

Proposed Demolition of the Cascade Cottages

Public Notification of Adverse Effects on Historic Properties

National Park Service
Rocky Mountain National Park
1000 U.S. Highway 36
Estes Park, CO 80517

September 2026

Project Description

Rocky Mountain National Park (park) is proposing to redevelop the southern half of the Cascade Cottages property into an administrative campground for non-recreational use to be used by conservation corps, youth groups, research groups, Tribes, and park staff. All existing cottages, outbuildings, and utilities within the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) listed Cascade Cottages Historic District will be removed to construct the administrative campground.

The new administrative campground will not be accessible to the public. It is anticipated that the campground will be utilized for approximately 12 to 15 weeks annually, subject to weather conditions. All existing cottages, outbuildings, and related utility infrastructure at the site will be demolished and removed. After removal, the site would be minimally re-graded to accommodate tent pads and gathering spaces, generally guided by existing topographic contours. Grading would primarily involve the placement of fill and limited surface recontouring to stabilize the site and address safety concerns. The park will revegetate disturbed areas as needed. The scheduled demolition of the cottages, outbuildings, and utility infrastructure, as well as property regrading, is scheduled to commence in the winter of 2026. Subsequent development of the administrative campground will commence upon securing sufficient funding.

Preliminary design of the administrative campground has been conducted by the park in-house (see Administrative Campground Design Schematics). The proposed campground layout follows the existing driveway system and can support up to 60 people within 3 to 4 group sites. Anticipated features will include picnic tables, food storage lockers, fire pits, circulation, parking, and a central pavilion. Utilities will include vault toilets, an above ground water storage tank, potable water filling stations, solar showers, and electricity for the central pavilion.

In 2025, the park determined that the removal of all existing cottages, outbuildings, and utilities within the NRHP listed Cascade Cottages Historic District (5LR14505) meets the criteria of

adverse effect pursuant to 36 CFR § 800.5 (a)(1), because the undertaking would alter and diminish characteristics that contribute to the property's historic significance and integrity.

Per 36 CFR § 800.6 (a)(4), the park is providing an opportunity for members of the public to express their views on resolving adverse effects of the undertaking.

Cascade Cottages Property Acquisition

Kansas schoolteachers L.V. and Hazel Davis bought the Cascade Cottages property in 1941 and the family operated a seasonal lodging business that extended from Memorial Day through Labor Day. In addition to the front office, there were 12 rustic cabins that were available for lodging. The family approached the park in 2009 offering to sell the property to the NPS.

With assistance from the Trust for Public Land, the Rocky Mountain Conservancy, and many donors, including the Estes Valley Land Trust, Larimer County, and the Town of Estes Park, the park was able to acquire the 42-acre Cascade Cottages property in March of 2017. The northern half of the property was designated Wilderness on July 19, 2022; the southern half retains the former Cascade Cottages lodging facility. Following the acquisition, the park undertook a comprehensive evaluation of the property's historical significance and assessed potential future uses.

Pre-NEPA scoping in 2018 presented five options to the public (1. Youth Conservation Corps Seasonal Housing, 2. Youth and Volunteer Outdoor Education, 3. Mothball the Structures, 4. Remove the Structures and Restore the Site, 5. Other Alternatives) to help initiate discussion on ideas for the future of Cascade Cottages that would be compatible with the mission of the National Park. Preliminary planning considered approaches that would prioritize the naturalization of the area and encourage compatible uses focused on outdoor and/or environmental education.

Mission Need

At present, the park's public campgrounds accommodate mission-essential conservation corps, youth groups, researchers and Tribal groups for up to twelve weeks each summer during peak season. However, these facilities are insufficient to support such groups, and their administrative use reduces the number of public campsites available to visitors, resulting in decreased visitor access and annual revenue loss. In response, the park has formally proposed redeveloping the Cascade Cottages property into an administrative campground for groups conducting mission-essential work. Centralizing administrative camping in one location is anticipated to ease demand on public campgrounds and improve operational efficiency. Since this preliminary planning occurred alongside a land acquisition, alternative sites within the park for administrative campground purposes were not considered.

