



November 2022

WILDLAND FIRE

Barriers to Recruitment and Retention of Federal Wildland Firefighters

Why GAO Did This Study

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. These increases are straining the federal wildland firefighting workforce.

GAO was asked to examine federal agencies' efforts to hire and retain wildland firefighters. This report describes barriers to recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters, including women firefighters, and steps that agencies have taken to address those barriers.

To identify and describe these barriers, GAO reviewed laws, regulations, and program guidance and other agency documents. GAO also interviewed senior officials from the Forest Service and Interior, including both wildland fire and human capital managers, and from OPM.

To get a broader perspective on barriers, GAO interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 16 nonfederal stakeholders, such as nongovernmental organizations involved in firefighting issues. GAO identified stakeholders through a review of documents and interviews with officials, and GAO asked those interviewed to suggest others. GAO selected stakeholders found to be most engaged with issues associated with recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters. GAO also conducted a literature search to corroborate information on barriers.

View [GAO-23-105517](#). For more information, contact Cardell Johnson at (202) 512-3841 or JohnsonCD1@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

The federal wildland firefighting workforce is 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. The Interior agencies are the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service. GAO identified seven barriers to recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters through analysis of interviews with agency officials and 16 nonfederal stakeholders and a review of documents (see fig.).

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-23-105517

Low pay was the most commonly cited barrier to recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters. Officials and all 16 stakeholders stated that the pay, which starts at \$15 per hour for entry-level positions, is low. Officials and eight stakeholders also noted that the pay does not reflect the risk or physical demands of the work. Moreover, officials and stakeholders said that in some cases, firefighters can earn more at nonfederal firefighting entities or for less dangerous work in other fields, such as food service. The Forest Service and Interior agencies have taken steps to help address this barrier. For example, in 2022, the agencies worked with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to address a provision of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act calling for 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. In June 2022, the agencies announced that the salary increase would apply to wildland firefighters in all geographic locations, as their analysis indicated that recruitment and retention challenges existed in all locations. The act authorized funding for the wildland firefighter provisions, including those related to salary increases, for fiscal years 2022 through 2026, and appropriated some funding toward those provisions.

The Forest Service and Interior are taking steps to address other barriers as well. For example, to help improve work-life balance for firefighters, the Forest Service increased the size of some firefighting crews, a change intended to allow crew members to more easily take time off for rest or personal reasons, according to Forest Service officials. In addition, in fiscal year 2021, 84 percent of federal firefighters identified as men and 72 percent identified as White. To increase diversity, the agencies have recruited women and underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, including through a wildland firefighter apprentice program. The agencies are also taking steps to improve mental health services and hiring practices.

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Abbreviations

GS	General Schedule
OPM	Office of Personnel Management
PTSD	post-traumatic stress disorder
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture

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November 17, 2022

Congressional Requesters

In recent decades, the size and severity of wildfires has increased across much of the United States, as has the length of wildfire seasons. This has increased the demands on the federal wildland firefighting workforce who, along with state, tribal, local, and other firefighters, respond to those fires.¹ According to information from the National Interagency Fire Center, the total acres burned across the United States has doubled over the past 20 years, breaking records in many states.² For example, in 2020, Colorado experienced its three largest wildfires on record, and California experienced what has been described as its first “gigafire,” with a single fire exceeding 1 million acres burned, an area larger than the state of Rhode Island.³ 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.

Recent assessments by the U.S. Global Change Research Program and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change have found that these increases in fire activity are due in part to climate change, which has contributed to increasing temperatures and droughts in the West, as well as earlier snowmelt and a later onset of fire-season-ending rains.⁴ As a result, climate data show that the fire season in the western United States

¹Federal wildland firefighters have primary responsibility for responding to fires on about 640 million acres of federal lands, primarily in the western United States, and also are available to help state and local firefighters respond to fires on nonfederal lands.

²Since 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.

