

Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture Forest Service Wildland Fire Workforce Framework March 2022

Introduction

This report responds to Public Law 117-43, Division A, Title VII, Sec. 1701 (g): Not later than 45 days after the date of enactment of this Act, the Secretary of the Interior and Secretary of Agriculture shall jointly provide to the Committees on Appropriations of the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Senate Committee on Agriculture Nutrition and Forestry, the House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture, the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, the House of Representatives Committee on Natural Resources, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, and the House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Reform, a framework to modernize the wildland firefighting workforce beginning in fiscal year 2022.

The majority of the Federal government’s wildfire response apparatus is located within the Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service (FS) and the Department of the Interior (DOI). DOI’s Wildland Fire Management program comprises the Office of Wildland Fire (OWF) and four bureaus: (1) the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), (2) the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), (3) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and (4) the National Park Service (NPS).

Wildland fire is generally a natural and essential component of a healthy ecosystem, but it can be destructive and costly in unhealthy ecosystems. The average wildfire has become larger¹, costlier², and more complex, and wildfire “season” has grown to be almost year-round. Wildfire itself contributes to climate change through the release of carbon emissions into the atmosphere.³

Climate change has led to severe drought conditions across the western United States that have contributed to more frequent and severe wildfires. For example, in the United States, based on a 10-year average for 2011-2021, more than 62,000 wildfires burn 7.5 million acres⁴ every year. In 2021, 58,985 wildfires burned over 7.1 million acres of land; this is in line with the average number of wildfires that burned over the past 10 years and about 95 percent of the average number of acres burned. At the height of last year’s fire season, every geographic area was experiencing large wildfires for extended periods. This was illustrated by how early the Nation reached Preparedness Level (PL) 4—June 22, 2021— and the highest PL of 5 on July 14, 2021, as well as how long the Nation stayed at either PL 4 or PL 5—99 days—which is a record for the highest number of consecutive days at either PL 4 or 5.

To manage an effective wildland fire program, it is critical to take a proactive and cooperative approach that mitigates the negative effects of wildfires while actively managing the use of fire to achieve resource management goals. However, the wildland fire management workforce framework from earlier decades must be revised to more effectively meet these objectives and manage current

¹ <https://www.nifc.gov/sites/default/files/document-media/TotalFires.pdf>

² <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/statistics/suppression-costs>

³ Source: <https://www.csl.noaa.gov/factsheets/csdWildfiresFIREX.pdf>

⁴ National Interagency Coordination Center Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics Annual Report, 2021 (https://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/intelligence/2021_statsumm/annual_report_2021.pdf), page 12

conditions. This requires a workforce that is fairly compensated, available year-round to respond to wildland fire, cared for both physically and mentally, and has all the necessary tools to accomplish their mission safely, effectively, and efficiently.

Strategic Direction

Human capital is the DOI and FS wildland fire organizations' greatest investment. To ensure this investment accomplishes the increasingly challenging and complex mission of managing wildland fire on DOI and FS lands, we must focus on:

1. Ensuring that compensation and benefits reflect the true value of the work that is performed
2. Ensuring an organizational culture that promotes a sustainable work-life balance
3. Establishing programs that enable employees to properly manage their health, wellbeing and resilience
4. Providing the resources that are needed to develop and support training, education and opportunities that ensure critical emergency response, business acumen and land management competencies
5. Ensuring that work is accurately described, and that a distinct occupational series reflects the true competencies and certifications that are needed to perform the work
6. Developing a robust recruitment strategy to provide a relevant and diverse candidate pool
7. Providing clear career paths from hiring to retirement.

Strategic Workforce Framework

Phase 1 - Beginning in Fiscal Year (FY) 2022, DOI and the USDA FS have individually contracted for Wildland Fire Workforce Assessments. These assessments will:

- Gather and review background documents including staffing patterns, pay and compensation, organizational charts, position descriptions and performance plans, budget plans, relevant reports, and other documents.
- Analyze workforce demographics across organizational, occupational, geographic, diversity and other dimensions.
- Identify key Departmental, agency staff, and labor representatives for interviews, as appropriate, to gather background information on prior studies or recommendations on how to recruit and retain wildland firefighters.
- Conduct interviews and other fact-finding methods.
- Analyze all data and information collected through research, interviews, and other sources to determine valid staffing needs for current and future workforce.
- Draft and finalize an Assessment Summary, highlighting baseline data on the current workforce in various dimensions including geographic location, pay and compensation, financial and nonfinancial incentives, diversity, occupational series and grade, and other factors that also focus on future workforce capacity needs.

