

Fire lookouts face uncertain future in the Pacific Northwest

By JAMIE HALE

The Oregonian/OregonLive

PORTLAND — Imagine waking up to the sun cresting a ridge of the Cascade Mountains. You look out the window, and through the dawn light you can see clouds still settled over a lush alpine forest. You're in a tower in the sky, in the shadow of our tallest peaks, surrounded by wilderness.

Camping in a fire lookout tower is like no other experience in the Pacific Northwest. It's a unique opportunity to sleep above the tree-tops, living like an old fire lookout, more cheaply than at most motels. It's no wonder the towers have fast become the hottest rentals in the region.

But booking a night in a fire lookout can be harder than getting a ticket to "Hamilton," thanks to high demand, short supply, and prices from \$35 to \$65 a night. Of the hundreds of lookouts in Oregon and Washington, only 22 are available to the public. The rest are either in disrepair, still in use or stuck in bureaucratic limbo, refurbished but waiting to house travelers.

As technology makes fire lookouts obsolete, federal and state agencies are stuck with the question of what to do with the towers. Should they be turned into vacation rentals? Torn down? Preserved in public parks and museums?

The answers are few and far between.

Sky high demand

Let's say you want to rent a lookout tower. You've found the perfect location and scheduled your vacation days. You wake up early on the day the lookout opens for rental — six months before your vacation — head to Recreation.gov and pull out your credit card, only to see that the lookout is already booked.

That's the frustrating reality of trying to book a lookout in the Pacific Northwest. All the planning in the world can be undone by another person just a few seconds quicker, or by somebody who booked it earlier for the maximum 14 days.

Constructed in the early 20th century, often atop high peaks in rugged wilderness, fire lookout towers are particularly susceptible to lightning strikes, high winds and heavy snows, which can take them out of commission until difficult and costly repairs are made.

Because of that reality, relatively few lookouts are open to the public. The U.S. Forest Service manages 160 towers in Oregon and Washington, of which 22 are available for rent. Of those, most are available only seasonally - they're either occupied by the forest service during fire season or inaccessible in the winter. And they can be booked for one or two weeks at a time, limiting the number of people who have a shot at them.

Jocelyn Biro, a regional program manager in charge of the forest service rentals, said the agency is considering limiting the maximum stay to help curb competition.

Biro said the agency is also trying to manage a tricky balancing act between charging enough to maintain the structures, keeping the lookouts affordable and figuring out their fair market value.

"The bottom line is we haven't



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

Sunrise from the Flag Point Lookout Tower, located east of Mt. Hood, in this 2014 photo.

been able to keep up with the inflation or the needs out there," she said. "Because we're the government and we do get appropriated funding, we're not operating it like a private business."

The Forest Service could sell the lookouts to private concessionaires, which run lodges, hot springs and other destinations. But Biro said the agency isn't interested in doing so because lookout towers require more care and maintenance than other properties.

"Be careful what you ask for," she said. A concessionaire "can change those fees, but how much of those fees go back into the lookout?"

Even if the Forest Service figures out a fair price, a long and complicated process still stands in the way of changing the fees.

Lookout limbo

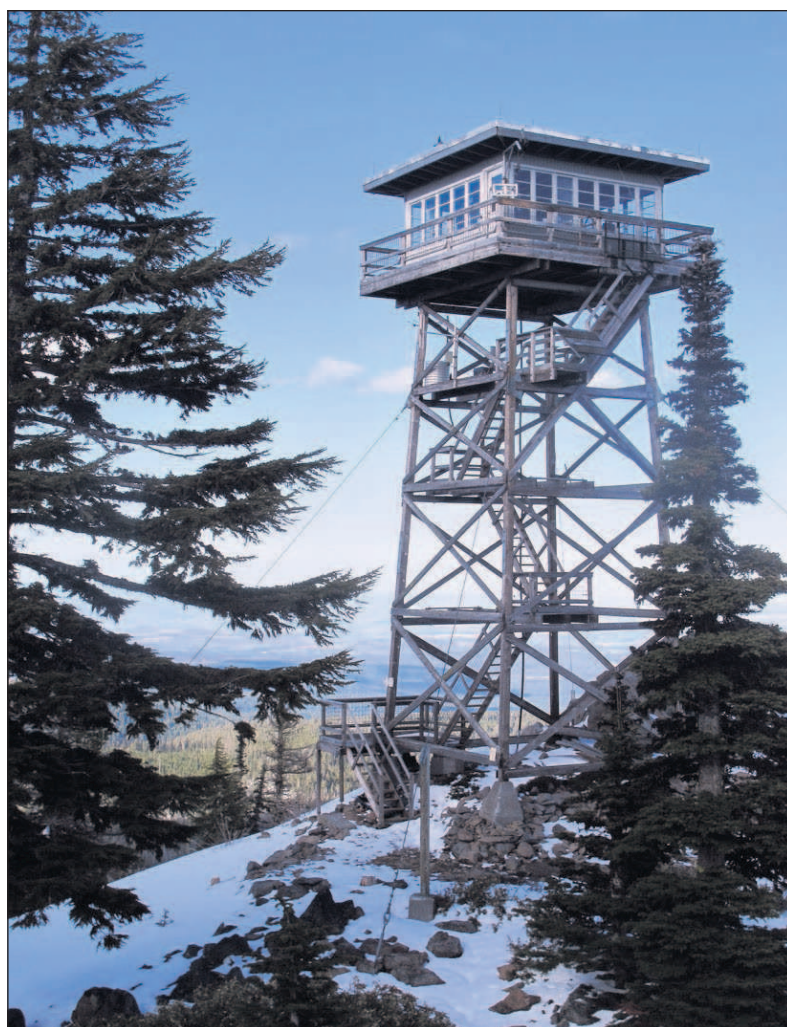
Under federal law, any new fees on forest service structures must go before a recreation advisory committee, an 11-person panel whose members come from specific backgrounds, like "non-motorized guides," as well as from environmental groups and state tourism.

