



Testimony  
Before the Committee on Energy  
and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate

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## WILDLAND FIRE

# Federal Agencies Face Barriers to Recruiting and Retaining Firefighters

Statement of Cardell D. Johnson, Director,  
Natural Resources and Environment

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Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss our work on the barriers facing federal agencies in their efforts to recruit and retain wildland firefighters. In recent decades, the size and severity of wildfires has increased across much of the United States, as has the length of wildfire seasons. For example, the total acres burned across the United States has doubled over the past 20 years, breaking records in many states.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, wildfires destroyed more than 12,000 homes, businesses, and other structures annually, on average, between 2017 and 2021—more than three times as many, on average, as in the preceding 5-year period, according to information from the National Interagency Fire Center. These increases are straining the federal wildland firefighting workforce.

In November 2022, we reported that the federal wildland firefighting workforce was composed of approximately 18,700 firefighters (including fire management and support staff) from the Department of Agriculture’s Forest Service and from four agencies in the Department of the Interior.<sup>2</sup> The Interior agencies are the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service.

Congress, the agencies, and others have expressed concern about the capacity of the federal wildland fire workforce and the conditions facing federal firefighters. Enacted in November 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act included a number of provisions related to the federal wildland firefighter workforce.<sup>3</sup> Forest Service and Interior officials have also testified about their agencies’ struggles in hiring and retaining wildland firefighters.

My statement today will discuss commonly cited barriers to recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters, and is based on our November

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<sup>1</sup>Since 2000, an average of 7 million acres have burned each year, which is more than double the annual average burned in the 1990s, according to information from the National Interagency Fire Center.

<sup>2</sup>GAO, *Wildland Fire: Barriers to Recruitment and Retention of Federal Wildland Firefighters*, [GAO-23-105517](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 17, 2022). The Forest Service employed nearly 70 percent of those firefighters, with about 12,800. The remaining nearly 5,900 federal wildland firefighters were split across the four Interior agencies.

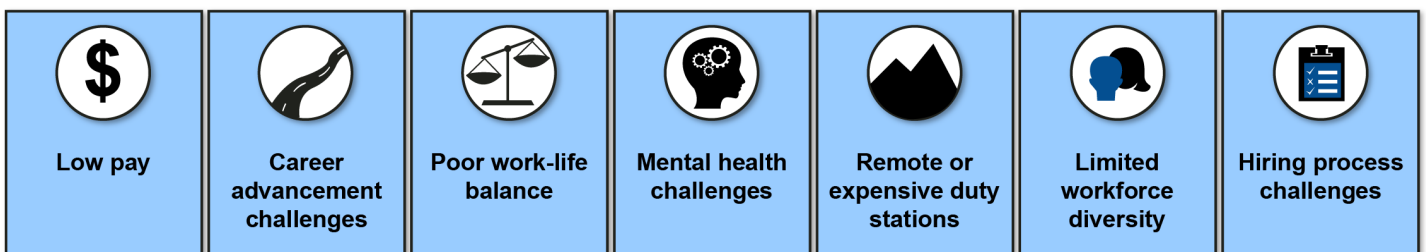
<sup>3</sup>Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803, 135 Stat. 429, 1097 (2021).

2022 report.<sup>4</sup> For that report, we identified and described barriers by reviewing laws, regulations, and program guidance and other agency documents. We also interviewed senior officials from the Forest Service and Interior, including both wildland fire and human capital managers, and from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). To gain a broader perspective on barriers, we interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 16 nonfederal stakeholders, such as nongovernmental organizations involved in firefighting issues. The report provides a more detailed description of our methodology. Our work was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

## Barriers to Recruiting and Retaining Federal Wildland Firefighters Include Low Pay, Career Advancement Challenges, and Poor Work-Life Balance

In our November 2022 report, we identified seven commonly cited barriers to the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters: (1) low pay, (2) career advancement challenges, (3) poor work-life balance, (4) mental health challenges, (5) remote or expensive duty stations, (6) limited workforce diversity, and (7) hiring process challenges (see fig. 1).

