



# ON THE LOOKOUT

From the  
**National Chairman**  
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## THE BIGELOW REDEMPTION

### WHAT WE MUST LEARN FROM THE UNEXPECTED LOSS OF A BEAUTIFUL LOOKOUT

On the afternoon of April 15, 2011 a high profile fire lookout located on the Appalachian Trail in Maine was intentionally burned to the ground by state park personnel, and with it went more than a century of history, dating all the way back to 1905! How did this happen? It is a classic story, and one we simply must learn from.

One of a very few ground house lookouts in Maine, the important Bigelow Lookout (located on Avery Peak) was rebuilt by the Maine Forest Service in 1967 with a new stone foundation and a classic north woods style 12'x12' wooden cab that had been prebuilt the winter before. With one of the most sweeping views of any fire tower in the state it was no surprise that such a major investment on a new structure was made. The future of the lookout seemed assured for another 60 years.

Unfortunately, the Maine Forest Service began phasing out lookouts in the 1980s and even Bigelow went dark, with no attention given to maintenance. By 2000 only three lookouts, Agamenticus, Mt. Hope, and Ossipee remained staffed, all three by FFLA volunteers and members of local fire districts. Surprisingly, no one came forward to staff Bigelow, even though it was popular hiking destination atop one of the state's few 4,000-foot peaks.

While the lookout gradually succumbed in abandonment, big things were happening to the mountain it sat upon. Avery Peak and 6,000 acres around it was acquired by developers and promoted as a major ski area and a possible

venue for the Winter Olympics. Not everyone was pleased, and in 1976 Maine voters approved the Bigelow Preserve Act by referendum with a margin of 33,000 votes. Eventually the new state park grew to 33,000 acres with the fire lookout at its crown. The structure was transferred from the Forest Service to the State Parks Division.

The next chapters in the story are where our lesson lies. The Bureau of Parks and Lands prepared long range management plans which did not include maintaining the lookout as a public contact point, even one staffed by volunteers. Four public meetings to allow citizens to respond to the plans were held between 2005 and 2007 and no objections were made to the removal of the lookout. Having completed the public input phase, the state park planners followed up with multiple meeting of Advisory Committees and internal interdisciplinary review. The Maine Forest Service approved removal as it was not longer used, and a review of records found no reference to historic status (amazingly, no one had listed Bigelow, the second oldest lookout site in the state, to the National Historic Lookout Register). The State Historic Preservation Office considers only properties 50 years or older, and at age 46 the restored lookout did not qualify.

Much of the foregoing review comes from a complete review conducted by Maine Chapter Director Bill Cobb, who responded immediately in April at my request. We can honestly ask ourselves, where were the members of FFLA in Maine during all these public hearings? The answer is that there are too few FFLA members who live in Maine to have known about what was happening. The Chapter Director, Bill Cobb, lives in Massachusetts and has a large job as FFLA webmaster. He took the Maine director job at my personal request after we failed to find anyone else interested. Our most active Maine members, the ones who staffed the lookouts, had either passed away or retired. Our excellent fire tower inventories were completed by the late Dave Hilton, and updated by Bill Cobb, Bill Spach (West Virginia), Bob Spear (New Jersey) and Mark Haughwout (Vermont). Our Deputy Chair, Peter Barr, lives in western North Carolina. Although he completed a well-publicized 2,178-mile hike of the Appalachian Trail last year and visited the lookout, he was unaware of the pending removal. Not surprising, since our local members didn't know either. There are no faults here, only a record of too few people covering too much territory.

#### HOW HAS FFLA RESPONDED? THE "BIGELOW REDEMPTION"

The lookout is gone ... but FFLA has responded aggressively to the experience with a four-part initiative:

1. The Eastern Region would be split in two, with the proposed creation of a new Southern Region. This proposal is before the Board of Directors as a [bylaws amendment](#).

2. New procedures are being developed by the Executive Committee (FFLA officers) to establish periodic reviews by the Deputy Chairs with every Chapter Director.
3. A new requirement is proposed that every Chapter Director establish communication with the appropriate State Heritage Protection Office. In states with multiple chapters, one director would be given this responsibility.
4. FFLA will establish a permanent Liaison Officer with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

The bottom line: FFLA learns from our failures, and responds to opportunities to inventory, restore, and promote the importance of fire lookouts in all 50 states!

I am looking forward to seeing many of you soon at Mt. Hood, Oregon!

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