Area of Potential Effect

The defined area of potential effect (APE) is comprised of the 22.7-acre Cascade Cottages Historic District Boundary. Cascade Cottages is located on the south side of Fall River Road, approximately 0.7 miles west of the park's Fall River Entrance Station. The APE includes the anticipated construction limits of disturbance, staging areas for removed topsoil, fill, construction materials, and heavy equipment, as well as potential indirect visual effects to the adjacent Trail Ridge Road, also known as Fall River Road, in this section of the park.

Identification of Historic Properties

The APE for this undertaking was surveyed for archeological resources in 2019 (Briggs 2019). During this survey, Fall River Road and the Stanley Power Plant/Fall River Hydroelectric Plant Pipeline were identified within the current APE. The Stanley Power Plant/Fall River Hydroelectric Plant Pipeline was found to officially support the eligibility of the overall resource on September 11, 2018; Fall River Road is listed in the NRHP.

In addition, the park completed a Cultural Landscape Report (CLR) for Trail Ridge Road in 2023, which was found to be officially eligible for the NRHP under Criteria A and C. Segment 1 of Trail Ridge Road (Fall River Road/High Drive/US 34 segment) subsumes the historic Fall River Road section that intersects the APE.

In 2020, the park drafted an NRHP nomination for the Cascade Cottages property. This nomination concluded that the property had significance under Criterion A at the local level, with significance in the area of Entertainment/Recreation. The property was originally developed as a rustic resort lodge and later as a cabin camp. Cascade Cottages is significant because its history spans two distinct periods of the tourism and resort industry in the park. Cascade Cottages Historic District was listed in the NRHP on August 27, 2020.

Assessment of Effects

In 2025, the park determined that the removal of all existing buildings, structures, and utilities within the NRHP listed Cascade Cottages Historic District (5LR14505) meets the criteria of adverse effect pursuant to 36 CFR § 800.5 (a)(1), because the undertaking would alter and diminish characteristics that contribute to the property's historic significance and integrity. The park issued its finding of adverse effect on September 17, 2025 to the Colorado State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and to Tribal Historic Preservation Officers (THPOs) and notified the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) of its finding on June 22, 2026. Section 106 consultation has been ongoing following the finding of adverse effect to help identify opportunities to avoid, minimize, or mitigate impacts from this undertaking.

Rationale for Demolition

As part of pre-NEPA planning, the park assessed the potential to retain and repurpose the existing buildings. After considering the operational requirements of the proposed undertaking, existing infrastructure constraints, and long-term management objectives, it was determined that

maintaining the cottages and outbuildings would not adequately meet their intended purpose due to three primary factors:

1. No Functional Utilities

Since 1983, the proprietors of the Cascade Cottages hauled in potable water because the property does not possess an operational water system. Establishing a new septic and water system with capacity for fire suppression and sprinklers, as required by code, would require a substantial upfront capital investment as well as significant ongoing operation and maintenance.

In contrast, the utility improvements proposed for the administrative campground, such as vault toilets, an above ground water storage tank, potable water filling stations, solar showers, as well as electricity, are intentionally limited to the level of infrastructure necessary to support administrative and camping functions. The proposed campground utilities would require substantially less capital investment and create significantly fewer long-term operational and maintenance obligations than establishing a new water system for the former lodging operation.

2. Need for Centralized Housing

The park has also adopted a long-term strategy of centralizing employee housing within the Headquarters Area of the park, and in the Colorado River District on the west side of the park, to improve operational efficiency. Consolidating housing provides centralized maintenance and utility services, improved fire protection, greater walkability and access to park facilities and community services, and more efficient response to maintenance requests and work orders. Retaining the existing buildings at the Cascade Cottages property would not support these long-term operational objectives.

3. Deferred Maintenance

Cascade Cottages were open only during summer months, as the cabins were not built for year-round or the six-to-nine-month seasonal occupancy for park employees. Rehabilitation of the structures would be a major investment to make them code compliant and suitable for six to nine months or longer of habitation.

While we have partnered with preservation groups on previous projects such as McGraw Ranch and the William Allen White Cabin to help fund significant rehabilitation of historic structures, those partnerships do not include sustained support for operations and maintenance. Even with rental revenue, the park would not recover the operating costs.

Alternatives Considered

Following the park's adverse effect determination on September 17, 2025, and Colorado SHPO's concurrence with the park's finding on October 17, 2025, the park held a virtual meeting with the SHPO office on February 18, 2026, where we discussed rationale for demolition and potential alternatives to reduce or mitigate impacts to the district. The park continued consultation with the SHPO on May 29, 2026 and identified four alternatives for the cottages (see below).