Figure 1: Commonly Cited Barriers to Recruitment and Retention of Federal Wildland Firefighters



Source: GAO analysis of information from the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior and selected nonfederal stakeholders. | GAO-23-106888

Our 2022 report describes the seven barriers in detail, including actions that the agencies had taken to help address the barriers and suggestions from agency officials and selected stakeholders about additional actions that could be taken. All seven barriers are important and need to be addressed if the Forest Service and Interior agencies are to make

<sup>4</sup>[GAO-23-105517](#).

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continued progress in their efforts to improve firefighter recruitment and retention. This statement highlights findings related to three of those barriers; please see our 2022 report for findings related to the other barriers.<sup>5</sup>

**Low pay.** Forest Service and Interior officials and all 16 stakeholders we interviewed for our 2022 report said that the pay for federal wildland firefighters is low. Officials and eight stakeholders also noted that the pay does not reflect the risk or physical demands of the work. We reported that the Forest Service and Interior agencies in August 2021 implemented an administration initiative to increase the minimum hourly wage for federal wildland firefighters from \$13 to \$15 per hour.<sup>6</sup> We also reported that in June 2022, the agencies worked with OPM to address a provision of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act directing the agencies to increase firefighter salaries by the lesser of \$20,000 or 50 percent of base salary in locations where it is difficult to recruit or retain wildland firefighters.<sup>7</sup>

However, Forest Service and Interior officials and four stakeholders we interviewed said that while steps to increase federal wildland firefighter pay were positive, they believed that pay still did not reflect the demands of the job and was not competitive with nonfederal entities. Officials and two stakeholders also pointed out that authorization for the funding that

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<sup>5</sup>[GAO-23-105517](#).

<sup>6</sup>The agencies' implementation of the initiative increased the pay—through the payment of special awards—for more than 11,300 firefighters at the Forest Service and approximately 3,500 firefighters at Interior. In January 2022, OPM established a nationwide special rate schedule that provided a \$15 minimum hourly rate and pay increases at General Schedule grades 1 through 4 for General Schedule employees stationed in the United States, which ensured a \$15 minimum hourly rate of basic pay for wildland firefighters. See Office of Personnel Management, Memorandum for Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies, *Achieving a \$15 Per Hour Minimum Pay Rate for Federal Employees*, CPM 2022-02 (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 21, 2022). The wildland firefighter pay increase provided by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act was paid on top of these special rates, according to agency officials.

<sup>7</sup>Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(d)(4)(B), 135 Stat 429, 1101 (2021). For more information on the implementation of this provision, see Department of the Interior, Office of Personnel Management, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Frequently Asked Questions: Implementation of Section 40803 of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law* (Public Law 117-58) (Washington D.C.: June 21, 2022). Beginning on July 3, 2022, eligible wildland firefighters at the Forest Service and Interior received the supplemental salary increase, which will remain in place until September 30, 2026, or until the funds are depleted, whichever comes first. Firefighters also received retroactive payments covering October 1, 2021, through July 2, 2022.

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the agencies had received from Congress ends after fiscal year 2026 and that longer-term solutions are needed. Officials said that they were looking at a long-term pay solution, such as establishing a higher pay rate nationwide for wildland firefighters.

**Career advancement challenges.** The agencies worked with OPM to develop a new occupational series for federal wildland firefighters aimed at better reflecting the duties related to fighting fires and providing a clearer path for firefighters to advance their careers.<sup>8</sup> OPM announced the new occupational series in June 2022 and directed the Forest Service and Interior to implement it within 12 months. The new occupational series covers positions for which many of the primary duties involve the prevention, control, suppression, or management of wildland fires. According to an interagency document and agency officials, creation of the new occupational series will provide a clear career path, with defined requirements for career advancement.<sup>9</sup>

Implementation of the new occupational series is ongoing. The Forest Service and Interior agencies have the delegated authority to determine the work and grades supportable for their positions, including the firefighter positions under the new occupational series.<sup>10</sup> As of August 2022, Forest Service and Interior officials said that they were developing the grade levels for the new occupational series, which is expected to take effect in 2023.

We also reported that the Forest Service and Interior agencies had converted some temporary firefighter positions to permanent positions, which may help address some retention challenges, according to officials.

