



NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FEDERAL EMPLOYEES

Affiliated with the International Association of Machinists & Aerospace Workers, AFL-CIO

July 8, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Re: Wildland Firefighters' Pay, Benefits and Work-Life Balance

Dear Mr. President,

The National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE) is a national union representing approximately 110,000 government workers across thirty different agencies in the United States, including thousands of wildland firefighters within the United States Forest Service within the Departments of Agriculture and Interior. We would like to be working partners with you on how to address the challenges to our federal firefighter workforce. We know of possible fixes available through direct agency action, with the help of the Office of Personnel Management, and through collective bargaining.

We appreciate the tremendous leadership, support and attention from the Biden-Harris administration on wildland firefighter pay and resources. NFFE has for years called for a long-term fix to the under-resourced firefighting effort. More lives, property, and infrastructure are lost each year than the previous year, and this trend is expected to continue. This is a national emergency of immense proportions, and a subject of bipartisan concern.

The pay incentives announced June 30, 2021 at the Briefing on Western Wildfires are a start. We agree with you that it is not enough. Our firefighters need a permanent deal on pay, benefits, and work-life balance. This is a unique opportunity to invest in our people, increase union jobs, save taxpayer dollars, and professionalize our firefighting workforce who risk their lives for the American people and our communities every day. To that end, we have the following recommendations:

- 1. Increase pay for all federal wildland firefighters by at least fifty percent (50%) across the board.**

Firefighters at every grade deserve to be paid at their worth. They take incredible risks on the job. Approximately half of federal firefighter income comes in the form of overtime and hazard pay, all of which is excluded from wages considered for retirement. Our members are paid far less than the state and local firefighters they work alongside. Our agencies provide some of the best training and experience, but many experienced firefighters leave once they get to journeyman level for better pay elsewhere, from \$21 an hour up to triple that. Pay increases will improve workforce retention, which saves on training costs and ensures we have the most experienced hands on the fire line.

NFFE has identified the following actions the Executive Branch can immediately take to ensure firefighters are paid fairly and commensurate with those outside of the federal workforce:

- Create a new, modern job classification and new position series to sustain the wildland firefighter workforce at all agencies. The new classification and series must reflect accurate job position descriptions, support career ladders, acknowledge specialties and disparate education levels required throughout a wildland firefighter workforce, encourage promotion and growth, etc. Embed hazard pay into the classification of the job so the pay becomes part of the basis for their retirement and other benefits. Ensure that all firefighters have access to Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program. NFFE would like to expeditiously bargain the process for reassigning our firefighters into the new classification.
- Establish "portal-to-portal" pay and remote location pay as compensation for firefighters who are away from home and family.
- Preserve the one-time boost of incentives given to firefighters in FY2022 in future budgets as recognition of the incredible risk firefighters take on the job.
- Direct OPM to authorize Hazard Pay and Environmental Differentials for employees who are engaged in prescribed fire operations.
- Guarantee employees maintain the same level of pay on leave by establishing a fair base pay. Currently, firefighters make significantly less when they give birth and/or care for a child or are injured on the job and go out on OWCP, because overtime and hazard pay is not available. A fair rate of base pay, special rates and other incentives will ensure firefighters are not enduring what is essentially a pay cut on top of suffering injury or when maintaining a life outside of work. Restructure how OWCP is administered at each agency to eliminate barriers to timely acceptance of claims and full payment on bills.
- Pressure Congress to pass the First Responder FAIR Retire Act (S. 129/H.R. 521) to ensure firefighters no longer lose enhanced retirement eligibility when disabled due to a workplace injury. Additional bills on other key firefighter issues are simply stranded in Congress. Please explore all paths to get the substance of all pro-firefighter bills enacted into law, rule or regulation.

2. Increase the number of firefighters by 10,000-20,000 over the next decade.

Due to worsening fire conditions, the United States will need a rough estimate of 10,000 to 20,000 additional firefighters within the Departments of Agriculture and Interior. Conversion of 1,000 seasonal firefighters to year-round, permanent positions is an important first step, but it will not meet the rapidly increasing demand for firefighters. Year-round employment may also mean year-round deployment, which potentially deprives our firefighters of critical off-season recovery time from fatigue and the stress of the job. Please hire more firefighters before asking more of our already stretched workforce.

