

**File Code:** 5100**Date:** April 15, 2024**Route To:****Subject:** Medical Clearance Adjustments for 2024**To:** Regional Foresters

This letter outlines a waiver process for current Incident Qualification and Certification System cardholders (aka, Red Cards). The mental and physical health of our workforce is a top priority for the agency, especially for those engaged in all aspects of our wildland fire response. To manage this expectation, the agency follows the Federal Interagency Wildland Firefighter Medical Standards. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) adopted the standards in 2000 for both the USDA Forest Service and the Department of the Interior (DOI). These standards established the minimum medical fitness requirements for arduous duty that the agencies determined to be necessary for safe and efficient job performance based on 5 CFR Part 339 Medical Qualifications Determinations.

In late 2023, the Forest Service began implementing the first phase of the new Arduous Medical Process in Regions 6, 8, 9, and 10. We also began using an updated Heath Screening Questionnaire (HSQ) across the entire Forest Service wildland fire workforce. The new HSQ questions subsequently increased the number of required medical clearances by our agency Medical Officers. The intent of both processes is to ensure those in arduous duty fire positions meet the Federal Interagency Medical Standards and are physically and mentally able to perform the duties required of the wildland firefighting community.

From this implementation we have learned that our new system cannot accommodate the additional volume of medical clearances needed to maintain the operational readiness of a healthy workforce. We also recognize that not all geographic locations have medical providers who accept the agency's new processes. As a result, the Forest Service is adjusting the implementation of the new Arduous Medical Process and the updated HSQ. The following changes have been coordinated with the National Federation of Federal Employees and will take effect immediately:

- **All arduous, moderate, and light duty employees who completed the medical clearance process and work capacity test in 2023, for either the Forest Service or DOI, and do not have a change in medical status<sup>1</sup>, will have the expiration date of their medical clearance and associated waivers extended to December 31, 2024. These employees are still required to complete a new work capacity test for 2024.**
- New hires and employees who did not complete a medical clearance process in 2023 will be required to complete the HSQ and the OPM OF-178 Certificate of Medical Examination if an HSQ response indicates that one is needed, prior to completing the work capacity test.
- For those employees holding arduous duty qualifications and who are currently in the scheduling, examination evaluation, clearance, or waiver process; medical clearances will be processed through the Acuity contract and medical qualifications staff. Employees who completed an HSQ and are in the process of completing the OF-178 medical exam or clearance will have their cases processed.

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<sup>1</sup>Change in medical status: if you have a change in condition (e.g. new diagnoses, new medication, or injury), or should a previously-cleared medical condition/health status change/worsen, (new diagnosis, new medication, or injury), you are required to notify the medical qualifications program via email at [SM.FS.mqp\\_emedical@usda.gov](mailto:SM.FS.mqp_emedical@usda.gov) as soon as possible.



- Other arduous duty employees in Regions 6, 8, 9, and 10 may elect to go through the Arduous Medical Process at any time; however, it is not required in 2024.
- The agency will continue to implement the Arduous Medical Process in future years. Arduous duty employees who have scheduled or completed their physical exams under the new Arduous Medical Process but are still waiting for an examination, final clearance, or clearance with waivers will be processed through our Acuity contract and medical qualifications staff. Employees who completed the new HSQ but are still waiting for an OF-178 Certificate of Medical Examination, final clearance, or clearance with waivers will also have their cases processed. Again, Arduous duty employees in Regions 6, 8, 9, and 10 may still elect to begin the Arduous Medical Process at any time, but it will not be required for 2024.

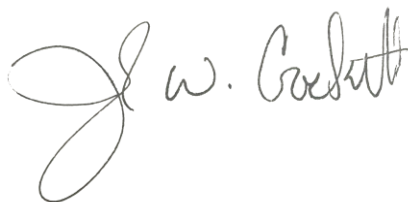
The Forest Service recognizes that the updated HSQ contains four new questions which could prompt the OF-178 Certificate of Medical Examinations for many employees. These are:

- I have/carry/take prescribed medications (other than birth control, testosterone), take herbal supplements, or take over-the-counter medication regularly.
- I have an allergy that I have been told I should carry an Epi-pen for.
- I wear corrective lenses.
- I have been told I have hearing loss, or I wear hearing aids.

To improve clarity on the intent behind the new and revised questions, the Forest Service is working closely with the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE) to provide clear instructions on how to navigate the HSQ questions. The Forest Service is also taking the following steps for Arduous Medical Process implementation in future years:

- Where medical provider access has proven to be limited, the agency will work with Acuity and the Department of the Interior to bring in mobile clinics to perform exams for our federal employees and increase medical provider availability for walk-in medical exams.
- We will work closely with the Regions and the Department of the Interior to identify other areas where medical provider capacity may be an issue and work to proactively provide options for employees in those areas.
- We will monitor the process for delays and remain flexible in the implementation of the new Arduous Medical Process.

We take our commitment to learning seriously and will do so as we stand up this update to the Medical Qualification Program. I also recognize the hard work of the program staff to implement a new process and accommodate feedback and concerns. As we move forward, we will continue to assess our current systems and processes, listen to our employees and our NFFE partners, and evaluate next steps to implement the new requirements. I especially want to thank everyone who has participated in the first phases of the Arduous Medical Process and have helped us learn along the way.



JOHN W. CROCKETT  
Deputy Chief, State, Private and Tribal Forestry

cc: Regional Fire Directors and Deputies, FAM12, Jeff Marsolais