

Wildfire Resilience Coalition

A coalition of non-governmental organizations seeking to help federal, Tribal, state, local, and private partners realize transformational change in wildfire risk management across the United States.

September 19, 2023

- Senator Murray, Chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee
- Senator Collins, Vice Chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee
- Representative Comer, Chair of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee
- Representative Raskin, Ranking Member of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee
- Representative Westerman, Chair of the Natural Resources Committee
- Representative Grijalva, Ranking Member of the Natural Resources Committee
- Representative Granger, Chair of the House Appropriations Committee
- Representative DeLauro, Ranking Member of the House Appropriations Committee
- Representative Simpson, Chair of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee
- Representative Pingree, ranking member of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Wildland firefighters are crucial for protecting lives, communities, forests, and grasslands across the country. They work long hours in dangerous conditions and deserve income security and a living wage. Chronically low wages threaten to drive many highly trained wildland firefighters to other, higher paying, jobs. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act was a critical first step in improving pay and we thank Congress for your leadership. Now, **Congress needs to act quickly to maintain increases in federal wildland firefighter pay, while protecting other dedicated funding for forest restoration and wildfire risk reduction.**

Wildfires have grown larger and more severe in recent years. Increasing wildland fuel loadings combined with warming and drying will continue to exacerbate the effects of wildfires in the coming decade. Wildland firefighters are the single most important resource contributing to safe, efficient fire suppression. Unfortunately, the pay received for the value they provide is disproportionate to the cost of other resources frequently assigned to wildland fire incidents such as aircraft and contractual support services. Wildland firefighters are critical to a safe and effective response to fire, along with fuel reduction and fire-resilient communities. They work to reduce the negative impacts of wildfires and, importantly, to reduce the threat of fires through controlled burns and other proactive mitigation efforts. Today's wildland firefighters are highly skilled and certified through a rigorous qualification system. They travel around the country, spending long stretches away from their homes as part of incident response teams. Wildfire management is inherently a partnership effort between federal, state, tribal, local, and volunteer partners. Nearly 20,000 federal wildland firefighters work within the Department of Interior and the Department of Agriculture and make up a significant part of the resources that respond to large wildfires nationally.

In November of 2022, a Government Accountability Office report (GAO-23-105517) identified low pay as a primary barrier to recruitment and retention of wildland firefighters. The National Federation of Federal Employees Forest Service Council estimates 30-50% of the USDA Forest Service wildland firefighters may leave for higher paying jobs without improved pay and working conditions. Though a recent study found that federal wildland firefighters were paid on average 33% less than state firefighters in Washington, Oregon, Colorado, and California,¹ similar issues face wildland firefighters working for Tribes, states, or other organizations. Wildland firefighter pay needs to be increased across Tribes, agencies, and departments including for positions such as dispatchers and others who provide support to wildland firefighters, who without this support, cannot safely do their jobs.

As a nation, we cannot afford to reduce or hamper our efforts to mitigate, manage, and suppress wildfires. An urgent step is for Congress to provide a long-term solution, ensuring federal wildland firefighter pay remains at or above the current levels, while protecting existing funding intended to increase the pace, scale, and quality of wildfire risk reduction work that is both critical and complementary to wildfire response.

Sincerely

American Forest Resource Council
American Forests
Environmental Defense Fund
Federal Forest Resource Coalition
Forest Stewards Guild
Intertribal Timber Council
Megafire Action
National Association of Counties
National Association of Forest Service Retirees
National Association of State Foresters
Public Lands Foundation
Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition
The Nature Conservancy
The Watershed Research and Training Center
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Silvix Resources

For more information regarding this letter or members of the Wildfire Resilience Coalition, please contact Zander Evans, wildfireresilience@gmail.com

¹ Alkhar, Lu, Perkins, & Pierce. 2023 *Closing the Gap: Addressing Disparities in Wildland Firefighter Compensation*. University of Washington. www.grassrootswildlandfirefighters.com/closing-the-gap

cc:

- Deb Haaland, Secretary of the Interior
- Tom Vilsack, Secretary of Agriculture
- Joan Mooney, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy Management and Budget, Department of the Interior
- Homer Wilkes, Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Department of Agriculture
- Meryl Harrell, Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Department of Agriculture
- Randy Moore, Chief, USDA Forest Service
- Brian Ferebee, Chief Executive of Intergovernmental Relations, USDA Forest Service
- Jaelith Hall-Rivera, Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry, USDA Forest Service
- Jeff Rupert, Director, Office of Wildland Fire, Department of the Interior