

Statement of
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Before the
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
U.S. House of Representatives
Hearing on Wildland Firefighting Workforce Reforms
October 27, 2021

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the approximately 110,000 federal workers we represent throughout the United States, including roughly 10,000 federal wildland firefighters employed at land management agencies (primarily at the U.S. Forest Service), we thank you for holding a hearing regarding the Tim Hart Wildland Firefighter Classification and Pay Parity Act (H.R. 5631), and the Wildland Firefighter Fair Pay Act (H.R. 4274), two pieces of legislation that NFFE strongly supports.

For more than a century, NFFE has been a staunch advocate for federal employees, particularly those fighting wildfire. Today, with wildfires increasing annually in size and strength, and with the increased destruction stemming from this troubling trend, federal wildland firefighters have never had it so bad. Our brave members fighting wildfire have seen their situation steadily deteriorating for years, and there has been nothing resembling an appropriate response from Washington that would give our members a chance at completing the herculean task with which they are assigned. The problems our members are experiencing are truly at a crisis level. The time is now to address the systemic problems we have in fighting wildfire. This is not one of those issues that can be studied and contemplated for years on end. We need action, and we need action this year.

As the largest representative of federal wildland firefighters, we know that with each intensifying fire season, firefighters and their families have been forced to endure greater hardships. At the very root of this tribulation is an outdated and under-resourced federal wildland firefighter program. It is time to rise to the challenge of combating the neglect of the past while striving for a future where our wildland firefighters can perform well under the harsh requirements of their jobs knowing that the country they serve has their backs. That means more boots on the ground, better pay and benefits, and an array of programs to adequately care for wildland firefighters while they are on a fire today, recovering between fire seasons, or dealing with issues related to their fire service decades in the future.

Wildland firefighting is unlike any other civilian job. It requires firefighters to leave their homes and families for months on end. It requires accepting the inherent risk of unpredictable fires, where life or death can be decided by a shift in wind. These are true American heroes. Yet, at the end of a long, hard fire season, when the bodies and minds of wildland firefighters need rest and renewal, many are left to fend for themselves, often denied coverage for injuries or

deprived of physical and mental wellness assistance. This is especially true for a certain classification of seasonal 'temporary' wildland firefighters, even though many return to serve year after year for an ever-lengthening fire season. It is a travesty that our country turns its back on our wildland firefighters in need in this way. Bureaucratic reasons for why this continues to occur are no longer acceptable. This heartless policy needs to be addressed immediately.

For too long, federal wildland firefighters have endured low pay. The impact of below market wages is reflected by the continuing loss of federally trained and certified personnel to state and local fire services. The difference in firefighter wages is stark in urban areas that buttress forested areas, but it is no less impactful in rural areas where local fire departments offer superior wages in contemporary settings. In addition to the loss of seasoned personnel to lead annual fire suppression efforts, the loss of federally trained assets is damaging to the success and fiscal efficacy of federal firefighting programs. NFFE has called for a minimum of a 50% across-the-board increase in pay for federal wildland firefighters. H.R. 5631 would significantly increase federal wildland firefighter pay.

Of the plethora of issues requiring Congressional and Executive Branch attention from which to modernize federal wildland firefighting programs, none is more important than the enhancement of immediate and long-term care of the firefighters themselves. Since NFFE began representing wildland firefighters more than 80 years ago—during that time building federal wildland fire services from a loosely knit effort of wildfire response into a professional force of highly trained specialists—the mental and physical toll on firefighters has increased significantly because of the growing demands of the job. Unfortunately, the immediate and long-term care programs to which wildland firefighters have access are woefully insufficient. We need meaningful change to how injury and illness are recognized and treated, even decades after service ends, and how the increased risk of each heightens under dangerously understaffed fire service programs. H.R. 5631 would be a significant step in the right direction to addressing these issues.

Every day, federal wildland firefighters are exposed to toxic pollutants and chemicals. These toxins often accumulate and reside in the body as hidden dangers unseen until detection, often because of the diagnosis of an illness. As fire seasons extend, so does the exposure and risk of illness later in life. Aggressive national tracking of exposure and proactive monitoring and treatment will save lives, as will the mandatory and expanded presumptiveness of a service connection. H.R. 5631 would address this.

In the interest in offering some semblance of a work-life balance that is regularly forfeited with wildland firefighter jobs, improvements to nonwage-based compensation and reimbursements can dramatically affect daily living while on deployment. The days of firefighters sleeping on the ground or in their cars because housing is not available or affordable cannot continue. Earlier this year, NFFE secured a commitment from the U.S. Forest Service to purchase the required boots for new firefighters and replacement boots for seasoned firefighters. Before NFFE successfully bargained for this benefit, firefighters were required to purchase the \$300 to

\$600 boots themselves, a huge financial burden to firefighters, especially to those making close to minimum wage. More can and must be done to help firefighters financially to improve their quality of life. H.R. 5631 would be a significant step in the right direction to addressing these issues.

Mental health and wellness is a very pressing issue for wildland firefighters. It is a perpetually high-stress environment. Over time, firefighters see a lot of troubling things, and sadly, these things impact their mental health. Mental health is exacerbated for wildland firefighters by long detachments from their families and their “regular lives.” It is not surprising that many wildland firefighters struggle with depression and addiction. There is also an unacceptably high rate of suicide among wildland firefighters. It is time for a significant investment in mental health and wellness for wildland firefighters, including training and support networks to ensure that everyone has a lifeline to be heard, understood, and embraced. The statistics are stunning and detail too many firefighters left to fend for themselves after a distressing event or after years of mental trauma. These wildland firefighters deserve better, plain and simple. We must address the serious issue of mental health now. H.R. 5631 would address this.

In closing, I wish to again thank the Subcommittee for their interest in improving the lives and professions of federal wildland firefighters. NFFE looks forward to working with the Subcommittee on these and additional matters from which to build a modern, fully funded, and fully staffed federal wildland firefighting service.