Subject: Needles Lookout and Tower Replacement Scoping Letter

Date: December 9, 2011

Dear Interested Citizens,

This letter initiates the scoping for Needles Lookout and Tower Replacement project within the Sequoia National Forest and Giant Sequoia National Monument. The project area is located 2.5 miles off Forest Service Road 21S05, at the end of Forest Service Trail 32E22. This area is East of Springville, along the Western Divide Highway, approximately 2.5 air miles east of the community of Ponderosa, Tulare County, California. The legal location of the project is Township 21S, Range 32E, Section 14, MDBM (see Map 1).

Background
On July 28, 2011, the Needles Fire Lookout and Tower were destroyed in a structure fire. The lookout cab and tower were constructed in 1937 and 1938 by the Civilian Conservation Corps atop the Needles rock formation at 8,245 feet. The lookout was determined as eligible for the National Register of Historic Places but had not been nominated for the register. Currently, part of the staircase accessing the lookout and some of the structure’s foundation remain.

The lookout overlooked the Kern River Drainage, Mt. Whitney, Olancha Peak, Farewell Gap, and Dome Rock. The personnel staffing the tower were a secondary communication line for persons in the backcountry where cell phones do not work. The Needles Lookout was one of the most popular places to visit on the Western Divide Ranger District. The lookout served as an office and living quarters for a Forest Service employee, who was responsible for detecting fires and relaying information to fire managers. In addition, the staff at the lookout offered communication support for users, such as the Backcountry Horsemen, volunteer trail crews, and the Pyles Boys Camp in the Wilderness during the summer months. During active firefighting, the lookout staff provided additional communication support to firefighting efforts, especially during night operations.

Since the lookout has been destroyed, there has been strong enthusiasm from many members of the public to rebuild the lookout in its current location. The Forest Service has received approximately thirty-two letters and a number of phone calls regarding the lookout, nearly all in favor of replacing this nationally recognized site.

Existing condition
Currently there is no functioning lookout or communications equipment on Needles. This has left a gap in the Forest Service’s ability to provide early detection of wildfires and management of them in the Golden Trout Wilderness and adjacent forest and public lands. All communication equipment was destroyed in the fire, including radio repeaters, antennas, microwave dishes, and internet web cams.
The lookout no longer provides the same popular recreation destination. Visitors can still hike on Trail 32E22 or climb the rock faces of the Needles formation accessing it from below. Currently, part of this area remains closed to visitors for their safety until hazardous materials can be safely removed.

**Desired condition**
The lookout is fully operational, with the look and feel of the historic C-3 lookout cab and SPD9 tower. It complies with current building and safety codes, and is constructed of durable materials that have a relatively long life. The living and working conditions of the lookout cab are functional and efficient for detecting smoke and relaying critical information to employees, agencies, and volunteers. All electronic equipment is replaced with current technology, and provides the necessary communication for both firefighters and backcountry users. The Needles lookout, when staffed and not in emergency response, is open for safe public recreational use and enjoyment as was provided historically.

**Current Management Direction**
The desired conditions for the Needles Lookout and Tower Replacement project are supported by current management direction. The 1988 Sequoia National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan focuses on the need to “rehabilitate, replace, or relocate existing buildings to support Forest management” (p. 4-34). The 2000 Presidential Proclamation establishing the Giant Sequoia National Monument focuses on the decades of fire suppression and the increased hazards of wildfires. The Proclamation also identifies historic values and objects of interest to be protected.

**Purpose and Need**
The purpose of this project is to replace the Needles Lookout and Tower with a structure that maintains the same “look and feel” as the original structure while complying with current building codes and safety requirements. There is a need to ensure all electronic equipment is replaced with current technology providing the necessary communication for both firefighters and backcountry users. There is also a need for restoring the lookout to provide the same popular recreation destination prior to the fire.

**Proposed Action**
The proposed action is to construct a new lookout cab and tower with the same “look and feel” as the original tower on the same site. The lookout will comply with current building codes and safety requirements, and be constructed out durable materials. The living and working conditions of the lookout cab will be functional and efficient. The existing stairs leading to the tower will be repaired or replaced as necessary. All electronic equipment will be replaced with what is currently available, and provide communication for both firefighters and backcountry users.

**Preliminary Issues**
Increased traffic on the road and trail to access the lookout tower during construction may increase the need for some road and trail maintenance to restore proper drainage and roadside/trailside brushing. To mitigate this potential issue, road and trail maintenance will be conducted as needed before and/or after tower construction following Forest Service Manual and Handbook direction.
Comments
If you have information you feel the Forest Service may not be aware of, especially about any extraordinary circumstances, regarding the Proposed Action, please send these in writing on or before January 9, 2012 to:

Western Divide Ranger District
Attn: Anne Thomas
32588 Highway 190
Springville, CA 93265
RE: Needles Lookout and Tower Replacement project
or
mariannethomas@fs.fed.us
Subject: Needles Lookout and Tower Replacement project

When submitting comments, please keep the comments specific to this proposal only. Comments that are not specific to the project and project area will be considered outside the scope of the analysis and will not be considered. For more information regarding this project contact Anne Thomas at 559-539-2607 ext. 270 or at the address above.

PRISCILLA R. SUMMERS
District Ranger

Enclosure