



Legislative Hearing on H.R. 908, July 23, 2013

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Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
United States House of Representatives
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Greetings from the Pacific Northwest,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about an issue that is very dear and personal to my community. My name is Scott Morris, and I am the president of the Darrington Historical Society. On behalf of the Historical Society, as well as many friends and neighbors, I respectfully request that the honorable members of this Subcommittee support House of Representatives Bill 908 to preserve the Green Mountain Lookout in the Glacier Peak Wilderness. The lookout is threatened by a lawsuit that is attempting to remove it from the wilderness.

Green Mountain Lookout is a symbolic icon for our small town in the North Cascades. It was built in 1933 with a strategic and expansive view of the forests up the Suiattle River and on the flanks of Glacier Peak's volcanic ridges. In World War II it served as part of the early warning network of lookouts designed to spot aerial invasions of the West Coast.

In the 1960s, it survived, avoiding the fate of most of its counterparts, which were burned and dismantled by the Forest Service. Fear of liability and the advent of airplanes spelled doom for most lookouts. Today, only 16 remain of the more than 90 that were built in northwest Washington state.

A few of those, such as Green Mountain Lookout, found themselves inside wilderness boundaries after passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 and subsequent wilderness expansions. In some cases, Congress has specifically exempted a few key lookouts from the law's requirement that structures be left to rot naturally in the wilderness. Unfortunately, in 1984 when the Glacier Peak Wilderness was expanded to include Green Mountain's summit, Congress did not make such an exemption for that lookout. I suspect the reason is simply because nobody could have foreseen that anybody would take issue with a historic restoration of the lookout two decades later. The lookout was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987.

Indeed, as the members of the Historical Society and the Darrington community came together during the 1990s to dream up and carry out the eventual historic restoration, the comments received by the Forest Service about the project were overwhelmingly supportive, with little or no opposition.

So, why are we here today? I don't want to bog down in the details of the legal battle that ensued, so here's a quick summary:

The restoration that began in the late 1990s was completed on the mountaintop following appropriate environmental and historical restoration procedures, with a minimum of helicopter support. But by the summer of 2002, it became apparent that the foundation design was faulty. The lookout was leaning badly from heavy snows the previous winter. It was in clear danger of falling off the summit to its destruction under the weight of the next winter's snows.

Faced with a difficult decision, the Forest Service decided to remove Green Mountain Lookout, taking care to number and label the boards and windows so they could be reassembled in their proper places on a new, stronger foundation.

Extreme floods and road washouts delayed the restoration until 2009, when the lookout was finally restored atop Green Mountain. In 2010, an out-of-state, hardline group called Wilderness Watch sued the Forest Service, alleging that the restoration violated the Wilderness Act. A U.S. District Court judge in Seattle agreed in 2012 and ordered the Forest Service to remove the lookout. Later, the judge remanded the issue to the Forest Service as to how to comply with his order, and those who sued are pressuring the agency to remove the lookout as soon as this summer.

Obviously time is of the essence. We are grateful to this subcommittee for giving this bill a hearing. Fortunately, fixing this problem is easy – Congress can simply exempt Green Mountain Lookout from the Wilderness Act and allow the Forest Service to maintain and restore it. Indeed, Wilderness Watch and U.S. District Judge John C. Coughenour each pointed out that Congress has done so in other instances, including the Evergreen Mountain Lookout in the new Wild Sky Wilderness to the south of us.

The legislation that our Washington state delegation in Congress was kind enough to move forward is a modest proposal, designed to build widespread, bipartisan support. We are not asking for a far-reaching bill that substantially changes the Wilderness Act. The exemption of Green Mountain Lookout does not represent some kind of camel's nose in the tent that would somehow lead to resurrecting a bunch of long-dead lookouts in wilderness areas. The historical trend is that we are losing most of the CCC-era lookouts, and thus, Green Mountain Lookout merits an exemption.

But don't just take our word for it. We have a long list of supporters for this bill. The Wilderness Society, notably, supports H.R. 908. They see the lookout as enhancing the public's enthusiasm for wilderness areas. A broad range of local, state and national groups and legislators have joined with us to protect Green Mountain Lookout, from the National Trust for Historic Preservation (and its state affiliate), to the Forest Fire Lookouts Association, the Snohomish County Council and the Darrington Town Council, among others. Support among legislators is bipartisan – Republicans and Democrats alike stand behind this bill. The Everett Herald and Seattle Post-Intelligencer have each editorialized in favor of protecting the lookout.

In the end, though, the reason so many of us feel strongly about this simple 14-by-14-foot mountaintop cabin is the sense of magic it conveys. I had the great fortune to visit Green Mountain Lookout last summer, and I was lucky enough to see firsthand the classic North Cascades lookout sunrise, with clouds filling the valleys, and only the tallest mountaintops peeking through while the sun turned everything pink. Standing on the catwalk, Green Mountain Lookout felt like a time machine, taking us back to the 1930s. It was easy to understand what drove the first generation of men and women in the Forest Service to staff these lookouts. Today, we face a vocal, extreme minority with no imagination who don't get it. But for the rest of us, we have a legacy we are asking you to protect. Thanks for your time, and thanks for supporting H.R. 908.

Sincerely,

Scott Morris, President, Darrington Historical Society