



NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES

Affiliated with the International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers, AFL-CIO

September 20, 2023

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack
Under Secretary for Natural Resources Homer Wilkes
U.S. Forest Service Chief Randy Moore
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Re: Reprogramming of Mental Health and Paycheck Corrections Funding for Federal Wildland Firefighters

Dear Secretary Vilsack, Under Secretary Wilkes, and Chief Moore:

On behalf of the approximately 10,000 federal wildland firefighters represented by the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE), I write to you regarding concerns about the reallocation of funding to avoid the impending pay cliff facing federal wildland firefighters. As you know, federal wildland firefighters will have their pay cut by 50% up to \$20,000 no later than November 5th of this year if Congress does not pass legislation to provide additional funding.

In the latest draft Continuing Resolution proposed by the House Freedom Caucus, the U.S. Forest Service would be directed to reprogram allocated funding for mental health programs and paycheck corrections to pay wildland firefighter salaries through the end of the year.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 (IIJA) provided funding to establish programs for permanent, temporary, seasonal, and year-round wildland firefighters to recognize and address mental health needs, including post-traumatic stress disorder care. It is my understanding that the Forest Service has currently allocated existing funds to establish and soon implement these programs to research and address mental health issues among federal wildland firefighters.

It is absolutely critical that the proposed reprogramming of mental health funding does not take place. Due to a grueling occupation and current lack of mental health programs, federal wildland firefighters suffer from anxiety, depression, PTSD, and [suicidal ideation at rates](#) two to 10 times that of the general population. Wildland firefighters are faced with traumatic experiences every season: witnessing the destruction of communities destroyed by megafires, harrowing injuries, and the deaths their close colleagues, whether on the fire line or by suicide. These experiences are universal and lead to substance abuse and mental health issues across the workforce.

To address these rampant mental health issues among federal wildland firefighters, Congress provided funding through the IIJA. It is inconceivable that Congress would now turn and take that funding away. It must instead be used for its intended purpose. Wildland firefighters need support programs to help them deal with the hazardous nature of the job. We as a nation owe it to them for their sacrifice and service in protecting us from megafires and other disasters.

Similarly, the proposed Continuing Resolution also directs the Forest Service to reprogram existing funding for paycheck corrections. However, it is my understanding that this funding has already been allocated and is immovable. Over 1,000 federal wildland firefighters have already performed their duties but were paid at an incorrect rate. These employees are entitled to receive a corrected paycheck with that funding and the agency is indebted to them. Congress and the agency must pay their debts as the rest of us are expected to pay our bills.

NFFE and our members across the country appreciate the Department of Agriculture's commitment to ensuring federal wildland firefighters are paid a living wage and have access to mental health programs. The IJA provided necessary short-term fixes for the wildland fire workforce, but it is now time to implement permanent solutions. Under no circumstances should Congress be reneging on their commitment to our wildland firefighters by taking away mental health services or hard-earned wages. I implore you to stand against any proposed reprogramming of funding and instead request that Congress upholds their end of the bargain.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Randy Erwin', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Randy Erwin
National President
National Federation of Federal Employees, IAMAW, AFL-CIO