Phase 2 –Complete the workforce analysis and draft the Departments' wildland fire workforce plans.

Phase 3 –Departments will conduct an evaluation of the effectiveness of wildland fire management recruitment strategy. Results of the evaluation will be disseminated to Departmental leadership and will be used to support recommendations that improve recruitment strategies and identify areas where efficiencies may be gained. Finalize the DOI and USDA FS Departmental Strategic Wildland Fire Workforce Plans.

Phase 4 –Continual monitoring, evaluation, and revision as necessary to incorporate changes and identify best practices, as the Departmental Strategic Workforce Plans for fire will be dynamic. Monitor, evaluate, and revise the workforce action plans. Identify best practices.

Workforce Reform Short Term Goals

1. **Wildland Firefighter Compensation and Benefits:** Evaluate the need for a market-based, special salary rate for wildland firefighters as well as exploring other compensation changes, like an increased base pay for leave and hazard pay for prescribed fire. This will be done in tandem with the increase in base pay that was directed in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL).
 - a. *Note: There is a need to develop, in partnership with the Office of Personnel Management, a new distinct wildland firefighter occupational series that adequately describes the duties performed by these positions.*
2. **Conversion to a More Permanent Workforce:** As directed by the BIL, convert temporary wildland fire response positions to permanent, full-time positions available for fire response activities year-round. DOI and USDA FS began conversions with funding received in FY 2021 and will continue workforce transformation efforts through the BIL funding and FY 2022 and FY 2023 budget requests.
3. **Increase Firefighter Capacity:** Consistent with DOI’s and USDA FS’ FY 2022 and FY 2023 budget requests, and to meet the demands of nearly year-round wildfire activity, the workforce assessment in Phase 1 and the workforce analysis in Phase 2 will inform decisions to increase investment in core fighting capacity including hotshots, analysts, logistics (cache and dispatch), and base firefighters (engines, equipment operators, etc.). There would also be associated investment in the support of these individuals including equipment, vehicles, facilities, and agency administrative support functions. We will also be implementing robust succession planning to ensure these individuals would fill much-needed Incident Management Team capacity.
4. **Health, Well Being and Resilience:** Wildland firefighters work in an arduous, stressful environment that is physically and mentally taxing. They spend months away from family and friends, endure death and serious injury among their community, and face very real hazards every time they are deployed. The BIL requires the establishment of a program to recognize and address mental health needs and develop recommendations for mitigation strategies for wildland firefighters to minimize exposure due to environmental hazards. The FY 2023 Forest Service departmental budget requests, and funding within the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, further seek to address significant discrepancies within both the “hard” and “soft” infrastructure that supports the minds and bodies of our wildland firefighters when not on incident, to include mental health programs that take aim at the challenges faced by arduous and dangerous work on the fire line; and investing in the professional development and growth of our wildland firefighters now and for a post-firefighting career.

Workforce Reform Long Term Goals

1. **Administrative Program Support for Wildland Fire Operations:** The wildland fire system does not function autonomously. It is through the support and effort of many aspects of the USDA FS and DOI that our national wildland fire response operations are successful each year, including contracting, incident finance, and human resources. Assessment and analysis of core capacity needs could require additional investment in these critical administrative support functions.
2. **Modernization of Wildland Fire Information Technology:** The information technology systems, infrastructure, and tools that support our modern wildland fire response are falling behind what is currently available and being widely utilized by our partners and cooperators. It is necessary to invest in cutting-edge technologies such as hazardous fuels/risk mapping, satellite early detection systems, and unmanned aerial systems to provide our modern wildland firefighting workforce with the tools they need to maximize their effectiveness during response.
3. **Critical Response Infrastructure:** There are critical components of the wildland fire system that are absolutely necessary for a safe and effective fire response operation: dependable vehicles and fire engines, and hand-held radios. The investments in these system components have not kept pace with an increasing operational tempo, resulting in fewer vehicles that are shared among more responders. In addition, the interagency radio systems that provide essential and life-saving communications on the fireline are outdated and require significant annual maintenance. DOI and FS will coordinate to right-size the Federal wildland firefighting fleet and to invest in a modern radio platform for our firefighters.
4. **Wildland Firefighting Facility Improvement and Maintenance:** The wildland fire cache system that manages and distributes critical supplies to fire camps around the country, often in very remote areas, needs an overhaul. The cache facilities are often too small, underequipped, or understaffed—putting significant strain on the backbone of the wildland fire logistical support component of the system. The fire caches are not the only support facilities in need of support. There are also engine bays, helipads, airtanker hangars, and smokejumper facilities that need repairs or upgrades to meet the demands of our modern fire response equipment.