
“We’ve made huge improvements in how we address firefighter safety. It has been painfully slow, though. All things are doable over time; it’s just the speed of change that is difficult. We will change over time, but do we want to wait 20 years and sustain the 20 firefighter deaths per year and increasing public deaths?”

—Type 1 Incident Commander, Society Focus Group

A 10-year review of accidents and incidents within the USDA Forest Service wildland fire system.

USDA Forest Service photo by Jace Jacobs.
Abstract

This document seeks to describe the wildland fire system and culture within which U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service employees operate. To do so, this review presents a narrative of the Forest Service's wildland fire system based on the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of those who operate within it.

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Chapter 11. The Quest for 1,000 Hours of Overtime—Money as an Incentive to Risk

“Hourly wages incentivize exposure. Everybody goes to a fire to get your 16s and [hazard pay]...They’ll take the opportunity to work as long and as hard as they can so that at the end of the summer, we have a 1,000-hour [overtime] season. Within the OPM hourly wage requirements, there’s no way to provide this financial stability that a young individual could use to build a future on or build a career out of.”

—Wildland Fire Module Supervisor, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group

A fundamental tenant of the learning review process is understanding the conditions of influence that affect decision making and firefighter safety. One of the most common conditions which emerged from the 2007–2016 metareview dataset revealed that for many, the current system of pay incentivizes accepting greater levels of risk when making decisions within the wildland fire environment. To dive deeper into the fiscal conditions which may influence risk decision making, fiscal incentives focus group participants were asked to consider if they believed the wildland fire system has fiscal incentives built-in that:

1. Encourage risk taking or increase exposure to risk
2. Create a relationship between firefighter pay structure and rates of firefighter fatalities or injuries

Subsequent discussions confirmed this theme and participants noted that many employees depend on premium pay to make ends meet. Much of the conversation focused on the ethics of balancing fiscal rewards with risk and fatigue management. Put simply, to make money, one has to work, and for firefighters, that means to work as much as possible due to the seasonality of the job. This means grabbing overtime and hazard pay whenever possible, even when the risk associated with an assignment might be high. Focus group participants expressed a desire to see changes to the system that would mitigate or remove this pressure from the decision-making process. Further conversations revealed three primary concerns regarding firefighter pay structures: (1) financial instability is prevalent in the workforce, (2) the ethics of working 16-hour days (16s), and (3) prioritizing pay over recovery.
Financial Instability

“We have a seasonal workforce that is incredibly unstable financially. We are approaching a point where a GS-3 is making less than some State's minimum wages. And in order to make up for that hourly wage, I’m trying to do my best as their line supervisor to cover for that in overtime.”

—Wildland Fire Module Supervisor, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group

To begin to understand this pressure, we can look to American society for some insight. According to CareerBuilder, 78 percent of Americans are living paycheck to paycheck.19 When were you able to stop living paycheck to paycheck? If the answer to that question is “I haven’t,” then money is likely still a motivator for you.

In 2020, the minimum wages set by Washington State and the District of Columbia exceeded the GS-3 “rest of U.S.” pay rate. Combine this pay rate with a limited tour of duty, and it is easy to see how the temporary and permanent seasonal workforce might be motivated to make the most of fire season. Whether seasonal or permanent, GS-3 or GS-12, overtime and hazard pay were seen by focus group participants as either the only means to make ends meet or as the means to support the lifestyle one has chosen.

To achieve a livable wage, participants spoke of being willing to take on riskier assignments if accepting them meant the difference between an 8-hour day and a 16-hour day with hazard pay. Participants also spoke of fiscal incentives influencing decisions around strategy, pushing folks more towards suppression tactics than letting fire take its natural course. For many, these decisions aren’t selfish ones; rather, they are made by supervisors looking out for their employees’ financial well-beings who get paid less and only work part of the year.

“Fact is, money is a motivator at work but in a slightly strange way...the best use of money as a motivator is to pay people enough to take the issue of money off the table. Pay people enough that they aren’t thinking about money, they are thinking about the work.”


While most firefighters love their jobs and have chosen this career out of selflessness, they still need to put food on the table and a roof over their head. This can unwittingly make money a significant motivator as many employees have these issues weighing in the back of their minds. Participants felt that changing the pay structure in a way that removed the pressure of fiscal incentives would decrease the level of risk firefighters were willing to accept. To do this will require a massive overhaul of policy and directives, and should the agency decide to take on that challenge, it must first ask itself what Dan Pink proposes in the quote above, “How do we get to the point where we pay people enough that they aren’t thinking about money, they are thinking about work?”20

“We need to neutralize financial incentives for everyone that participates in fire. Firefighters are paid by the hour they work, including me. They rely on that overtime pay to get them through the winter, pay for college, make their truck payments, etc.”

