

USFS cabins offer a unique twist to Tahoe living



U.S. Forest Service cabins in Tahoe are family treasures.

By Kathryn Reed

In the early 1900s, Congress allowed the U.S. Forest Service to lease cabins in an attempt to get more people to use the National Forests which were then in their infancy.

And use them they did.

The Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit of the USFS oversees 594 Recreation Residence Special Use Permits – which includes Echo Lakes. In California, 6,000 permits have been issued, with 15,000 cabins permitted throughout the country.

“All of the cabins are authorized for use throughout the year. Under the terms and conditions of the permit, it is prohibited to use the cabin as a primary residence,” said Lori Alessio, special uses permit administrator in the basin.

Del Laine’s cabin in El Dorado County has been in her family since her parents acquired it in 1934. She spends about five months a year at the 1,000-square-foot dwelling that has two

bedrooms, one bath, a little kitchen and small living area.

“Originally the cabins were identified as summer residences and were used that way,” Laine said. “Leases are renewable every 20 years. In the past we had year-to-year permits. The 99-year leases never really existed.”

When her folks bought the cabin (the Forest Service owns the land), about a dozen cabins existed. Now, 18 of the 24 lots around her have cabins. About a half dozen are used in the winter. At one time winter use was prohibited because no road existed.

Neighbors then and now are a community unto themselves. Women and children would spend summer at the cabins. Men, mostly from the Bay Area, came on weekends.

“First of all, I simply like the touchstone of history, as well as I like the space. The space that I enjoy with neighbors,” Laine said of the cabin, which she can’t foresee ever not belonging to her family. “I have a lot of privacy and I like the quiet.”

Leases may be passed to family and cabins may be sold. The original cabin near Laine is on the sixth generation. Hers is being enjoyed by the fourth generation.

Changes to cabins are allowed, though like everything in the basin, the restrictions have gotten more cumbersome through the years.

“Cabins are prohibited to expand in footprint. Exceptions are provided for accessibility needs,” Allesio said. “Policy requires the cabins to be maintained to blend in with the forest environment and “like in kind” materials are required. Most maintenance projects approved by the Forest Service also require permits from the county building department. These projects include roof, deck and window replacements.”

Outhouses were the norm. Now most cabins have sewer lines. Lahontan Water Quality Control Board made exceptions to all sewage being hauled out of the basin when installing a sewer line posed even more environmental problems, according to Allessio.

Sewage holding tanks at Echo Summit are routinely pumped or people can haul the waste out. Two tracts near Truckee, which are outside the basin, have septic tanks.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is minimally involved with the cabins. Erosion concerns – aka best management practices – come under TRPA's microscope.

"We have expressed concerns with the Forest Service about gray water discharge from cabins. A lot of improvements have been made over the years," said Julie Regan, TRPA spokeswoman.

Cabin owners pay the government 5 percent of the appraised value of the lot as rent. According to Allessio, the lot is appraised as though it is vacant. The county or appropriate entity assesses the value of the cabin for tax collection purposes.

Recreation residence tracts within the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit:

Echo Lakes area

Channel Tract – 19 cabins

Hemlock Tract – 28 cabins

Island Tract – 1 cabin

North Shore Tract – 14 cabins

South Shore Tract – 41 cabins

Mermaid Cove Tract – 18 cabins

Fallen Leaf Lake area

Fallen Leaf Lake Tract – 42 cabins

Alpine Falls Tract – 9 cabins

Fallen Leaf Lodge Tract – 22 cabins

Stanford Tract – 10 cabins

Lily Lake Tract – 10 cabins

Fish Hatchery Tract – 3 cabins

Fallen Leaf Park Tract – 1 cabin

Echo Summit area

Echo Road Tract – 42 cabins

Echo Summit Tract – 44 cabins

Angora Lakes area

Lower Angora tract – 12 cabins

Spring Creek area

Spring Creek Tract – 137 cabins

Meyers area

Rainbow Tract – 51 cabins

Upper Truckee Tract – 18 cabins

Bridge Tract – 20 cabins

Emerald Bay area

Emerald Bay Tract – 22 cabins

Tahoe City area

Twin Crags Tract – 14 cabins

Fir Crags Tract – 16 cabins