

Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act

The Federal wildland firefighting workforce is composed of approximately 20,000 firefighters—including fire management and support staff—from the Forest Service and four agencies within the Department of the Interior (DOI). A significant consequence of increased catastrophic wildfire activity across the American West is the strain it has placed on Federal agencies' ability to recruit and retain wildland firefighters. Factors such as low pay, poor work-life balance, and the excruciating mental and physical toll of working longer and more brutal fire seasons has caused many firefighters to pursue better employment opportunities at state agencies and in the private sector. In a recent report, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) concluded that low pay was the most commonly cited barrier to Federal wildland firefighter recruitment and retention.

Until recently, most Federal wildland firefighters earned minimum wage-level incomes. This forced them to earn as much hazard and overtime pay as possible in order to get by, contributing to low workforce morale and heightened levels of burnout. To help rectify this, in 2021 Congress provided a temporary pay increase to wildland firefighters; however, this pay bump will expire near the end of September 2023. Without any further Congressional action, wildland firefighters would again revert to earning minimum wage-level incomes. Agency leadership and firefighter associations have testified that a lack of further Congressional action would likely result in massive departures from the Federal wildland firefighter workforce this year and compromise Federal responsiveness to America's growing wildfire crisis.

The Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act will prevent attrition and provide long-term workforce stability. Specifically, the bill would:

- **Permanently Increase Federal Wildland Firefighter Pay.** The bill would avoid the impending pay cliff by permanently increasing wildland firefighter pay at levels at or near those enacted within the current temporary increase.
- **Establish a new Pay Scale for Wildland Firefighters.** The bulk of the pay increases within the bill are realized *via* the establishment of a new pay scale for wildland firefighters at all grade levels similar to the General Schedule (GS) pay scale that is applicable to most Federal employees.
- **Establish Additional Pay Supplements for Wildland Firefighters.** Base pay is supplemented by pay for each day a firefighter is deployed on a wildland fire.
- **Requires Consistency in Agencies' Policies Related to Work-Life Balance.** To limit burnout, the bill directs agencies to work to make existing policies consistent, and to study opportunities to ensure proper rest and recuperation for wildland firefighters to lessen burnout.

The Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act is bipartisan, and is supported by the Grassroots Wildland Firefighters, National Treasury Employees Union (representing DOI firefighters), and the National Federation of Federal Employees (representing Forest Service firefighters).