—Regional Fire Director, Society Focus Group
The Ethics of 16s

“We were on a Type 5 fire and I knew that people were going to want 16s, right? And I just have a problem if we’re working 12s and signing 16s. So, we stayed on the fire and we just... we kept mopping up. We stayed on the fire till after dark and that way I can feel ethically okay with signing their [crew time report (CTR)] and then we hike back to the truck in the dark and we missed the turn.”

—Interagency Hotshot Crew Captain, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group

Intentional misrepresentation of hours worked can result in severe consequences, yet there is a prevalent ethical exception which exists in wildland fire: many firefighters and supervisors have claimed 16-hour days when 16 hours were not actually worked. How is this ethical decision justified by both supervisors and employees?

In an agency where one of the few sure ways of ending a career is lying on your timesheet, one must carefully consider why people would be willing to take the risk. Focus group participants offered several rationales, including compensation for time away from home, not truly being off hours while at camp, acknowledgment that a lot of administrative and maintenance work is done off the clock, and making up for having to “show your lunch” even though you worked right through it. So where does the ethical dilemma come in? For many, claiming 16 hours of work is uncomfortable when they know they did not work 16 hours, yet they want to make sure their folks are paid.

“I’m going to throw in there that I think it is a conflict of values. I’m calling it that because you have your ethical responsibility to the organization, but you have your ethical responsibility to the people that work for you.”

—District Ranger, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group

To avoid this ethical dilemma, supervisors spoke of finding ways to stay out on the fireline for the full 16 hours, which they admitted, could inherently come with detrimental impacts to the health and safety of their employees. For example, one participant spoke of a crew that worked a fire during the shoulder season. To reduce risk, the crew had been leaving the fireline earlier so they wouldn’t have to drive in the dark. However, their division would only sign the hours they worked on the fireline. To get around this, the crew decided to stay on the line longer so they could claim 16-hour days, recognizing they would then have to drive in the dark at the end of a long day when safety margins were reduced. Fiscal drivers often compel fireline leaders to push for 16s to take care of those they lead who may still be living paycheck to paycheck. Conversely, fireline leaders who hold to the letter of policy are sometimes seen as not taking care of their people, impacting trust, relationships, and sometimes retention. Whatever side of the ethics coin one lives on, there is no easy answer to this difficult dilemma.

“I mean, ethically, that’s the deal. When I say that I sign 16s [even if 12s are worked] and I ensure for that, it's to take the exposure [of long hours on the line] and the [associated] risk off...to free them up [from those pressures].”

—Deputy Forest Supervisor, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group
It appears to focus group participants most everyone knows and accepts that this ethical dilemma exists, and striving for 16s is just how it’s done. Whether it be to falsify a timesheet or to take on extra risk or hours, walking that line is easy for no one, as duty, integrity, and respect are pillars of the wildland fire organization’s character. Yet fireline supervisors will continue to be forced to navigate that ethical decision space until the structure of pay in the wildland fire system changes. To take the pressure of fiscal stability off the table so firefighters can focus on their jobs, the agency must identify aspects of the wildland fire system that can be improved to address the underlying conditions that lead to the inevitable question, “to 16, or not to 16?”

What is the Priority: Recovery or Pay?

“I think it’s interesting to take a look at the taking care of your people aspect from a short-term perspective vs. from a long-term perspective. So, taking care of your people for a short term, you might be looking at their work-rest and maybe looking at fatigue; take care of their feet, personal needs. But you’re not taking care of the long term. The 6 months they’re not working out of the year, you’re not looking out for their bank accounts, or their families, [or] their finances. So, am I taking care of the long term or am I taking care of the short term?”

—Risk Management Officer, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group

The effect of fatigue on decision making and performance has been acknowledged for decades, yet the wildland fire organization still struggles with the long hours and extended assignments necessary to accomplish the mission. The problem is only worsening due to depleted workforces, longer and more active fire seasons, and increased socio-political pressures.

Participants stated that in recognition of this trend, fireline supervisors and line officers have started encouraging their fire crews and personnel to take more time off during the season. Additional paid and unpaid rest and recuperation (R&R) days have been offered and folks have been encouraged to take more vacation time. Yet many of those offers get rebuffed as taking days off during the summer is seen by many as the fastest way to affect the availability of themselves and their module, which can result in a drastic pay cut (e.g., to take time off in the middle of the summer can mean missing out on a 2-week assignment full of hazard pay and overtime). Many firefighters and supervisors sacrifice self for crew in this regard.

