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Forest Fire Lookout Association



BALD MOUNTAIN LOOKOUT ‘VISITING VOLUNTEERS’ PROJECT 2025 END-OF-SEASON REPORT

The Forest Fire Lookout Association (FFLA) partnered with the Mono Lake Ranger District of the Inyo National Forest to deploy 16 veteran “Visiting Volunteers” from remote volunteer lookout programs to work 42 shifts at Bald Mountain Lookout for the trial program of 2024. After the successful trial season, the FFLA then scheduled 46 visiting volunteers with at least one year’s experience to staff the facility for the entirety of the 2025 fire season.

2025 visiting volunteers were recruited from:

1. Angeles National Forest Lookout Assn	(3)	[Angeles NF]
2. Buck Rock Foundation	(4)	[Sequoia NF]
3. FFLA Administration	(2)	[unaffiliated]
4. FFLA Monterey local Chapter	(10)	[Los Padres NF]
5. FFLA San Diego-Riverside local Chapter	(17)	[Cleveland NF]
6. Southern Calif Mountains Foundation	(10)	[San Bernardino NF]

Season time span:	June 17 – October 12
Days in service:	113
On-duty hours:	1,599.5
Driving hours:	668.5
Total volunteer hours:	2,268
Visitors hosted:	1,943

The tower was staffed continuously with the exceptions of:

July 4-6. The volunteer scheduled for that span canceled with late notice due to a family emergency.

October 1-2. Volunteers housed on site, standing by to work once government shutdown logistics were defined.

LOGGED ACTIVITY: During the 2025 season, Bald Mountain Lookout volunteers extended their shifts beyond the normal 9 hours due to high fire danger conditions a total of 22 days. On 11 days, they reported multiple lightning down strikes, and closely monitored those locations for days after the strikes occurred.

One post-down strike smoke was reported, however it dissipated and no significant fire resulted. One full fire response was aborted after Bald Mountain lookouts identified the incident as dust stirred by off-road vehicles.

LOCAL VOLUNTEERS: During the 2025 season, the FFLA advertised for and recruited local volunteers from the Eastern Sierra to begin the process of building a local chapter to staff Bald Mountain Lookout. A total of 26 persons have applied and were issued home-study online training materials. 13 of them reported to the lookout late this season to begin in-tower training by the visiting volunteers. We anticipate most all of those 26 will return in the Spring to continue their training. For the 2026 season, a hybrid schedule of local as well as visiting volunteers will be deployed.

OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES: The following issues created problems in 2025 that we did not experience during the 2024 trial project:

1. Multiple volunteers telephoned program managers with questions about information that was already provided in training documents, videos, newsletters and in the "Cheat Sheets" binder in the cab. This indicated that some volunteers were unwilling or unable to properly prepare for their deployments.
Proposed Resolution – Carefully/precisely worded preparation documents at the time of scheduling.
2. There were times when forest or program personnel attempted to telephone the on-duty volunteers, who for various reasons did not answer their cellphone.
Proposed Resolution – Carefully/precisely worded preparation documents at the time of scheduling.
3. Confusion developed around radio operation, in being able to scan tactical channels. Additionally, radios were inadvertently set to the wrong settings.
Proposed Resolution – Completion of a radio primer document and video during the offseason. Online training tests to be implemented as part of qualifying pre-shift requirements.
4. During lightning storms, confusion developed around how and to whom to report down strikes. This problem is not easily repairable due to different Duty Officers having different preferences; whether or not the Lightning Plan is activated; and the potential of visiting Duty Officers and Patrol units having different preferences.

Proposed Resolution – rewrite lightning procedures in consultation with forest staff. Propose a call to Patrol units in the morning before a predicted storm to ascertain preferences.

5. Many volunteers struggled with ascertaining the Duty Officers’ identities and phone numbers.

Proposed Resolution – Re-write manual stressing listening to the 0940 Morning Lineup and recording the Duty Officer’s callsign. Also, request Patrol 11 to prepare a card with likely Duty Officer and Patrol unit phone numbers to be posted in the Log Binder.

INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES: Volunteers continued to successfully deal with the aging facility’s systems.

1. Water deliveries kept the storage tank well-supplied.
2. The indoor toilet remains broken, and the FFLA will pursue replacing it in the Spring. Although the water supply line to the indoor toilet is permanently out of service, with a new toilet, volunteers could manually refill the toilet tank and enjoy normal flushing function.
3. With permission, the FFLA can also explore installation of “Pex” flexible plastic plumbing to bypass the ruptured pipes, perhaps returning function to the hot water heater, kitchen sink, bathroom sink, and shower.
4. The wall heater pilot light would not remain lit. The FFLA can also look into professional repair in the Spring.
5. Peeling exterior paint continues to give the tower a poor and deteriorated image to the public. It also exposes wood fascia surfaces to weather deterioration. The tower was last repainted approximately 15 years ago and no lead-based paint remains on site. If the forest will give consent, volunteers can mobilize a re-painting effort to greatly improve the building’s appearance. The FFLA will provide paint and materials.

SANITATION: During the 2025 season, three FFLA donors contributed \$250 each to pay for the rental of a portable toilet from Mammoth Disposal, and these donations will likely not be made again in 2026. It should be noted that this toilet served many of the 1,943 forest visitors who otherwise may have deposited on the site, and have been seen doing so. The FFLA is well aware of the federal government’s current budget woes, but mentions this situation for the Inyo National Forest’s information, now that an accurate count of the visitor volume at this site is realized and documented.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The FFLA recommends continuing the 'Visiting Volunteer' program in the summer and fall of 2026, and offers its assistance in scheduling and preparing participants.

The FFLA thanks the Inyo National Forest for the opportunity to bring this 61-year-old lookout back into service. We look forward to continuing the tower's service in the future.

I can be reached at (760) 585-8400 or PalomarTowers@gmail.com if I can answer any questions.

Sincerely,

Scott McClintock

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