Biro said it's difficult to find enough interested parties for the committee. As a result, there haven't been any meetings since 2010. That forces the agency into a state of limbo, where structures are fixed up only to languish. Right now, the agency has several newly refurbished lookouts and cabins that it can't put on the market.

"It's kind of like building a new hotel but not being able to rent those rooms out," Biro said.

The forest service can get permission directly from state governors to charge new fees, but she said that course of action can be onerous, too. Local forest officials have begun the process of asking Oregon Gov. Kate Brown for a waiver, Biro said, but it could be a long time before anything comes of it. A spokesman for the governor's office said Brown hasn't yet received a request.

There are issues, too, with simply raising existing fees. Fee increases are necessary



Staff photo by Tim Trainor

The four-story fire lookout at Flag Point, east of Mt. Hood, offers unparalleled views when the weather permits.

for long-term maintenance but must be approved by the federal government, a process that can take months or years. According to the agency, the Forest Service has 11 lookouts and 11 cabins across Oregon and Washington awaiting approval for a fee hike.

Raising fees and putting more structures on the market could help stem competition for lookout rentals, but even if the forest service gets through the red tape, hundreds of fire lookouts across the Pacific Northwest will still sit unused, falling slowly into disrepair.

Lost legacy

According to the Forest Fire Lookout Association, a national organization dedicated to restoring

historic lookouts, there are just more than 200 standing lookouts in Oregon and more than 100 in Washington. The U.S. Forest Service owns 160, while the rest are on a mixture of private and public lands.

In Oregon, a few dozen remaining lookout towers are managed by the Oregon Department of Forestry, which until the 1990s staffed the towers in its six state forests. Since then, towers have been replaced by smoke-detection cameras and aerial observation.

"We're most proud of the people that were in those stations, and I think as Oregonians we all owe those men and women a debt of gratitude," department spokesman

Jim Gersbach said. But the cameras are simply more efficient. "They don't go to sleep and they don't blink. They don't need to make breakfast. They're a nice tool in that they're always on the job."

Since the switch, different fates have befallen towers managed by the department. Some are still in use as mounts for the cameras; others are simply torn down. The department's job is to protect the forests, not the lookouts, Gersbach said, and when the lookouts are no longer of use, they're a potential liability due to hikers who might seek them out or climb them.

It would be nice to keep the structures, he said — and the department isn't against working with private landowners to do so — but the department of forestry isn't the parks department, and unlike the U.S. Forest Service it has neither the funds nor resources to rent to the public.

That mindset is certainly logical, but it has riled up the people who see the towers with a more romantic eye, as invaluable artifacts of our Northwest legacy.

Howard Verschoor, the Oregon director for the Forest Fire Lookout Association, said if it wasn't for the U.S. Forest Service rental program, few would care enough about the lookouts to keep them. He said he doesn't understand why the towers can't be dismantled and reconstructed in parks or fairgrounds.

"Oregon Department of Forestry, they're tearing out a part of our history," he said.

Over the last few years, Verschoor has made a concerted effort to raise awareness and support for the lookout towers. He's started two Facebook groups, he said, and has developed a following among those who see the romance and history in the lookouts.

Ultimately, the Forest Fire Lookout Association aims to raise funds and gather volunteers to restore old lookouts. Those projects can range from \$5,000 to \$100,000 to complete, Verschoor said, and can come with a host of unforeseen complications.

Verschoor said it's nice to have renewed public interest in the lookout towers, though it appears to have done little besides adding to the competition for rentals. Representatives from the Oregon Department of Forestry and the U.S. Forest Service said they, too, feel the romantic allure of the towers, but most are simply too difficult to maintain.

"Like lighthouses, they were built with a very specific purpose in mind," Gersbach said. "These structures are like any other equipment that becomes obsolete — let's not burden the taxpayers with that."

Fans of the lookouts argue that paying a little extra to fix them up or to reconstruct them in a public park is money well spent.

"People don't realize how much history there is on these mountaintops," Verschoor said. "It's heartbreaking."