Alternative 1: No Action - Leave the Cascade Cottages to Deteriorate in Place

Demolition by neglect is discouraged by the ACHP and constitutes an adverse effect under 36 CFR 800.5(a)(2)(vi). Allowing the cottages to continue deteriorating without intervention would not only result in a loss of historic integrity but also create increasing safety hazards for park staff and the public. Accordingly, stabilization and other management actions must be considered along with this alternative to address both preservation responsibilities and public safety concerns.

The park has considered whether preserving retaining (mothballing) a smaller group of cottages might allow for a reduced historic district while supporting the mission needs of the project. Ultimately, it was determined that, while this option could offer some preservation, this decision would still adversely affect the overall integrity of the district. The Cascade Cottages recognition is centered primarily on its significance under National Register Criterion A, rather than the architectural value of individual buildings under Criterion C. Therefore, retaining only a few cottages would still not negate the adverse effect finding, nor would it fully address the project's impacts or meet the operational needs that are guiding this undertaking.

Alternative 2: Rehabilitate and Reuse the Cascade Cottages

Rehabilitating and reusing the cottages would impose a substantial financial burden on the park, given the extent of structural, utility, accessibility, and code-compliance upgrades required to bring the cottages and outbuildings into safe public use. Necessary improvements would likely include substantial rehabilitation of aging building systems, utility infrastructure, fire and life-safety protections, accessibility accommodations, and other upgrades needed to meet current building, health, and safety codes. While partnerships and state grants could provide resources for initial preservation, even donor-funded rehabilitation would introduce ongoing maintenance, staffing, and operational obligations that exceed the park's current capacity and compete with existing deferred maintenance needs. Limited stabilization or seasonal use options were considered, but these options would not adequately address long-term preservation, on site utility needs, or operational feasibility.

The reuse the property for commercial purposes (outleasing), such as coffee shops, restaurants, lodges, or retail establishments, is deemed incompatible with the mission need stated above. Such business activities are inconsistent with the park's purpose of preserving its natural features and wilderness character. Furthermore, the financial commitment necessary for rehabilitating the cottages and outbuildings would likely exceed the capabilities of individual lessees.

Alternative 3: Offsite Relocation of the Cascade Cottages:

Following a meeting with the Colorado SHPO on February 18, 2026, the park researched the General Services Administration (GSA) marketing and disposal process as a potential mechanism for relocating the cottages. As part of this effort, the park assessed the Fair Market Value (FMV) of each cottage to determine eligibility for GSA marketing and the feasibility of offsite removal. This analysis found that the FMV of the cottages falls below the minimum

threshold required to initiate the GSA disposal process, indicating limited marketability and insufficient financial incentive for third-party relocation. The park has determined this alternative to be infeasible and will not be carried forward for further consideration.

Alternative 4: Demolition of the Cascade Cottages:

This preferred alternative involves the complete removal of all above-ground cottages, outbuildings, structures, and associated utility infrastructure at the Cascade Cottages Historic District (5LR14505) NRHP listed property. Demolition would remove the physical fabric of the district and result in an adverse effect through the loss of historic materials, design, and association.

Consulting Parties

Following the park's adverse effect determination on September 17, 2025, and Colorado SHPO's concurrence with the park's finding on October 17, 2025, the park held a virtual meeting with the Colorado SHPO office on February 18, 2026, where we addressed SHPO's questions regarding our rationale for demolition and discussed potential alternatives to reduce or mitigate impacts to the district. After that meeting at the SHPO's request, the park considered off-site relocation and verified the legal process for the park to do so (see Alternative 3 above). The park continued written consultation with the Colorado SHPO on May 29, 2026 where we identified four alternatives for the cottages, as well as provided a draft Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to help facilitate discussions regarding appropriate mitigation strategies.

The park has also engaged with federally recognized Tribes as part of the consultation for this project. On March 21, 2018, the park sent Tribes information during the pre-NEPA planning. The park again consulted with Tribes on the undertaking and assessment of effects in a letter dated September 17, 2025 and the park extended invitations for Tribes to participate in drafting the MOA through correspondence dated July 20, 2026.

