UPDATED TO INCLUDE NEW INFO ON US WILDLAND FIRE SERVICE POSITIONS

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

Updated Information from the Forest Fire Lookout Association

How to get a job as a Fire Lookout!

When I have visitors come to the Fire Lookout I staff, one of the top questions I get is: how do you get a job as Fire Lookout? And while I wish the process was simpler, I explain that the positions are mostly federal and require a relatively long qualification and hiring process. It is multi-faceted. But through my position within the Forest Fire Lookout Association (FFLA), I created this document with the hope that it could help people interested in these positions navigate the hiring process. I gathered information from speaking with the United States Forest Service's Human Resource Management (HRM) department, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and USAJobs.gov itself. Hopefully this provides clarity and understanding to anyone interested in this process!

Where do I look for positions?

Fire Lookout jobs are typically initially listed on USAJobs late summer through Fall 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. Fire Lookout jobs are WG/GS-4 or WG/GS-5 on the Federal pay scale. And the positions are listed as ***Forestry Technician (Lookout)*** for ***United States Forest Service*** (USFS) positions. And ***Wildland Firefighter (Lookout)*** for ***United States Wildland Fire Service*** (USWFS) positions, which include National Parks Service (NPS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) roles.

It is also important to note here that Fire Lookouts often have '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 vacancies on USAJobs.gov are being held by current Lookouts, but the positions are still listed in case something happens and they are suddenly unable to return. So do not be surprised if your dream location is listed but isn't really a vacancy.

Outreaches - Federal agencies often release a pre-announcement or "outreach" prior to officially listing a job on USAJobs.gov. This information will include what 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 supervisor. It is important to note not all hiring supervisors 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 positions. In my experience, and the experience of many others, the website is difficult to navigate and is one of the number one things I would change in this process if I could. I recommend starting the process 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, VA 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.

Qualifying 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 non-government roles, you must meet the OPM hiring standard 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, HRM will closely review your qualifications alongside the required experience listed in the position description.

What are the requirements?

General Federal Job Requirements for all agencies:

- You must be a US Citizen or US 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 he E-Verify employment verification check.
- Willing to live/work in remote locations (volatile/unpredictable)

Physical Demands specific to Lookout work: Requires standing, walking over rough, uneven, rocky and sometimes hazardous surfaces. Travel to and from the post of duty requires hiking of several miles with elevation change. Demands of long days in the tower may not always be physically demanding but are mentally fatiguing by occasional heavy fire activity. Many times, lieu days must be worked because of emergency fire conditions. Extended operation of equipment may place unusual physical stress during certain monitoring activities.

Work Environment specific to Lookout work: The incumbent works in mountainous and forested terrain. Some activities require work during early mornings, late evenings and at night. Risks include exposure to toxic and irritating insects, exposure to potential animal-borne disease vectors, and exposure to machinery/aircraft noise, falling and rolling material, heat, and exhaustion. The duty station may be located on a remote isolated mountain peak, accessible only

by hiking. Work is performed indoors and outdoors and is subject to weather variances. Supplies for scheduled workdays may be delivered by pack string.

Forestry Technician (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. And in my experience and in my conversations with folks within hiring and resume specialists this is where you can really pad your resume to meet the 'General Experience' portion of the application.
    - 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 relating to wildland fire.
- Examples of *Specialized Experience* area more specific and less flexible: Forestry technician work, or previous experience as a Forest or Range Fire Lookout, dispatch, fire prevention or fire suppression work.
    - There isn't 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.
- You can also qualify based on higher education: successful completion of 2 years of study that included at least 12 semester hours in any combination of courses such as 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, or wildland fire science.

Forestry Technician (Lookout) Qualifications (GS-5):

- Applicants to this pay grade must have 1 year of specialized experience equivalent to at least GS-4 grade level described above.
    - Examples of ***Specialized Experience*** include: maintaining records, log books and lookout equipment: maintaining 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.
- You can also qualify for this pay grade based on high education: a bachelor's degree or 4 years of successfully completed education above high school (120 semester/180 quarter hours) with major study in forestry, range management, agriculture, or a subject-matter field directly related to the position, or that included at least 24 semester hours in any combination of

courses such as forestry, agriculture, crop or plant science, range management or conservation, wildlife management, watershed management, soil science, natural resources, outdoor recreation management, civil or forest engineering, or wildland fire science.

Wildland Firefighter (Fire Lookout) Qualifications (WG-4/5):

- General work experience guidelines remain the same as USFS positions in each respective pay grade however specialized work experience requirements are different for positions within the USWFS.
    - Unlike USFS positions, these USWFS requires previous "on the line wildland fire experience or prior work as a wildland fire lookout" or "two year course of study above high school, from an accredited college or university, in Wildland Fire science, training, technology or in other directly related fields which included at least 12 semester hours of coursework such as forestry, range management or conservation."

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 you have
- All relevant experience and accomplishments that prove you can perform tasks at the level required and described in the position description.
- 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)

Each job posting will including the job description for the position, which you'll see below:

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.

Wildland Firefighter (Lookout) job description: maintains surveillance to detect and report the occurrence of fires, status for fires, suspicious smokes, smoke like dusts, or unusual volumes of legitimate smoke. Uses standard equipment to locate smokes reported by others, estimate distances, ascertain probably distances to smokes, ascertain the probably size and characteristics of fires. Reports and locates fires on maps. Records and reports daily weather observations. Maintains records and logbooks.

Pull from these job duties and include them in your resume! For example, I have previously done volunteer work at a local State Park - a very small part of what I did was educate visitors about burn bans within the park, so I included 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. Match your experience closely to the job requirements listed! *Remember, those reviewing your qualifications will be reviewing your resume alongside the job posting and required qualifications!*

Once you're done, click submit!

And then you wait…sometimes for weeks.

How you will be evaluated:

All applications for roles submitted through USAJobs.gov are processed through HRM, not the hiring supervisor for the listed role. The application is reviewed to ensure that you meet all listed qualification requirements. Applications that meet the qualification requirements for the position will be 'referred' to the hiring supervisor. You will receive an email at this point from HRM as to whether you have been 'referred' or 'not referred'.

You're referred! What now?

Once you are referred to a position your application and documents are passed along to hiring supervisors. 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 qualifications required. Although it is not an immediate fix, here are ways to bolster that experience and get your foot in the door in the future.

- **Seek out an AD role**: 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 the following season. They are terminated at the end of the season. They 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.
- **Work an entry level Forest Service wildland fire job to gain experience!** 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 fulfill the 'Specialized Work Experience' portion of the application and give valuable training and experience working in the world of wildland fire.
- **Volunteer as a Fire Lookout!** There are some incredible volunteer organizations out there that staff Fire Lookouts on a volunteer basis. They often provide training and hands on experience that can help eventually fulfill your 'Specialized Work Experience' part of the application. Examples include: the Southern California Mountains Foundation and San Bernardino National Forest partner and staff quite a few Lookouts with over 300 volunteers each season from May to November. Deadman Fire Tower in Colorado hosts volunteers, as does the Flathead National Forest in Montana, just to name a few. Some shifts are single days and some are a week or even a month long.

Hopefully this helps clear up any questions you may have about getting hired as a Fire Lookout. The process is complicated, there aren't many of these jobs out there and it requires a bit of luck. But it is worth it in the end. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me via email.

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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.