



ON THE LOOKOUT

From the
National Chairman
Keith A. Argow

Vienna, Virginia
Winter 2011

THE FOREST FIRE LOOKOUT ASSOCIATION CHASING AN IMPOSSIBLE DREAM?

In two decades plus two, the Forest Fire Lookout Association has established itself on the web as the go-to source for information on fire lookouts in America and worldwide. Under Gary Weber's editing we publish the Lookout Network magazine, our four-color glossy quarterly that is full of news, stories of history, and wonderful pictures. There is no wonder that it consistently receives rave reviews. Our association co-sponsors both the National Historic Lookout Register (NHLR.org) as well as the new Register of Former Fire Lookout Sites (FFLOS.com). Our members have participated in the restoration of a hundred or more lookouts, supporting 35 of them with cash restoration grants. Most of the volunteer active lookouts are staffed with FFLA members. When it comes to searching out the locations of the 8,000 lookouts that once stood in 49 states as symbols of forest conservation, no association comes close to FFLA in documenting the history of fire lookouts.

From that small and dedicated group of eleven that gathered at Hopewell Fire Tower in Pennsylvania in 1990 our organization has grown to 32 chapters, each with a voting director. Our membership topped out at about 1,000 and today stands at about 900. We are rightfully proud of our past, but what does the 10% membership decline portend for the future?

DOES OUR MEMBERSHIP DECLINE MEAN THE DREAM IS ENDING?

Successful organizations have two hallmarks: a steady growth in membership, plus a group of emerging leaders. Right now, FFLA has neither. Instead of complaining, we have to do something about that. But what? We have tried a lot of things. Our leadership is dying a blunt way of saying many are getting

pretty old. Five of our original directors are still in office. Others, like myself, have been active for 20 of the 22 years. Don't mistake me for a minute. I love this job - you know that - and I am honored to be your Chairman! Our officers feel the same way. But where are our successors? Finding and grooming them is our responsibility too.

There is a school of thought that no leader in a volunteer association should remain in office more than six years, ten at the most. That idea is founded on the concept that every organization needs an infusion of new blood to grow. Of course to every rule, there are exceptions. One of those exceptions relates to organizations focused on the past. Only a handful of people look to our heritage, while most look forward to their future. We recognize that our future includes respect and learning from the past. We find people who will volunteer, but to a point.... For example there are nearly 300 wonderful volunteers who staff the fire lookouts in southern California. While they enjoy their assigned days as observers, the majority do not join FFLA, even though they regularly distribute our brochures to visitors! That tells us something! We have to figure out what. They come to the door, but don't come in.

A HISTORY OF COST EFFECTIVE FIRE DETECTION

When organized fire protection came to America 100 years ago, there were no two-way radios, few roads, fewer telephone lines, no trucks and no airplanes. Fire lookout stations were the only practical answer to spotting fires. In some remote locations, especially in the west, a companion smoke chaser or sometimes the observer himself went directly to the fire to put it out. With all the remarkable changes that occurred over a century, it is a wonder that any fire lookouts remain! The reason so many are here, as we know so well, is that nothing yet developed can replace an experienced person looking over the forest, knowing every part of the landscape including who lives where, who is in the woods today, the nature of the fuels and potential fire rate of spread. Passing motorists, occasional air patrols, and rotating cameras can't do that.

We know there is a future for fire lookouts. Observers will still take pride in getting the first sighting. This is a constructive competition. Add to that the importance of having a real person on duty to explain the perils of wildfire and the importance of watersheds. Current research reveals that clear and clean water is the most important product of living forests. Prescribed fire helps that goal, hot wildfires degrade it.

ARE WE PART OF THE FUTURE, OR THE PAST?

I don't think this is an "impossible dream" for a minute. Do you? Get a member. Volunteer for positions. You will be glad you did!

Keith A. Argow
CEO/Chairman of the Board argow@cs.net