



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.**

Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act (WFPPA). NFFE urgently requests the passage of WFPPA (H.R. 5169 / S. 2272). Democrats and Republicans strongly agree that permanently stopping the pay cliff through the WFPPA is critical to the success of federal wildland fire services. WFPPA would:

1. *Permanently Increase Federal Wildland Firefighter Pay.* The bill would avoid the impending pay cliff by permanently increasing wildland firefighter pay at levels at or near those enacted within the current temporary increase that was extended from legislation passed in 2021 (IIJA).
2. *Establish a new Pay Scale for Wildland Firefighters.* The bulk of the pay increases within the bill are realized *via* the establishment of a new pay scale for wildland firefighters at all grade levels similar to the General Schedule (GS) pay scale that is applicable to most federal employees.
3. *Establish Additional Pay Supplements for Wildland Firefighters.* Base pay is supplemented by additional pay for each day a firefighter is deployed on a wildland fire.
4. *Require Consistency in Agencies' Policies Related to Work-Life Balance.* To limit burnout, the bill directs agencies to ensure proper rest and recuperation for wildland firefighters.

YOU ALREADY VOTED FOR WFPPA if you voted for any continuing resolution since 2023 or voted for FY 2024 appropriations. The authority for the temporary pay increase that expired in 2023 was extended in each of the continuing resolutions and was fully funded in the FY 2024 appropriations bills. As an authorizing bill, WFPPA has the bipartisan and bicameral “blessing” of appropriators.

BUILT-IN OFFSETS: Appropriators realize that automatic offsets will occur from smaller and fewer wildfires, delivering: 1) less contracting to expensive state and private services, 2) saving on remediation costs, 3) more prescribed burns that prevent fires, 4) more effective use of current resources (e.g., fire engines and hotshot crews sitting idle due to low staffing), and 5) less FEMA and other financial assistance to wildfire victims and towns.

Wildland Firefighter Fair Pay Act. NFFE urgently requests the passage of S. 3221/ H.R. 6195, a bipartisan, bicameral bill to raise the caps on overtime pay for hours worked. Right now, wildland firefighters exceed an arbitrary cap on overtime pay which means they are NOT PAID for all the hours they work. They work a grueling and dangerous job FOR FREE during peak fire months because of an outdated OT pay cap.

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The Tim Hart Wildland Firefighter Classification and Pay Parity Act. NFFE requests the passage of S. 1505/ H.R. 3108, also known as “Tim’s Act.” If passed, this bill would deliver necessary sweeping reforms for pay, working conditions, physical and mental wellness, and strengthen the recruitment and retention of WFFs.

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 non-federal 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.
- 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, and 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 counting this time will help with retention.

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 in the 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, smoke, 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 regularly 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 expedite 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 fire stations as the government increasingly relies on costly outsourced help.

- 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.