

End of an Era: State to End Use of its 72 Forest Fire Towers

By Lee Bergquist of the [Milwaukee] Journal Sentinel Dec. 17, 2015



After climbing 115 steps to start her shift, Bonnie Dryer looks for smoke from atop a fire tower in May 2009 in Park Falls. Beginning next year, the state Department of Natural Resources will take all of its 72 forest fire towers out of service. [Photo by Mark Hoffman]



Fire towers, perched over the treetops to spot smoke and fire since the 1930s, will be taken out of service in 2016. The Department of Natural Resources says that all 72 towers will be removed from service. The agency assessed their condition and determined they are no longer safe and would be too expensive to replace. In the early 1930s, the state operated 119 fire towers.

Last year, 60 were staffed with part-time employees who use binoculars to spot fires and radio in locations. "They were a critically important part of fire protection," said Trent Marty, director of the bureau of forest protection at the DNR. "They served their mission well, but it's time to move forward."

The towers, averaging about 100 feet, have been operated with personnel working an average of 17 days a year during periods of heightened fire danger, usually in the spring before trees leaf out. Like so much else, the towers and the people inside

them are being replaced by technology.

Traditionally, spotters would use their binoculars, maps and a table-sized 360-degree compass to identify the location of smoke and then radio the coordinates to headquarters. Other spotters might see the same smoke and help to pinpoint the fire. Marty said that the \$100,000 saved from ending the program will be redeployed for more aerial surveillance.

The need for fire towers diminished as the prevalence of cellphones has grown. Another factor is that more people live in areas that were once sparsely populated, according to Marty. Today, more than 90% of forest fires are first reported by citizens.

Example: A spotter identified smoke from the Germann Road fire in 2013 in Douglas and Bayfield counties at virtually the same time as a nearby resident and work crews that accidentally started the fire called 911. The fire was one of the largest in decades in Wisconsin, covering 7,500 acres.

Bonnie Dryer, 63, says that some small fires would be easier to spot for people on the ground. "I do get that," Dryer said. "There are a lot more people now and everyone has a cellphone and can spot them and call right away." Still, Dryer said she was surprised by the DNR's news and had not yet been informed that the job she's held for 15 years as the Park Falls spotter is ending. "It's a bit of a shock," she said. Trudging up the steps, Dryer entered another world, 7 feet by 7 feet, with a panorama stretching out before her. She would see eagles, fox, deer and a changing landscape.

And there was solitude.

"Some people say, 'How do you do it?' " she said. "Don't you get bored out of your mind?' But on some days when you are busy and hear a lot of traffic and if there is a big fire, it's just cool." Dryer has spotted fires as far as 40 miles away. But a destructive fire in May 2009, known as the Blockhouse fire, went up after she and other spotters ended work for the season. "That still bugs me that I wasn't up there and didn't see it," Dryer said.

The DNR's decision follows a national trend of states moving away from fire towers or eliminating them altogether, said Marty.

The U.S. Forest Service in Wisconsin has used aerial observation for years and has relied on the DNR to tend one Forest Service fire tower on the border between state and federal protection areas.

What will happen to the towers remains unclear, although some will be dismantled. Others are located on private property, and easement agreements with property owners may dictate their disposition. Also, Marty said at least one tower has a historic designation.

Towers that aren't torn down will not be open to the public. Ladders at the ground will be removed to block would-be climbers from scaling them.

[Lee Bergquist covers environmental issues and is author of "Second Wind: The Rise of the Ageless Athlete."]