



Federal Wildland Firefighter Pay

Our federal wildland firefighters need our help, and time is of the essence. The *Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act of 2021* provided funding to increase base salaries for federal wildland firefighters up to \$20,000 or 50% of their current wages in an effort to address historically and comparatively low pay and widespread staffing shortages. However, without action, that funding expired in September 2023. Although Congress extended the current funding levels through the three separate stopgap measures, they have yet to pass a permanent solution, and the next congressional deadline for a solution is March 1st. The [National Federation of Federal Employees](#) estimates up to half of wildland firefighters might possibly leave the federal service if Congress does not permanently secure their pay and benefits.

The National Association of Forest Service Retirees is dedicated to sustaining the Forest Service mission by adapting to the challenges of today and tomorrow. We believe Congress and our country should work to ensure that these brave men and women who put their lives on the fireline to protect human life, our communities, watersheds, wildlife and fisheries habitat, and other forest and rangeland values, should not have their employment fraught with financial insecurity and instability. Their commitment and sacrifice should allow them to provide a living wage for themselves and their families.

Forest Service Chief Randy Moore recently met with our organization's Board of Directors and told us that many federal firefighters cannot afford housing, and some are even living out of their cars. We understand that such a pay reduction could amount to up to \$20,000 for some of these firefighters, forcing them to leave personal and family decisions in the hands of Congress. Alternatively, many might leave the service for more assured compensation and stability. Solidifying these benefits would help to successfully implement the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy and the recommendations from the Congressional Wildland Fire Commission. At the most basic human level, it's simply the right thing to do.

This is one of the factors that can contribute to a shortage of federal wildland firefighters, and the timing couldn't be more important. While we may not yet be in the thick of wildfire season, agencies are actively finishing the recruiting for the upcoming season. Timeliness is important for meeting the hiring demands for the needs for this summer. This is not a United States issue alone. Last year the federal wildland fire community responded across Canada to support our northern neighbors and personnel have been assisting in Chile. Our international agreement with Australia and New Zealand is ready for implementation.

It could be argued that the longer Congress waits, the more our elected officials are putting our communities at risk. This shouldn't be another "partisan game" over which party will get their way. We are talking about real communities that could be left without adequate services due to insufficient staffing, or firefighters leaving the service. We are talking about real men and women with a duty to provide for their families. We are also talking about putting our firefighters in harm's way by stretching them too thin. We are conceivably talking about life-and-death consequences, for firefighters and anyone who lives within the possible reach of wildfires, as a result of Congress's inaction. For Oregonians, that's most of us.

It's time for Congress to fix this issue, permanently.

Steve Ellis

Steve Ellis, Chair
National Association of Forest Service Retirees

February 14, 2024