

DEC restoring fire towers

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PAUL SMITHS - The St. Regis Mountain and Hurricane Mountain fire towers have sat neglected for decades, but not forgotten. To bring the Hurricane Mountain Primitive Area and St. Regis Canoe Area into compliance with the Adirondack Park State Land Master Plan, both fire towers were proposed for removal by the state Adirondack Park Agency in 2010.

For five-and-a-half years since then, two groups, the Friends of the St. Regis Mountain Fire Tower and the Friends of Hurricane Mountain, have led an effort to restore the towers to their former glory and reopen them to the public.

Article Photos



Members of the Friends of Hurricane Mountain stand around materials for the restoration of the fire tower after the state Department of Environmental Conservation and State Police helicopters dropped them on the summit Aug. 25. Restoration of the fire tower is expected to begin on Monday, Sept. 28. (Photo provided)

They succeeded. In November, Joe Martens, then-commissioner of the state Department of Environmental Conservation, approved updated unit management plans which deemed the footprint for each tower a historic area. That decision meant work could begin on the aged structures, and that's exactly what happened Monday, Sept. 21. It was a triumphant moment for Doug Fitzgerald, a former DEC employee and co-chair of the friends group, who celebrated on the summit of St. Regis Mountain the morning the work began.

"I was yelling and jumping up and down on the tower," Fitzgerald said with a grin. "I was the first one on that tower."

The St. Regis tower was built in 1910 and the Hurricane Tower in 1919. The state closed 62 of its 103 operational fire towers in 1971. Others followed, including the one on Hurricane Mountain, which was formally closed in 1979. The St. Regis Mountain tower wasn't closed until 1990, making it the longest operating fire observation station in

the state.

The closed towers didn't all face the same fate. Some were removed while others were targeted as candidates for renovation.

"I walked down to the DEC and told him I'd chain myself to that tower if they tried to remove it," Fitzgerald said. "We worked with DEC and eventually started to change minds and attitudes."

The fire tower on Lyon Mountain was restored this summer, and work on the Hurricane Mountain fire tower is slated to begin Sept. 28.

Monday's work on St. Regis marked the beginning of a five-year agreement between that tower's friends group and the DEC.

"Our goal is, if everything goes well, then by next year at this time we'll pretty much have everything in order as far as the restoration, and then we can open it to the public," Fitzgerald said.

As the work proceeds, Fitzgerald said the friends board will continue to brainstorm for ways to create an interpretive experience at the tower. That could include signage that identifies the surrounding peaks and outlines the natural and human history of the mountain.

Fitzgerald said the group is also working with the Paul Smith's College VIC to possibly have a fire tower cab installed on the VIC premises in a spot where St. Regis Mountain is visible. The installation would contain items used by fire observers in the tower like books, maps and binoculars.

"We want to give people a feeling of what the observer might have had around him," Fitzgerald said. "We have a vintage radio that still has the St. Regis tag on it from the '40s or '50s. That is outside of our agreement with the state. Our agreement with the state is all up there."

A big part of making that agreement come to fruition is a collaboration between the DEC and the Student Conservation Association's Adirondack Program. DEC staff provided guidance and materials via a helicopter drop, but the SCA work crew, is performing the labor. DEC also provided half of the funding for the crew and AmeriCorps, a national community service organization, made up the balance.

"With their program, they all got trained in wilderness first-aid, trail building, and some of them get trained in chainsaw use and some get trained in using a grip hoist and other equipment," said DEC forester Steve Guglielmi. "Some projects require more specialized training. For example, with the fire tower, some DEC operations went in and trained them on the use of harnesses and safety working from heights."

Guglielmi said some of the materials for the project were salvaged from other fire towers, and new lumber was provided. The workers first replaced the wooden stairs, landings and cab floor. The rest will be finished next year, but Guglielmi said he isn't sure when.

"The roofing needs to be replaced, all of the metal cross pieces need to

be replaced," Guglielmi said. "We have to have those specially manufactured. The concrete (base) also needs to be patched up." Guglielmi noted that steel window frames will also be installed, but window panes will not.

Guglielmi said the good news is a survey conducted by VIC naturalist Brian McAllister found no evidence of Bicknell's thrush, an endangered bird that nests in high elevations, so the window for work is much larger than if the bird was found there.

SCA project leader Max Phinney is overseeing the restoration process. Phinney and his crew camped near the summit of the mountain and spent five days slowly replacing steps and landings from the ground up.

St. Regis was Phinney's third fire tower project. Last year he worked on the Spruce and Hadley Mountain towers in the Lake George area. Phinney said SCA work crews mostly do backcountry trail work on things like bridges, stone staircases and drainages. Earlier this summer, his crew installed waterbars on Baker Mountain in Saranac Lake.

SCA crew leader Jenna Moen could relate. The 22-year-old began working with a national SCA crew six years ago, and although she's done projects in California, Colorado and Vermont, St. Regis was her first fire tower project.

Moen likes carpentry work and said she feels lucky she's been assigned so many carpentry jobs this season, including foot and snowmobile bridges.

At Lilian Brook her crew used untreated spruce and cedar logs felled in the surrounding forest by backcountry stewards. She said that was a harder job than the suspension bridge she helped install over Calamity Brook.

"Suspension bridges have a bunch of cables, and those wire stringers are a lot easier to work with," Moen said. "You just pull tension on them and then you connect all of the wood rather than hauling giant, 2,000-pound logs across to make the stringers."

Moen said the St. Regis job was a great way to end a physically demanding season. The worksite is a rocky place where lakes, mountains and forests stretch to the horizon in every direction, and the air drop lightened the crew's already burdensome task of hauling tools, food and shelter up the 2,874-foot-elevation mountain.

Plus, Moen has a history with the rocky summit.

"I'm happy to be on St. Regis because my family has a little camp a couple of minutes here," Moen said. "Apparently I hiked this when I was younger, but I don't remember. Regardless, it's good to be back."