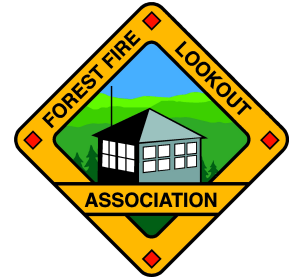


How To Get a Job as a Fire Lookout? Here's the Process and Tips for Success!



Information from the Forest Fire Lookout Association

One of the most common questions we get at the Forest Fire Lookout Association (FFLA) is how to get a Federal job as a Fire Lookout! This process can be a confusing and daunting path, but hopefully this guide provides some insight. Lookouts go unstaffed each season due to a lack of qualified applicants, so hopefully this can help those interested get their foot in the door and on their way to becoming a Fire Lookout, and in turn more Fire Lookouts can remain in active service. While this resource was written specifically with Federally-operated lookouts in mind, some of the pointers for preparation and your resume will be helpful in applying for positions with the few state forestry and fire protection organizations that still operate lookout towers as well.

Information used to write this guide was found on the US Office of Personnel Management's (OPM) website and in direct conversations with the United States Forest Service (USFS) Human Resources Department and Fire Management hiring managers at various locations. This information is also listed on all Federal Fire Lookout applications on USAJobs.gov found under the "Requirements" and "Qualifications" sections, which can be helpful to refer to when building your Federal resume and application packet.

The process to getting hired on at a Federal job, not just that of a Fire Lookout, is multi-faceted and somewhat complex. But let's start here:

Outreaches - the USFS and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) often use a pre-announcement or "outreach" prior to officially listing a job on the Federal Government's hiring website USAJobs.gov to attract potential applicants. This information will include the pay grade, duty location, position type and when the job announcement opens and closes for applications, as well as a contact email for the hiring manager. It is important to note not all hiring managers will list vacancies here, but if they do and you are interested, it is advised you reach out to express interest.

USAJobs.gov - this website is the only way to apply for a Federal Fire Lookout job. The website is difficult to navigate and is notoriously disliked within the Wildland Fire field due to its complexities. To assist yourself in the process, consider starting early, even before jobs officially post, to give yourself time to adjust if necessary. You start by setting up a personalized profile on the website. This involves basic information such as your name, contact information, veterans' preference (if you have it) and documentation. This process may seem straightforward enough, but it can take days at a time to do thoroughly. You must follow all instructions, attach any documents required, and complete all required fields - even missing one will cause your application to not be passed on to the next step by those who review your application package.

Finding a Fire Lookout Job - Fire Lookout jobs are typically listed on USAJobs.gov by late summer until sometime in October depending on what region the Lookout is based in. 'Fire Hire' is a rolling hiring process meaning there will be multiple hiring phases to fill any vacant roles. This process can go all the way into the Spring. All Fire Lookout jobs, whether they are with the USFS, BLM or another Federal agency will be classified as Forestry Technician (Lookout) and are either a GS-4 or 5 on the Federal pay scale. Sometimes BLM will post GS-3 roles, however these are few and far between. To ensure you do not miss any openings, set an alert on your USAJobs.gov profile for 'Forestry Technician (Lookout)' and whatever state you're interested in. If you do this you will be emailed daily if a job is posted.

It is important to note here that Fire Lookouts have what are called 'rehire rights' to their Lookout. Meaning they can non-competitively return to their location until they decide they don't want to anymore. They do not have to reapply each year. Many of the locations listed as potential vacancies on USAJobs.gov may be held by current Lookouts, but the positions are still listed in case something happens, they are unable to return and the position must be filled in an unexpected manner. So do not be surprised if your dream location is listed but isn't really a vacancy.

Preparing to Apply for a Fire Lookout Job - once you have found a role you are interested in, you are going to make sure you qualify for the position. Unlike private sector jobs, you must meet the Federal and OPM hiring standards to be considered for a position. Although it is not unheard of for people to slip through without meeting these guidelines, especially in the past, after speaking with Human Resources last year, it seems they are leaving it less up to the person reviewing your application to decide if you're qualified and more rigidly following these specific guidelines outlined by OPM to make things as fair as possible. Thankfully these qualifications are outlined very openly in the job description and you can tailor your Federal resume to meet them.

