

Removing feed support from Firefox

What's happening?

Having gathered data on usage of the feed preview and live bookmark feature in Firefox, considering the technical state of their implementations and their maintenance costs, and reflecting the wider state of traditional RSS/Atom feed usage on the web, we've decided to remove the built-in feed reader feature as well as the "live bookmarks" support that allows users to view feed articles within the bookmarks UI.

Why are you doing this?

These features had an outsized maintenance and security impact relative to their usage. Making these features as well-tested, modern and secure as the rest of Firefox would have cost significant time and effort, and the usage of these features doesn't justify such an investment.

There are comparatively very few existing automated tests for both features. The live bookmarks implementation uses old, slow ways of accessing the bookmarks database, and complicates the rest of the bookmarks implementation unnecessarily. The feed viewer has its own special XML parser rather than using the main Firefox one, and hasn't had a significant update in styling or functionality in the last 7 or so years, gradually becoming more broken and looking more and more outdated.

What's more, these parts of Firefox aren't offering features users want. Live bookmark doesn't really have a concept of "read" state (it uses history visit state as a proxy, which doesn't work for redirects), it doesn't work well with sync, and arguably shouldn't be part of our bookmarks implementation in the first place. It's also not available on either Android or iOS and so has no mobile integration. Finally, podcasts are more successful than text-based feeds, but neither our feed viewer nor live bookmarks have good integration for them.

Usage data from Firefox shows that 99.9% of our users don't actually use either the feed viewer or live bookmarks. Furthermore, the usage of feeds outside of Firefox doesn't justify it, either - RSS/Atom has been slowly losing popularity, and various tools and companies have dropped support years ago (Apple Mail, Google Reader, ...), stopped existing if they were focused on feeds (e.g. FeedDemon) or changed focus (e.g. NetVibes).

Additionally, we are working on various initiatives that operate in the same area of focus as RSS/Atom feed support, like Pocket (including ways of aiding content discovery and selection by users), Reader Mode (including e.g. voice support, user-controlled styling of content, ...) and WebExtensions. All of these features are in a better place in terms of maintenance and usage, and so it makes more sense to expand them than to double down on our feed viewer and live bookmark support. We will likely invest more in those areas in the near future.

What will happen to my existing live bookmarks?

When we remove live bookmarks, we will:

1. Export the details of your existing live bookmarks to an OPML file, which other feed readers (including ones that are webextensions) support importing from.
2. Replace the live bookmarks with “normal” bookmarks pointing to the site (not feed) URL associated with the live bookmark. If no site URL exists, the original live bookmark is removed.
3. Tell you when this has happened, and offer you some suggested options for how you could continue consuming those feeds.

This work is currently expected to be done for either Firefox 63 or 64, scheduled for release in October and December 2018, respectively. We don't intend to change anything on ESR, so Firefox 60 ESR will keep support, and the next ESR won't have support anymore.