructure to others willing to rebuild. FS practice allows only 'rebuilding or vacating the lot' by current owners. Today there are over 5000 vacant lots. Our goal is to see these vacant lots used for their intended recreation purpose. Each cabin built is continued positive revenue to the FS. No additional forest land or lots are needed to correct the decline of this historic program. We simply seek to use these lots already authorized and suitable for the Program.

IMPORTANCE OF THE PROGRAM. WHY IT MATTERS!

1. The RRP generates over **6.5 million recreation visitor days** by the public of all ages. These are recurring visits for extended stays in the same forest every year. Over 44% of the visitors to cabins are youth; future stewards of our national forest lands.
2. The RRP brings over **\$200M in economic stimulus to rural communities** including property taxes. This bill will not only help sustain but increase the economic benefits to rural communities.
3. The RRP is **revenue positive**. With over \$33M in fees collected in 2022, it is one of the highest returns for recreational use of National Forests. This bill will ensure a **net revenue increase** for administration of the RRP and other recreation programs.
4. The RRP is a **historic part of our culture**. Many family cabins are historic buildings with some listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

CONGRESS CAN HELP SOLVE THE PROBLEM

The legislation will:

1. Restore the Program to Congress' original intentions.
2. Address the threat of cabin losses and reverse the decline.
3. Protect the rights of permit holders.

The following changes will resolve a specific set of problems for generations to come. They will ensure the Recreation Residence Program on National Forests works for permit holders, their families, Forest Service program administration and the many rural communities who share tangible financial benefits.

RESTORE PROGRAM FROM DECLINE OVER DECADES. This will use the land as intended and authorized.

- **Problem:** *The Forest Service will not issue a new permit for authorized vacant lots.*

Solution: Develop a fair and equitable process for issuing new permits to enable building or rebuilding of cabins on existing authorized and currently vacant lots and place a limit on the number of lots held in-lieu. Current FS practice designates *all vacant lots as in-lieu lots* that might only be used when a current cabin is destroyed and cannot be rebuilt, thereby perpetuating a decline in cabins.

ADDRESS CABIN LOSSES FROM WILDFIRES. In the last five years alone, over 3% of the cabins have been destroyed by wildfires. The primary obstacles hindering rebuilding can be mitigated.

- **Problem:** *When there are remaining tangible improvements on a lot authorized for rebuilding, the Forest Service will not allow the permit holder to sell their improvements and issue a permit so a new owner can rebuild.*

Solution: Often the current owner lacks the resources to rebuild. If they sell their privately-owned improvements, the Forest Service should issue a permit to the new owner to rebuild the cabin. Current FS practice in wildfire prone California is to refuse to issue a permit to the new owner.

- **Problem:** *Some lots suffer damage after a wildfire, making the lot unbuildable.*

Solution: Forest Service and permit holders cooperate to mitigate geologic, hydrologic, environmental and archeological concerns in order to maximize the number of cabins rebuilt after a natural disaster.

- **Problem:** *If the current owner relinquishes their permit and their lot was authorized for rebuilding, the Forest Service will not issue a new permit to a new owner.*

Solution: When a current owner has no improvements to sell and chooses not to rebuild, designate the lot as vacant, not in-lieu, so then the Forest Service can issue a new permit to a new owner who will rebuild.

- **Problem:** *FEMA will not assist in post-disaster clean-up.*

Solution: The destroyed structures are private debris on federal land. Direct FEMA to allow states and counties to apply clean-up funds toward debris removal and remediation from the remains of privately-owned structures on public lands after a federal disaster.

STOP THE EROSION OF PERMIT-HOLDER RIGHTS. Asserting internal consistency, the Forest Service has modified the RRP special use permits to closely align with the language of permits used by commercial interests. This new, often changing language is inappropriate for this non-commercial, family-oriented recreation program. In 2017 and 2023, the Forest Service made changes to the permit without posting them for public comment.

- **Problem:** *Incomplete implementation of Cabin Fee Act: impaired access regulation and fee retention.*

Solution: The Cabin Fee Act, passed in 2014, established fee retention beginning in 2025 and mandated that the fees be spent for RRP administration with any excess funds going to other recreation. Establish oversight and transparency of these retained permit fees by the Forest Service. Late in 2023, the Forest Service proposed draft regulation that is inadequate and inconsistent with the intent of Congress.

- **Problem:** *New permit terms make termination of a permit easier with no option to appeal.*

Solution: Require that any decision to revoke or terminate a RRP permit prior to its expiration date be subject to administrative appeal.

Without change, financial loss will result for the Forest Service, numerous rural communities and cabin permit holders, alike.