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# Plans in motion to rebuild Needles Lookout

## Biggest hurdle is money

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The Needles Lookout tower, which was destroyed in a fire July 28, 2011, may be rebuilt and open for business as early as this fall, according to Rick Stevens, district ranger of the Western Divide in Sequoia National Forest.

At least, that is the hope. As long as everything goes to plan and enough money is raised, this historic landmark tower that attracted hundreds of tourists a year and protected the surrounding forest will be rebuilt.

Built in 1937-38 by the Civilian Conservation Corps atop the Needles rock formation at 8,245 feet, Needles Lookout overlooked the Kern River Drainage, Mt. Whitney, Olancho Peak, Farewell Gap and Dome Rock. The 14-foot-by-14-foot wooden tower was the primary communication line for people in the backcountry where cell phones do not work.

The tower served as a USFS employee's office and home for summer months while the lookout was on duty. The employee was responsible for detecting fires and relaying radio messages to the dispatcher, who in turn sent firefighters and support equipment to extinguish the reported fire.

According to the Buck Rock Lookout Association, the Needles Lookout was one of the most historic and picturesque lookouts in the country. The Needles rocks are a series of granite rocks that attract rock climbers from all over. Before the lookout burned down, Forestry Technician Margee Kelly, who made the lookout her summer home for many years, made cookies each Sunday for climbers who made it to the top.

According to the Tulare County Fire Department in an incident report from July 29, 2011, the Needles Fire was caused by an ember that escaped from the tower's chimney. Although there was another fire in the area, the Lions fire, it was determined it had nothing to do with the Lookout fire.

According to the report, the female tower attendant, a U.S. Forest Service employee, had a fire going in the wood-burning fireplace when an ember escaped from the chimney and landed on the tower's wood-shingle roof, catching the roof of the fire. The tower occupant tried unsuccessfully to use a fire extinguisher to extinguish the flames, TCFD reported. The employee escaped unharmed.

The tower did not have a fire-retardant roof and caused four other

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## NEEDLES

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fires in the area by the tower's burning debris that rolled down from the rock on which it was built.

### Rebuild

Now plans are being enacted to rebuild the iconic and necessary tower, with the intention of restoring it as close as possible to the same look and feel as the original structure. Because the tower used batteries and other electronic devices, the area had to be cleaned out and secured by Hazmat before any other plans could be made for consideration of rebuilding the lookout.

Right now the Western Divide Ranger District is accepting comments regarding rebuilding the Lookout as part of the legal process. The comment period is for 30 days for those wishing to appeal the project.

"Assuming we don't receive any comments in opposition, then I will sign the draft decision memo," said Stevens.

Once the draft decision is signed, then the work can really begin, which means more fundraising and the design and construction of the Lookout.

"The actual construction, I doubt, will take more than a couple of months," said Stevens. "Hopefully it can begin and end by fall, but that depends largely on the fundraising."

Although there isn't an official dollar amount attached to the project, Stevens said he expects it to be "in excess of \$100,000."

Aside from construction of the new Lookout, there will be costs in locating it atop the Needles formation. Stevens said he suspects they will do some kind of modular

construction and have a helicopter move the pieces into place.

There are several organizations that have already been working on fundraising events specifically for the new Needles Lookout; Giant Sequoia National Monument Association and the Buck Rock Lookout Association are two of the most active.

Del Pengilly of the Giant Sequoia National Monument Association said they had already begun fundraising events such as the Christmas tree auctions with Sheltered Workshop.

"Tree sales made between \$9,000 to \$10,000 on the Christmas tree auction," said Pengilly. "The money is donated to the forest to rebuild the Lookout."

"There are a lot of folks interested in getting this rebuilt; not just the Forest Service," Pengilly said.

In fact, he said some of the California State Rock Climbing Association is on board, too, and the Giant Sequoia National Monument Association is partnering with Bill Roberts Engineering.

"Bill has volunteered all engineering work, even said he would be the inspector," said Pengilly.

The Giant Sequoia National Monument Association will be holding its annual dinner at 6 p.m. on March 15 at Nuckols Ranch which will feature a silent and live auction, with proceeds going towards the Needles Lookout rebuild project. Pengilly said they will have speakers at the event, possibly even Andy Vidak to speak about the water problems. Anyone can attend the dinner; cost is \$35. Those wishing to help support the Lookout project can offer donations or even join the Monument Association.

For more information, call 560-6190.