Fire lookout towers were tools for early foresters as well as homes for men and women who spent countless hours peering at the tops of the trees, waiting for a plume of smoke to rise.

Today, if you're lucky, you can get some idea of the life those lookouts lived — you just might not have that opportunity for long.

BRIEFLY

Whale-watching week begins on Oregon Coast

DEPOE BAY (AP) — State Parks and Recreation officials say this week is an excellent time to see whales on the Oregon coast.

Ranger Luke Parsons from the Whale Watching Center in Depoe Bay says an estimated 20,000 gray whale are traveling south from Alaska to warm lagoons off the coast of Baja, Mexico.

The parks department marks its annual whale-watching week by designating 24 "Whale Watching Spoken Here" sites that offer the best viewpoints. Volunteers staff the sites from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., offering viewing tips and facts about whales.

Whale-watching week began Wednesday and ends Dec. 31.

Dungeness crabbing season to open Jan. 15

ASTORIA (AP) — The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife says the Dungeness crab fishery from Cape Blanco to the Columbia River and into Washington state will open Jan. 15.

The fishery traditionally starts Dec. 1, but was delayed to give the crabs more time to fill with meat.

Fisheries managers use "meat fill" tests to determine how well the Dungeness have rebounded from the late summer shedding of their shells in a process called molting.

After the molt, the crabs fill with

water as their shells harden and they grow new muscle.

The minimum threshold is 25 percent meat, meaning a 2-pound crab must yield at least a half-pound of meat.

Hugh Link is executive director of the Oregon Dungeness Crab Commission. He tells *The Daily Astorian* that crabbers aren't thrilled with the delay, but understand it is necessary for a healthy market.

Timberline, Squaw Valley, tabbed as Olympic training sites

RENO, Nev. (AP) — A ski resort at Lake Tahoe steeped in Olympic history has signed a five-year agreement to be one of the five official training sites for the U.S. ski & snowboard team.

Officials at Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows north of Tahoe City, California announced they reached the agreement last week with U.S. Ski and Snowboard based in Park City, Utah.

Luke Bodensteiner, the organization's chief of sport, says the Tahoe resort has produced some of the nation's best skiers and snowboarders since Squaw Valley hosted the 1960 Winter Games.

Todd Kelly, ski team program director at Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows, says it's a "true honor" to be designated one of the elite training sites.

The other resorts currently

under similar agreements are Deer Valley in Utah, Copper Mountain in Colorado, Timberline Lodge in Oregon and Mammoth Mountain in California.

Wildlife officials kill mountain lion that attacked pet dog

POCATELLO, Idaho (AP) — Wildlife officials killed a mountain lion after it killed a family's dog near Pocatello in eastern Idaho.

A woman found her dog apparently mauled by a mountain lion Wednesday morning, the *Idaho State Journal* reported.

The woman told officials she had let her dog outside at 2 a.m. and immediately heard a commotion.

The owner went to check on her pet, but could not find it in the dark and the dog would not respond to her calls.

The woman and her husband found the dog after the sun came up, and suspected it was attacked and killed by a larger predator.

Wildlife officers confirmed the mountain lion attack, said Mark Gamblin, the regional supervisor for the Southeast Regional Fish and Game office.

The dog was medium sized and possibly part boxer, said Scott Wright, a regional conservation officer.

Wright believes the adult male lion may have come closer to town looking for easy prey since it had a

severe neck injury.

"A pet is easy pickings for a wounded lion," Scott said.

Officers located the lion and determined that it should be put down since it was already mortally injured and for public safety reasons.

The lion's remains are being kept at the Idaho Fish and Game offices for processing.

"We will take the lion's pelt and any other important data and information that can be used to improve our mountain lion management program before the animal is processed appropriately," Gamblin said.

Frigid temperatures spur cancellation of polar bear plunges

VENTNOR, N.J. (AP) — Polar bear plunges planned in two southern New Jersey towns on New Year's Day have been canceled because organizers think it will be too cold outside.

Ventnor officials say the event's organizers recently contacted them with concerns about the safety of participants who would be jumping into the Atlantic Ocean. They noted that the forecast calls for a high of around 20 degrees on Monday while water temperature likely will be in the mid-40s.

City officials agreed the event should be postponed saying they would rather "err on the side of safety."

SKI REPORT

Spout Springs
Tollgate, Ore.
CLOSED FOR SEASON

Anthony Lakes
North Powder, Ore.
New snow: 2"
Base depth: 24"

Conditions: Groomed runs, special Saturday music 3-6 p.m., open New Year's Day. Some unmarked obstacles.

Ski Bluewood
Dayton, Wash.
New snow: 2"
Base depth: 25"
Conditions: Fresh snow, good powder, open New Year's Day. Early season conditions in places.

Ski Fergi
Joseph, Ore.
New snow: 8"
Base depth: Unknown
Conditions: Rock skis recommended, special New Year's Eve Torchlight Ski Parade

Mt. Hood Meadows Government Camp, Ore.
New snow: None
Base depth: 38"
Conditions: High overcast with possible sprinkles and moderate wind. Get up early for the best riding.