NFFE has identified the following actions the Executive Branch can immediately take on staffing:

- Hire more permanent seasonal employees. Double the current levels in many locations. NFFE can help identify areas most in need. Increase baseline staffing on fire modules and in fire-support operations (including dispatch and cache operations) in addition to

looking at expanding the number of fire modules. This is key to ensuring employee resiliency in wildland fire.

- Convert temporary positions to permanent seasonal positions to end the “second class status” of temporary employees. Temporary employees do not have full job protections and benefits that permanent seasonals do. Rehire hinges upon their ability to “get along,” which has a chilling effect on reporting out legitimate safety concerns or harassment. Many temporary employees serve an average of five years with no retirement benefits prior to attaining a permanent position. Consider converting temporary employees to permanent seasonal employees upon successful completion of a non-consecutive 1-year probationary period.
- End the use of temporary hiring authority granted in 5 CFR 316.401(d)(ii), in which the employees must work less than 6 months (or 1039 hours) in order to be eligible for rehire each year. Thousands of employees hold temporary positions when the nature of the work has not been truly temporary for over a decade. End the practice of relying on extending hours of temporary employees. Only use temporary hiring authorities when it is needed to supplement unfilled permanent positions.
- Ensure adequate funding so that employees who have their hours extended are guaranteed employment through a date certain. Underfunding severely limits the value of OPM’s recent authorization for specific fire seasonal/temp personnel to have their hours extended.
- Cancel federal contracts for firefighting services and insource this work to support rural communities with dependable union jobs. There is no evidence that contracting out yields net savings for taxpayers compared to insourcing the inherently government work of preventing and responding to the national threat of wildfires. Realign equipment and personnel to reduce the reliance on contract resources. Develop a plan to seamlessly convert contractors to federal positions in accordance with merit system principles to mitigate any job losses and increase union density.
- Reduce using Administratively Determined employees (ADs) for support positions, such as warehouse material handlers, that we need staffed long-term. Employees hired under this authority have fewer job protections, benefits, and rights than temporary employees. Many are hired year-after-year. Consider converting AD positions to permanent ones and ensure the positions are adequately funded going forward.
- Competitively announce vacancies for higher graded positions in desirable communities in which employees wish to build a stable life -- ordinarily not remote duty stations. Remote duty stations are difficult to staff because they often require long commutes. These communities have few amenities and limited job prospects for firefighters’ family members. We recognize remote stations must be sufficiently staffed for rapid fire response, however overreliance on staffing remote duty stations exacerbates turnover.
- Provide OHRM the resources needed to process staffing requests timely. Use competitive hiring as opposed to Direct Hire authority to ensure merit system principles apply.

3. Explore new mental health resources and work practices through partnership and collective bargaining with NFFE.

Improvement in the quality of life for our federal firefighters needs immediate exploration. Back-to-back deployments are causing burnout at a high rate. Long separation from family is causing depression and other family life issues. The average federal employee Employee Assistance Program is not sufficient to keep our workers healthy and resilient.

NFFE has identified the following actions the Executive Branch can immediately take on work/life balance utilizing Labor Management/Partnership forums and collective bargaining:

- Install an improved, accessible Employee Assistance Program (EAP) that includes specialists who have experience working with first responders, especially wildland fire. Many of our firefighters have witnessed their colleagues injured or killed on the job and have experienced their own close calls. We need a new program that is fully accessible in rural areas, staffed with professionals who know trauma and treat PTSD, depression, and substance abuse, and includes comprehensive suicide prevention and crisis support. We recommend certification similar to the veterans' care resources available through the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Ensure EAP is available to all employees, including temporary employees, year-round and even during the off-season.
- Require agencies to allow regular work schedules for firefighters that allow for more days off during slower times such as 5/4/9 and 4/10 schedules.
- Stagger work periods by either implementing staggered schedules if they are not in place yet, or stagger them more efficiently.
- Explore ways to adjust the nature and length of deployments to allow firefighters more time with their families during fire season.
- Explore ways for changing how modules are staffed so employees can take time off or away from fire assignments to take care of family needs, address health issues, and take training assignments that will allow them to develop new Incident Qualifications, enabling career development and mobility within the fire system.

We look forward to working with you and your administration to achieve a comprehensive, permanent deal for our wildland fire members. Thank you.

Sincerely,



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National President/DBR
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Cc:

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