³California also had its largest fire season on record in 2020, with more than 4 million acres burned in that year alone—representing 4 percent of the state’s roughly 100 million acres, according to the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

⁴U.S. Global Change Research Program, *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: 2018); Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability, Summary for Policymakers* (Switzerland: March 2022).

has increased by more than 80 days since the 1970s⁵ and, according to the *Fourth National Climate Assessment*, fire seasons are expected to continue to get longer.⁶ In light of these trends, wildfire risk has now reached “crisis proportions” in the western United States, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Forest Service.⁷

These increases in the size and severity of wildfires and in the length of fire seasons are straining the capacity of the federal wildland firefighting workforce. This workforce is composed of firefighters from USDA’s Forest Service and from four agencies in the Department of the Interior: Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service. Firefighters from state, tribal, and local fire protection agencies and other entities also fight wildfires, and Forest Service and Interior officials have testified about their agencies’ struggles to keep pace with states and other nonfederal entities in hiring and retaining wildland firefighters.⁸

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, enacted in November 2021, included a number of provisions related to the federal wildland firefighter workforce.⁹ For example, the act directed USDA, Interior, and the Office

⁵A.L.R. Westerling, “Increasing western US forest wildfire activity: sensitivity to changes in the timing of spring,” *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* [Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B], vol. 371 (2016).

⁶U.S. Global Change Research Program, *Impacts, Risks, and Adaptation in the United States: Fourth National Climate Assessment*, vol. 2.

⁷U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, *Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience in America’s Forests*, FS-1187a (Washington, D.C.: January 2022).

⁸*Wildland Firefighting Workforce Reforms*, hearing held by the House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands, 117th Cong., 1st session, October 27, 2021.

⁹Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803, 135 Stat. 429, 1097 (2021). In addition, several other bills related to wildland fire workforce issues have been introduced in the 117th Congress.

of Personnel Management (OPM) to increase the salary of federal wildland firefighters in certain situations.¹⁰

You asked us to examine federal agencies' efforts to hire and retain wildland firefighters. This report describes barriers to recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters, including women firefighters, and steps that agencies have taken to address those barriers.

To identify and describe these barriers, we

- reviewed laws, regulations, and program guidance and other agency documents to understand processes for and barriers to recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters;
- interviewed officials from the Forest Service, Interior, and OPM and a nongeneralizable sample of 16 nonfederal stakeholders—including nongovernmental organizations representing active and retired federal firefighters and other organizations involved in firefighting issues, such as the National Association of State Foresters and the Western Governors' Association—for perspectives about barriers to recruiting and retaining. We selected stakeholders whom we found to be most engaged with issues associated with recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters;¹¹
- conducted a literature search to corroborate information from our document reviews and interviews; and
- analyzed fiscal year 2021 data (the most recent data available at the time we began our review) from the federal agencies to provide context on the composition of the federal wildland firefighting workforce, including the number of federal wildland firefighters that were classified as permanent, permanent-seasonal, and temporary-seasonal and their gender and race.

See appendix I for additional information about our scope and methodology.

¹⁰Specifically, the act calls for such salary increases if the relevant agency, in coordination with OPM, makes a written determination that the position is in a specified geographic area in which it is difficult to recruit or retain federal wildland firefighters. Further, the act provides that \$600 million shall be made available for the salaries and expenses of federal wildland firefighters for fiscal years 2022 through 2026, \$480 million of which is for USDA and \$120 million of which is for Interior.

¹¹We conducted our interviews with stakeholders from January through March 2022.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2021 to November 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

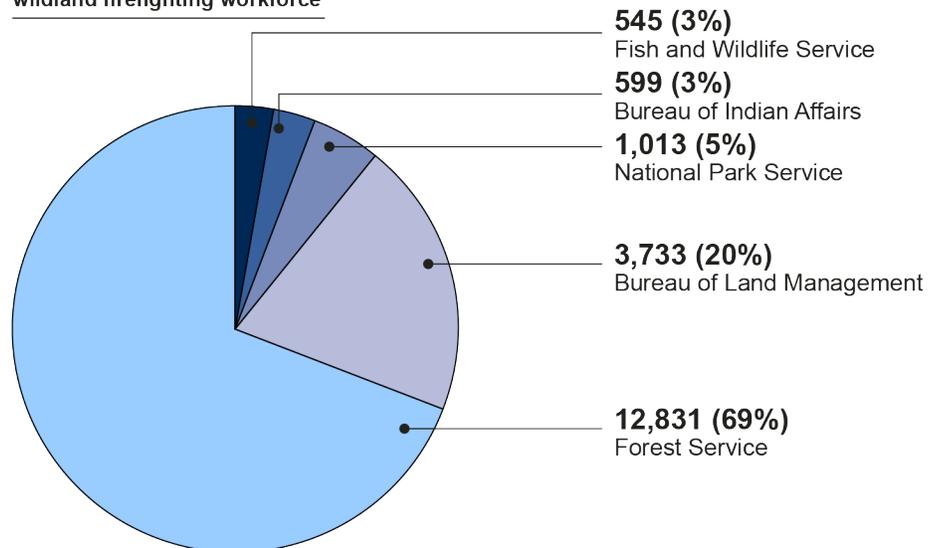
Background

Federal Wildland Firefighter Workforce

The Forest Service and Interior agencies conducted their wildland firefighting efforts through a workforce of roughly 18,700 wildland firefighters (including fire management and support staff) in fiscal year 2021. 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. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the federal wildland firefighter workforce across the five agencies.