Ultimately, these factors often lead to significant tension as the fire season marches along. Terms like “dirty August” and “Snap-tember” get thrown around as fire personnel reach their breaking points. Yet, as one participant, a wildland fire module leader, pointed out during the fiscal incentives focus group:
“At the end of the season when everybody’s looking tired and you can see exhaustion in everyone, [that’s when] teams, division supervisors, ICs... they’re all gonna say, ‘We gotta take care of our people. So, get them into bed, get them bedded down early,’ and all of a sudden, folks are down to a 12-hour shift, and that’s the quickest way to piss off a crew boss.”

Even though fire conditions may be moderating with the shorter days, the tension felt to make the most of the closing season gets worse. Work remains to be done; crews are still stuck in camp sleeping on the ground. Coupled with little explanation as to why hours are reduced and little trust the reduction in hours is anything more than “cost containment at the lowest level,” the tension grows.

The perceived inability to take time off during the summer for recovery also has system-wide effects as the transition to the shoulder season occurs.

“Fatigue be damned, I need to put food on the table.”
—Fuels Technician, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group

For those who have worked all summer, accruing but not using annual leave, fall is the time to use leave before they lose it. This is especially true for seasonal permanent employees. With only a short window of time to use this leave, districts are losing key players and numbers during what is normally their active prescribed fire season. This can lead to tension between those exhausted from a long season and those who are trying to implement forest management plans. Sometimes the worn-out firefighters are forced to lose out on valuable time off and sometimes the local system goes untreated for another year. Either way, one important part of the system will lose out.

The System as a Driver of Culture

In some ways, the wildland fire pay structure drives the culture of can-do. For example, firefighters who work 14 consecutive days will earn 2 paid days off. However, a firefighter who works 13 consecutive days will not earn 2 paid days off. The move from 21-day assignments to 14-day assignments was made to address fatigue just as the decision to cap the workday at 16 hours was made. However, the impact of such decisions must be evaluated. Are these changes to our system accomplishing their intent? If the goal is to provide a highly motivated, low-cost, seasonal workforce that is willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done, then the current pay structure with its fiscal incentives of overtime and hazard pay is working just fine. But is that the goal?

As with many of the other issues, these incentives that push fire personnel to work despite being fatigued are much the result of system drivers. Unfortunately, this means there is no easy fix. To remove these pressures would require policy and directive changes, or even creating a whole new pay system. Participants suggested increasing wages,
moving to a portal-to-portal pay system, or creating a system of pay where employees are paid based on the qualification they are serving in as possible means of moving forward. While these changes may seem and feel monumental or impossible, many participants believe they still deserve recognition and a national-level conversation. Until then, what other skills, resources, or tools might help employees become more financially stable and maximize the income they receive?

“I was really concerned...when we started with nothing but the ground-level firefighter's lack of integrity. You know? All those things. I sat here and I just said, 'Man. There's a lot more to this.' I always fear from where I sit in the organization that we're pushing all the fault down to the lowest level.”

—Interagency Hotshot Crew Captain, Fiscal Incentives Focus Group
**Learning Challenge**

The issue of pay highlights two very different perspectives:

**Perspective 1: Pay is Fair**

People get paid for the work they do; they chose this line of work and are aware of what it entails. Any complaints about pay sound like whining, and claiming more hours on a timesheet than were actually worked is illegal, unethical, and grounds for dismissal—end of conversation.

**Perspective 2: The Pay System is Broken**

People are on assignment away from their home for 6 months at a time, risking life and limb, making enormous sacrifices, and, even with hundreds of hours of overtime, are barely making a living wage. Burnout and stress due to financial instability is real. Forest Service employees are suffering, and supervisors are struggling to retain quality employees.

Take some time to personally reflect on these two perspectives using the following questions as a guide:

- **Q** Which perspective do you align with most? Why? Have you said or experienced the sentiments related above?

- **Q** Are you still living paycheck to paycheck? If so, does this affect which perspective you hold?

- **Q** What would a system look like that satisfied both perspectives?

- **Q** Now, purposefully, take on the other perspective. Think about how the arguments hold weight from that perspective. Was that easy to do? Did it change your thinking of “the other side” in any way?

- **Q** What is the effect on the work group when members hold to polarized viewpoints like this?

Now that you have taken some time for yourself, gather your work group and discuss some of the different perspectives.

*Tell us about your experience participating in this challenge at this [team learning link]*
Endnotes


7  U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2015. The rising cost of wildfire operations: effects on the Forest Service’s non-fire work. 16 p.


18 **U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 2015.** The rising cost of wildfire operations: effects on the Forest Service’s non-fire work. 16 p.