They are outlined as so:

Federal Job Requirements:

- You must be a U.S. Citizen or U.S. National.
- Males born after 12/31/1959 must be Selective Service registered or exempt.
- Subject to satisfactory adjudication of background investigation and/or fingerprint check.
- Direct Deposit Per Public Law 104/134 all Federal employees are required to have federal payments made by direct deposit to a financial institution of your choosing.
- Must be 18 years of age.
- Successfully past the E-Verify employment verification check.
- Willing to live/work in remote locations (self sufficiency required).

Fire Lookout Qualifications (GS-4):

- Applicants must have 6 months of general work experience (any type of work that demonstrated the ability to perform the work of this position, or experience that provided a familiarity with the subject matter or processes of the broad subject area of the occupation).
 - Examples of *General Experience* include: performed farm/ranch labor, such as feeding and tending livestock or general maintenance of farm/ranch facilities; cleaned tools and equipment; worked on a landscape or construction crew; other work experience, paid or unpaid, that demonstrates the ability to learn and perform the work of the position.
 - This last sentences opens up a realm of possibilities. Pad your resume with anything and everything that may fall into that qualifier. A lot of people fail to qualify for Fire Lookout jobs by not meeting this qualification. You can add things like: experience working in the outdoors, doing trail work, volunteer work within parks or recreational roles, leading hiking groups, etc. As long as it was paid work or volunteer work, add it to your resume!
- Applicants must also have 6 months of specialized experience directly relating to being a Fire Lookout.
 - Examples of *Specialized Experience* area more specific and less flexible: outlined as forestry technician work, or previous experience as a forest or range Fire Lookout, dispatch, fire prevention or fire suppression work.
 - There isn't as much wiggle room here, but there are ways to bolster this section of your resume, though it may be a more long term fix than immediate. More on that later...
- Additionally, one can qualify for this position and grade level with a “successful completion of 2 years of study that included at least 12 semester hours in any combination of courses such as wildland fire science, forestry, agriculture, crop or plant science, range management or conservation, wildlife management, watershed management, soil science, natural resources (except marine fisheries and oceanography), outdoor recreation management, civil or forest engineering.”

Fire Lookout Qualifications (GS-5):

- Applicants must have 1 year of specialized experience equivalent to at least GS-4 grade level.
 - Examples of *Specialized Experience* include: outlined as maintaining records, log books and Lookout equipment; maintaining a Lookout station and grounds in a neat and orderly condition; receiving and relaying a variety of fire and administrative data and keeping dispatcher/fire officials informed of current conditions; promoting the fire prevention program by explaining state and federal laws, policies and regulations to visitors.
- Additionally, one can qualify for this position and grade level with “successful completion of a full 4-year course of study leading to a bachelor's degree with major study in forestry, range management, agriculture, or a subject-matter field directly related to the position, or (b) that included at least 24 semester hours in any combination of courses such as those shown above for GS-4.”

Applying to a Lookout Job: so you have read through the requirements and decide you have the experience needed to apply. After you have set up your profile and found a job you are interested in, you are going to need to create a Federal resume if you do not have one already. A Federal resume is not a normal resume. It is not limited in length, and should be as in depth as possible. Federal resumes essentially are your application. They must paint a picture as to what you have done in the past and what you are capable of doing today.

For each past job you list on your resume, you must include:

- The start and end dates including the month and year.
- The number of hours you worked per week.
- The level and amount of experience; for example if you managed a large group of people or were a project manager.
- All relevant experience and accomplishments that prove you can perform tasks at the level required of the job.
- Your supervisor's name, contact information, and if they are okay to contact for reference checks.

It should look something like this:

Forestry Technician (Lookout), GS-0462-04 *05/2024 - current*
USDA Forest Service, Smokey Bear National Forest
Somewhere Out West, United States
40+ hours worked per week / \$13.31 per hour
Supervisor: Smokey Bear, (000) 000-0000, smokey.bear@usda.gov (contact me first)

- All jobs should be listed in reverse chronological order, with your most recent experience first. Do your best to tailor your background to the job you are applying for. This means looking over the job description of what it means to be a Fire Lookout and doing your best to use key words and phrases to pad your resume to show you can do the job!
- Additionally, use the job description provided on USAJobs.gov as a guideline for what to highlight on your resume. The job description will look like this:

Forestry Technician (Lookout) job description:

- *Uses standard fire finders to locate observed smoke. Estimate distance to smokes and probable size and characteristics of fires. Determines map location of fires with reference to known landmarks.*
- *Reports azimuth, distance, location, volume, color, behavior of smoke, and other pertinent information by radio or telephone.*
- *Continues to observe the area and reports significant changes such as increased smoke, wind conditions, changes in color or volume of smoke, etc.*
- *Observes ground lightning strikes, thunderstorms, and build up cloud formations and reports significant observations.*