On June 22, 2026, the park submitted an e106 package to the ACHP with documents related to adverse effect finding at Cascade Cottages Historic District. These documents included a description of the undertaking, consultation letters, design schematics, an APE map, and the draft MOA sent to SHPO and Tribes. In a letter dated July 7, the ACHP requested more information, and the park is continuing consultations to address their request.

References Cited

Architectural Resources Group

2023 Trail Ridge Road Cultural Landscape Report. On file at Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.

Briggs, Clive

2019 Cultural Resource Survey for Exotic Plant Treatment Areas Moraine Park, Aspenglen, and Lumpy Ridge Rocky Mountain National Park, Larimer County, Colorado. On file at Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.

History Colorado

2020 Cascade Cottages Larimer County. Webpage,
<https://www.historycolorado.org/location/cascade-cottages>.

McWilliams, Carl & Cheria Yost

2019 National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Cascade Cottages. On file at Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.

National Park Service

2018 Cascade Cottages Plan for Future Use - Pre NEPA. Webpage,
<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/projectHome.cfm?projectID=77616>.

Glossary of Terms

Adverse Effect:

An action that negatively impacts the historic significance or integrity of a property listed in the National Register of Historic Places, as defined under federal regulations (36 CFR § 800.5).

Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP):

The ACHP is a federal agency that promotes the preservation of historic resources across the United States. It advises the President and Congress on historic preservation policy, oversees the implementation of the National Historic Preservation Act, and provides guidance to federal agencies on compliance with preservation laws, especially regarding projects that may affect historic properties.

Administrative Campground:

A campground designated for use by park staff, conservation corps, youth groups, researchers, and Tribes and not open to the general public.

Area of Potential Effect (APE):

The geographic area within which a project may cause changes to historic properties, including direct and indirect effects.

Colorado State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO):

The official in Colorado is responsible for overseeing preservation of historic sites and compliance with federal and state laws.

Deferred Maintenance:

Maintenance and repairs that have been postponed, often resulting in increased costs and deterioration of structures.

Demolition by Neglect:

The process of allowing a historic property to deteriorate without intervention, resulting in eventual loss of integrity or safety hazards.

Historic Property:

A historic property is a site, building, structure, district, or object that has been officially recognized for its significance in history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, or culture. These properties are often listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) and are considered worthy of preservation due to their contribution to the understanding and appreciation of the past.

Memorandum of Agreement (MOA):

A formal document outlining agreed-upon mitigation measures between agencies and stakeholders when a project will have adverse effects on historic properties.

Mitigation:

Actions taken to reduce or offset adverse impacts on historic properties resulting from a project.

National Register of Historic Places (NRHP):

The official federal list of districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects considered significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering, or culture. Properties listed on the NRHP are recognized for their contribution to the understanding and appreciation of the nation's past and are often deemed worthy of preservation.

Pre-NEPA Scoping:

The preliminary process of identifying potential project impacts and alternatives before formal review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Section 106 Consultation:

The process required by the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) for federal agencies to consider the effects of their undertakings on historic properties and consult with stakeholders.

Solar Shower:

A portable shower system that uses solar energy to heat water, typically consisting of a bag or tank left in direct sunlight, commonly used in campgrounds or outdoor settings where traditional plumbing is unavailable.

Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO):

An official designated by a federally recognized Tribe to oversee preservation of tribal historic sites and participate in federal consultations.

Utility Infrastructure:

Systems and equipment for essential services such as water, electricity, sewage, and fire suppression.

Vault Toilet:

A non-flush toilet system typically used in campgrounds, consisting of a sealed underground vault for waste storage.

Criterion A:

A National Register evaluation criterion recognizing properties significant for their association with important events or patterns in history.

Criterion C:

A National Register evaluation criterion that identifies properties significant for their architectural style, construction methods, artistic value, or representation of the work of a master. It is used to recognize sites, buildings, structures, or objects that embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant or distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.

Mothball:

To secure and preserve a building or structure for possible future use without active occupancy or ongoing maintenance.

Outleasing:

The process of leasing park property to third parties for purposes compatible with the park's mission.

Fill:

Material used to raise ground level or grade, typically during site development or regrading.

Regrading:

Altering the slope or contour of land, often to prepare a site for new construction or restore stability.

Fair Market Value (FMV):

The price at which property would sell on the open market under normal conditions.