

U.S. News: U.S. Struggles to Find Firefighters

Caldwell, Alicia A . Wall Street Journal , Eastern edition; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]. 10 Aug 2021: A.3.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Willy Sloop left his job as a wildland firefighter for the U.S. Forest Service about two years ago. This year he has gotten multiple emails asking if he wants to come back.

"There are shortages at all levels," a recent note from one forest manager looking for help from current employees or even retirees read. "If you are interested in supporting the cause and supporting the wildland firefighting effort from the aviation perspective I encourage you to respond to this email."

Mr. Sloop, who works year-round as an outdoor guide with his wife, hasn't responded to the entreaties. He can't justify leaving it for a seasonal job where the pay typically ranges from \$15 to \$18 an hour, benefits are rare and higher wages for overtime mean putting his life at risk.

"I still miss the work and guiltily think about going back to it," Mr. Sloop said. "But I don't know if I ever could without, like, either a wage that made me not have to chase the overtime" or other benefits, including paid time off between fire deployments.

Amid a drought-fueled fire season where blazes are behaving unpredictably, Forest Service officials are struggling to effectively respond to all the fires burning and likely to come. The federal agency currently has about 10,000 wildland firefighters on staff, about 3,000 of whom are seasonal employees, combating just over 100 active fires. Nationwide, roughly 2.2 million acres have burned this year, 1 million more than at the same time last year, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

There are more than 100 open forestry technician positions, the job title given to federal wildland firefighters, according to a government hiring website. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the Forest Service, said its current staffing levels match those of the past few years but the agency needs more personnel to deal with the growing wildfire threat.

"What is different this year is the extended drought across the West, which has resulted in multiple fires occurring simultaneously across the country, inhibiting the movement of resources to support incidents," an agency spokesman said.

Officials say they have had to make tough decisions about where to send firefighters.

In the case of California's Tamarack Fire, which started south of Lake Tahoe on July 4, Forest Service officials said they counted more than 20 other fires in that area and decided to monitor the Tamarack fire and not initially send crews. It later crossed into Nevada, destroying at least 14 homes and prompting evacuations of hundreds of people.

The Dixie Fire, which started in mid-July in Northern California, has grown to more than 463,000 acres and is now the second-largest in state history. About 5,100 personnel have been deployed to combat it.

The Forest Service said it is working to raise the starting base pay for wildland firefighters to a minimum of \$15 an hour this year and add retention bonuses. The Biden administration is pushing Congress to make the pay raise permanent and add other incentives.

Tom Wieczorek, director for the Center for Public Safety Management, a research and consulting firm, said there is a shortage of first responders and firefighters at every level. "We are struggling to find enough resources to deploy across the country," Mr. Wieczorek said.

The shortage of wildland firefighters reflects a nationwide shortage of workers at nearly every level of the economy. Starting salaries are rising, and incentives like hiring bonuses are being instituted at many private-sector jobs that carry significantly less risk than firefighting.

Another challenge for the Forest Service is that many of its firefighting jobs are only for fire season. State and local fire agencies generally pay better and routinely keep firefighters employed year-round. At the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, firefighters also receive overtime and health benefits.

"Cal Fire salaries and, more importantly, benefits, have evolved over the years," said Ken Pimlott, a former Cal Fire director. At the federal level, he said, "the pay structure and such just hasn't evolved."

State firefighters also work more palatable shifts, he said.

Joel Lucas left the U.S. Forest Service in 2019 to find a better salary and benefits. He said he misses the work and the camaraderie of his Pacific Northwest hotshot crew, so-named for working on the hottest part of wildfires.

"If it wasn't for the lack of a living wage, I would still be working for the Forest Service," said Mr. Lucas, who now works in property management in the Portland area.

Mr. Lucas said in his best season as a Forest Service firefighter, he earned about \$45,000. He said he makes about twice that in his new job annually, with full benefits, retirement and no overtime.

—

Jim Carlton contributed to this article.

Credit: By Alicia A. Caldwell

DETAILS

Subject:	Firefighters; Overtime pay; Forest & brush fires; Employment; Seasons; Wages & salaries; Labor shortages
Business indexing term:	Subject: Overtime pay Employment Wages & salaries; Industry: 92216 : Fire Protection
Location:	California United States--US
Company / organization:	Name: Forest Service-US; NAICS: 924120, 926140
Classification:	92216: Fire Protection
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition; New York, N.Y.
First page:	A.3
Publication year:	2021
Publication date:	Aug 10, 2021
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance

ISSN: 00999660

Source type: Newspapers

Language of publication: English

Document type: News

ProQuest document ID: 2559591410

Document URL: <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/u-s-news-struggles-find-firefighters/docview/2559591410/se-2?accountid=44910>

Copyright: Copyright 2021 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Last updated: 2021-08-10

Database: U.S. Major Dailies

Database copyright © 2021 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)