- *Records and reports daily weather observations. Maintains records and log books. Makes minor adjustments and maintains lookout equipment. Maintains lookout station and grounds in a neat and orderly condition.*
 - *Operates a radio communications center which connects other lookout stations and radio sets.*
 - *Receives and relays messages and information received relating to weather forecasts, fire hazard conditions, fire emergencies , accidents and location of work crews and personnel.*
 - *Serves as a key contact at a lookout station visited by large numbers of people during fire season.*
 - *Promotes the fire prevention program by explaining State and Federal laws, policies and regulations, as well as fire prevention methods and process duress and fire hazard conditions.*
- Pull from these job duties and include them in your resume. For example, if you have done volunteer work at a local State Park and a very small part of what you did was educate visitors about fire restrictions within the park, include that as: *promotes the fire prevention program by explaining State and Federal laws, policies and regulations, as well as fire prevention methods and process duress and fire hazard conditions.*

Click Submit!

How you will be evaluated - all applications for roles submitted through USAJobs.gov are processed through HRM, not the hiring manager for the listed role. So you will not know who specifically is reading through your application and determining if you are or are not qualified for the job. The application is reviewed to ensure that you meet all listed qualification requirements and you will be notified by email as to what they decide.

Applications that meet the qualification requirements for the position will be ‘REFERRED’ to the hiring manager. You will receive an email at this point from HRM as to whether you have been ‘REFERRED’ or ‘NOT REFERRED’ and why.

You’re referred! What now? Once you are referred for a position, your application and documents are passed along to hiring managers at the locations you selected. This is when you will begin receiving phone calls! This is the exciting part! You may get multiple location offers in a single day! So have that phone on and ready!

You didn’t get referred? What now? It is most likely due to not meeting the ‘General’ or ‘Specialized’ work experience section of the application. Although it is not an immediate fix, here are ways to bolster that experience and get your foot in the door in the future.

- 1) Snag an AD role when Fire Season nears! AD roles or ‘Administratively Determined’ hires are purely temporary, emergency type fire hires for vacancies that were not filled or were vacated for any given reason. These are usually 60 day hires and essentially are ‘temporary help’ to the district. These roles can be terminated at any time, do not receive Federal benefits and do not receive ‘re-hire rights’ to the position for the following season. They are terminated at the end of the season and do not need to meet the work experience section of the hiring qualifications for the position. So it is worth reaching out to Forests you are interested in as Fire Season approaches to see if they need any AD Fire Lookout roles filled. It would also not hurt to follow Forests you are interested in on social media - sometimes they post vacancies there.
- 2) Work an entry level (GS-3) Federal fire job! Get your foot in the door! There are always so many of these roles at entry level positions available each season and they are so needed! They help fulfill the ‘Specialized Work Experience’ portion of the application many struggle with and give valuable training and experience working in the world of wildland fire, which can help make you a well rounded Fire Lookout and establish yourself in a Region or Forest!
- 3) Volunteer as a Fire Lookout! There are some incredible volunteer organizations out there that staff Fire Lookouts on a volunteer basis in coordination with Federal agencies. They often provide training and hands on experience that can fulfill your ‘Specialized Work Experience’ part of the application. And are also beneficial to see if being a Fire Lookout is really the job for you! Examples include: the Southern California Mountains Foundation/San Bernardino National Forest partner and staff quite a few Lookouts with over 300 volunteers each season from May to November. Deadman Fire Lookout in Colorado hosts volunteers, as does the Flathead National Forest in Montana, just to name a few.

Hopefully this helps clear up any questions you may have about getting hired as a Federal Fire Lookout. The process is complicated and it requires a little bit of luck. But it is worth it in the end - for many people, being a Fire Lookout is something they love so much they end up doing it for decades. There aren’t many jobs out there like that. Best of luck of all of you this hiring season!

Information developed by Kathryn Lindquist, FFLA Director for Colorado and Utah, October 2024

Also consider joining us at ffla.org! A quarterly magazine contains photos, history, techniques and resources, and a network of lookouts and enthusiasts joins each year at Eastern and Western Conferences.

Our mission is to preserve lookouts and their legacy. We do this through research, education, and support of lookout restoration, staffing for fire detection or historical interpretation, or other alternative uses.