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<sup>8</sup>The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provides that, subject to the availability of appropriations, the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior are to coordinate with the Director of OPM to develop a distinct “wildland firefighter” occupational series. See Pub. L. No. 117-58 § 40803(d)(1), 135 Stat 429, 1100 (2021). The agencies are to implement the new occupational series no later than 12 months after OPM’s issuance of the position classification standard, thus by June 21, 2023. According to OPM, it was appropriate to create the series because of the changing nature of the fire season and the need to employ wildland firefighters year-round. See Office of Personnel Management, *Memorandum for Human Resource Directors, Position Classification Standard for Wildland Fire Management, 0456*.

<sup>9</sup>See Department of the Interior, Office of Personnel Management, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Frequently Asked Questions: Implementation of Section 40803 of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (Public Law 117-58)*.

<sup>10</sup>See 5 U.S.C. § 5107.

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Interior began converting seasonal positions to permanent in 2021 to facilitate the agency's efforts to respond to wildfires year-round, according to Interior's Wildfire Risk Five-Year Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the Forest Service and Interior are taking steps to convert additional positions, as directed by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.<sup>12</sup>

**Poor work-life balance.** Poor work-life balance was another commonly cited barrier to wildland firefighter recruitment and retention. Forest Service and Interior officials said that longer and more intense fire seasons have increased the number of times that firefighters are deployed during a year, which can make it difficult for firefighters to spend time with family or attend to personal matters.<sup>13</sup> Officials and four stakeholders we interviewed for our 2022 report said that the frequent deployments cause some firefighters to leave the workforce or take a break in service for family or personal reasons (e.g., to start a family or care for young children) but that the structure of the retirement system may affect their willingness to return later to firefighting.<sup>14</sup>

Two stakeholders said that federal agencies would be better positioned to recruit former firefighters back to service if firefighters were eligible to

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<sup>11</sup>Department of the Interior, *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Wildfire Risk Five-Year Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan*.

<sup>12</sup>Specifically, the act called for, beginning October 1, 2021, Forest Service and Interior to seek to convert not fewer than 1,000 wildland firefighters to wildland firefighters who are (1) full-time, permanent, year-round federal employees; and (2) reduce hazardous fuels on federal land not fewer than 800 hours per year. See Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(d)(4)(A), 135 Stat. 429, 1101 (2021).

<sup>13</sup>Standard deployments last for 14 days at a time, but assignments can be extended up to 30 days, under certain circumstances.

<sup>14</sup>Federal firefighters who work more than 3 years in primary, or rigorous, positions are eligible to participate in a special retirement system, similar to that of law enforcement, in which they pay more of their salary toward retirement benefits but are generally required to retire at age 57, earlier than other federal employees. After serving 3 years in such a position, firefighters can move to a secondary firefighting position, while retaining eligibility for the special retirement benefits. Secondary positions are often less strenuous and allow firefighters to continue to use their experience and training to help the agencies achieve their mission as the firefighters age, according to officials. However, if firefighters take a break in service and later decide to reenter the workforce, they have to return to a primary firefighting position to be eligible for the special retirement system they had participated in earlier. Some firefighters may be unable or unwilling to return to a primary position for various reasons, such as family caretaking duties, and, therefore, lose their special retirement benefits, which officials said may affect retention, especially of women firefighters. For more information, see [GAO-23-105517](#).

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return to the special retirement system after a break in service. However, officials noted that eligibility for the special retirement system is governed by statute, so any change to eligibility requirements would need to be made by Congress.

In conclusion, the Forest Service and Interior agencies face a number of barriers to recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters, including those discussed here and the others identified in our November 2022 report. As we reported, the agencies have been taking a number of actions—including some with direction and specific funding from Congress—intended to help address these barriers. Implementation of the actions is ongoing, and it is too early to determine the outcomes of these efforts.

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Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso, and Members of the Committee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

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## GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Cardell D. Johnson, Director, Natural Resources and Environment, at (202) 512-3841 or [JohnsonCD1@gao.gov](mailto:JohnsonCD1@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement.

GAO staff who made key contributions to this testimony are Jonathan Dent (Assistant Director), Luqman Abdullah, Farah Angersola, Patricia Moye, Cynthia Norris, and Lesley Rinner. Other staff who made key contributions to our November 2022 report are acknowledged there.

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