



NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES,
IAMAW, AFL-CIO



NFFE-IAM Urges Congress to Stop a Pay Cliff that will Cripple the Federal
Wildland Firefighter Workforce and its Incident Response Capabilities

Position: 15,000 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. For a fraction of what the government pays annually for wildfire disaster relief to devastated communities and in losses of permanently scorched lands, the government can end this recruitment, retention, and response crisis. Smart investments can save lives, property, and disaster relief funding while supporting professional and highly trained federal WFFs.

NFFE-IAM **urgently requests that the FY 2024 budget proposal pass before August 30, 2023**, to prevent temporary pay increases from sunseting to stop a mass exodus of federal wildland firefighters to state and local agencies or other employment:

- Increase of \$647M to USFS for the management of wildfires and fuels. Of which:
 - \$509M increase for WFF suppression and related pay reforms
 - \$50M increase for personnel accommodations maintenance
 - \$10M increase for vital health and wellbeing assistance
- Increase to budget of \$233M to Interior for the management of wildfires and fuels.

NFFE-IAM requests Congress to pass the **Tim Hart Wildland Firefighter Classification and Pay Parity Act**, also known as “Tim’s Act.” If passed, this bill would deliver necessary sweeping reforms of pay, working conditions, physical and mental wellness, and the recruitment and retention of WFFs.

Background: *Due to decades of neglect, federal wildland firefighting programs have fallen behind state and local fire programs. As the scale of wildfires continues to increase, the systematic neglect became more visible. Now the country faces a crisis seemingly without end unless Congress acts to address past failings and provide a path forward for future success. Therefore, NFFE-IAM requests:*

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 Federal wildland firefighting job series are decades out of date and no longer recognize modern job markets and cost-of-living realities.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 (often with relocation) to achieve pay at \$20.00 per hour. Instead, a starting minimum of \$20.00 per hour is critical, and should be supported by additional, ample opportunities to supplement pay via certifications and promotions. The increase in starting pay must be reflected and adjusted throughout the grades.
- **Fair Pay for Long Hours and Dangerous Work.** WFFs are deployed for weeks or months at a time in remote areas. They endure hostile conditions and 18-hour workdays, and they need time to rest each day and between deployments. They deserve pay for every hour deployed or on assignment and Hazard Pay for other hazardous work like fuels management, prescribed burns, or suppression support. Specialized training and certifications should be reflected in their pay. Seasonal work should count toward retirement because seasonal work is no less dangerous, and it helps with retention.

(Continues on reverse...)

Improved Health and Wellness

- Access and Services for Mental Health. WFFs are 12 times more likely to commit suicide than the national average. It is a major issue among wildland firefighters, especially for seasonal firefighters who lose their connection to support mechanisms off-season. WFFs need support with mental and physical trauma endured after months of fighting fires and other catastrophes. WFFs need better mental health access, awareness, and treatment programs.
- Wellness Tracking and Preventative Medicine. Exposure to chemicals and hazardous environments leads to injury and illness over time. WFFs need access to preventative medicine to identify and track injuries and exposure-related disease. Seasonal WFFs also need better access to mental health care and physical wellness and tracking during the off-season.

Better Working Conditions and Opportunities

- Reasonable Living Conditions. WFFs deserve adequate facilities for lodging during assignments to limit the need to sleep in cars or on the ground except for emergency situations. WFFs often endure substandard housing with infestations, water damage, and electrical problems. Not only are these living quarters unhealthy, but they also crush morale and self-esteem which leads to burnout and depression.
- Career Mobility and Training. WFFs are siloed into careers which expedites burnout and limits human capital expertise. WFFs need 1) cross-discipline mobility and opportunities during their careers to grow as professionals and during WFF careers, 2) improved access to training to limit WFFs paying out of pocket for expensive training to advance their careers, 3) automatic conversion from seasonal to permanent employee within the first three seasons.

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.
- Enhanced Annuities. Premium pay must count toward otherwise paltry retirement annuities.