



NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES, IAMAW, AFL-CIO



NFFE-IAM Supports Stabilizing the Federal Wildland Firefighter Workforce through Increased Pay and Improved Recruitment and Retention

Position: Federal Wildland Firefighters (WFF) from the U.S. Forest Service (USDA) and Bureau of Land Management (DOI) endure longer, and more dangerous wildfire seasons each year with the loss of life and property increasing at a phenomenal rate. Increases in programmatic investments for wildfire prevention and response bear little fruit if those investments are severely lacking in workforce compensation, wellness, and working conditions. For a fraction of what the government pays annually for wildfire disaster relief and losses incurred from devastated communities and permanently scorched federal lands, the government can end its chronic recruitment and retention crisis, and better compensate and care for its wildland firefighters.

NFFE-IAM requests that the following legislation pass to address the retention and recruitment crisis through 1.) modernized compensation, 2.) modified retirement incentives to retain experienced talent, 3.) improve working conditions, and 4.) realistic approaches to firefighter physical and mental wellness.

Modernized Compensation. Federal wildland firefighting job series are decades out of date and no longer recognize modern job markets and cost-of-living realities. Annual applicant rates are 50% lower than historic levels, and attrition is at a historic high as personnel leave for local firefighting jobs.

- **Base Pay.** Starting base pay for WFFs is woefully low at \$11.86 per hour. The ascent up the GS scale is very slow. The rise to Captain (GS-8) takes at least 7 years (with relocation typical) and pays \$20.00 per hour. Hence, a starting minimum of \$20.00 per hour is critical supported by additional, ample opportunities to supplement pay (e.g., recompense for certifications) and seek promotions. The increase in starting pay must be reflected and adjusted throughout the grades.
- **Job Series.** A new, widely encompassing occupational series is required that fully integrates and compensates for long deployments and dangerous environments. The new series must include personnel on the fire line and behind who are involved in the prevention, control, suppression, or management of wildland fires. As with similar federal occupations, the series must recognize the appropriate practice of utilizing special pay rates, hazard pay, overtime pay, and portal pay.

Modified Retirement Incentives. Essential to effective retention and recruitment efforts, seasonal WFFs need an incentive to return each year, and permanent firefighters need incentives to stay. High attrition rates offset any marginal gains in hiring. As a result, federal assets (fire engines, half crews, Hotshot operations) remain shuttered in federal firehouses as the government increasingly relies on exhausted state and local fire departments to fill gaps in fire response.

- **Creditable Service.** Before FERS, seasonal and temporary work counted toward retirement. This must return to keep both temporary and permanent WFFs from leaving. (H.R. 4268)
- **Enhanced Annuities.** Premium pay must count toward otherwise paltry retirement annuities.

Improved Working and Living Conditions. Housing is mostly unaffordable at most WFF wages, commutes to work are exceptionally long, housing while deployed is often miserable, WFFs are often sleep deprived while deployed, isolation from family is continuous, and hazardous exposure is constant.

Realistic Physical and Mental Health Wellness. PTS, suicide, depression, chronic injury remains high.

- Pass S. 2700 (HERO Act), provides for first responder mental health (H.R. 1480 passed 5/21).
- Pass S. 1116 ensures duty-related presumption of disability/death (H.R. 2499 passed 5/22).