

Report from FFLA Washington Chapter for 2024/2025

Greetings! Washington had an interesting and challenging 2024 and faces a tough 2025 as well.

The biggest challenge we faced was the loss of our long-time Western WA Chapter Director Forrest Clark in a tragic auto accident. Forrest was a great presence and help for many sub-chapters and other fire lookout groups, swinging a hammer or providing great advice.

The Board decided that this was a good time to merge Western and Eastern Washington into one organization and asked me, John Hearing, to take on leadership of the new joined chapter.

One of our first tasks we are working on is to update the catalog of Fire lookouts in WA state. As of January, we have 86 standing original fire lookouts in WA, with an additional 26 that are standing but have been relocated or are replicas. We are trying to provide up-to-date info on all the standing lookouts in WA, including their operational status, current condition, who is the advocate for that lookout, and what is needed. We hope by springtime to have all the current lookouts documented.

Sadly, we lost one in late 2024, when the State of Washington decided to replace Aeneas Mountain lookout with a tower with cameras and used a bulldozer to topple the lookout.

At the same time, we are making strides in preservation of lookouts including major repairs to Three Fingers, Evergreen, and Granite Mountain lookout led by FFLA volunteers. A major rebuild continues on High Rock, with the Sand Mountain Society working with the White Pass Historical Society to remove the lookout, rebuild critical parts, and then in the near future put the refurbished back in place to watch over Mt. Rainier and the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. Modifications to Suntop to make it accessible to persons with disabilities continue and are expected to be complete this summer, making it one of the only ADA-accessible fire lookouts.

Volunteers have been stepping up to help operate fire lookouts with a lot of success. Volunteers on Goat Peak, Kelly Butte, and Suntop contributed to reporting fires in 2024. In fact we have started a log of fire reports from WA fire lookouts in order to help document the value of staffed fire lookouts to the forests. We'll be keeping everyone up to date on "success stories" as we get them. We have had talks with volunteer groups about putting High Rock into operational status when the restoration is complete, as well as discussions of

At same time, an era ended last fall with the retirement of "Lightning" Bill Austin, long time lookout for the Forest Service. Bill put in 34 years of service at Goat Peak and most recently Leecher Mountain. Another blow was received with a recent decision by Forest Service managers to not staff Mt. Bonaparte lookout for the 2025 season—one of the few lookouts in WA that was operated by a paid USFS employee. We are talking with the District Ranger about options which would allow us to keep this lookout in operation.

In summary, we've lost a little ground this year, but we remain hopeful that we can continue to preserve and protect fire lookouts in Washington State for years to come.