Figure 1: Number of Federal Wildland Firefighters and Percentage of Total Federal Wildland Firefighter Workforce, Fiscal Year 2021

Number and percentage of federal wildland firefighting workforce



Source: GAO analysis of Forest Service and Department of the Interior data. | GAO-23-105517

Note: The numbers and percentages in this figure represent all of the agencies' staff in wildland fire positions, including fire management and support staff.

The Forest Service and Interior agencies employ three categories of wildland firefighters:

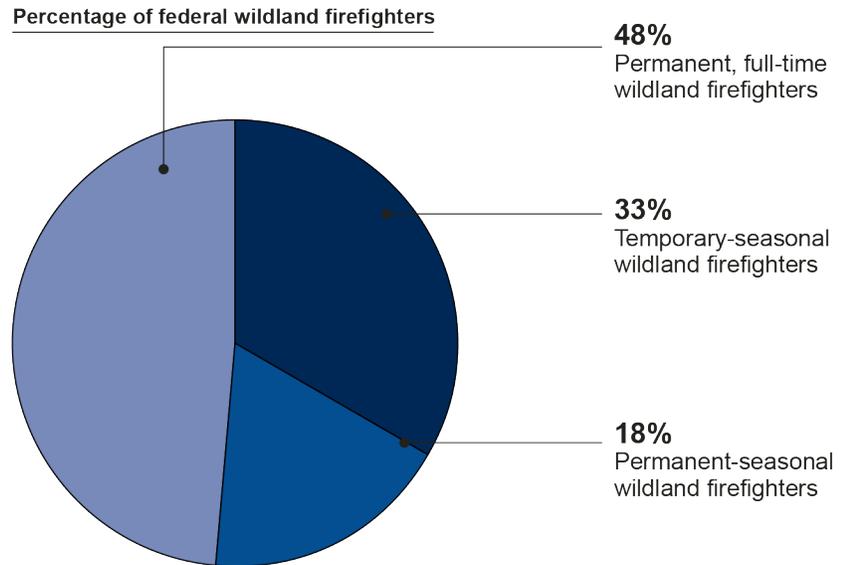
- permanent, full-time firefighters: those who work year-round in permanent positions;
- permanent-seasonal firefighters: those who have permanent positions but do not work year-round; and
- temporary-seasonal firefighters: those who are hired for a single fire season.¹²

In fiscal year 2021, more than half of the approximately 18,700 federal firefighters were employed as seasonal firefighters (see fig. 2). By using permanent-seasonal and temporary-seasonal positions, the Forest Service and Interior agencies are able to increase their firefighter workforce during the peak fire season each summer. In addition to these permanent and temporary firefighters whose primary duty is fighting fires, the federal agencies also rely on other personnel within each agency who are trained to serve in firefighting roles, when needed, in addition to performing their day-to-day work responsibilities.¹³

¹²Temporary-seasonal firefighters can reapply and be rehired for future fire seasons. Some permanent firefighters are “term employees,” with limited appointments or a “not to exceed” time limit of 1 to 4 years. Permanent-seasonal firefighters work a range of schedules, such as 26 weeks on and 26 weeks off. Temporary-seasonal firefighters generally cannot work more than 1,039 hours over the course of the fire season.

¹³The Forest Service and Interior also employ firefighters under a federal pay plan for emergency workers (e.g., retired firefighting personnel)—referred to as “administratively determined employees”—to supplement their firefighter workforces during the fire season.

Figure 2: Percentage of Federal Wildland Firefighter Workforce in Each Employment Category, Fiscal Year 2021



Source: GAO analysis of Forest Service and Department of the Interior data. | GAO-23-105517

Notes: The numbers and percentages in this figure represent all of the agencies' staff in wildland fire positions, including fire management and support staff.

Percentages do not add to 100 percent because of rounding.

Permanent, permanent-seasonal, and temporary-seasonal federal wildland firefighters work in a variety of positions to help manage wildland fire. Many entry-level firefighters work for handcrews, which are responsible for constructing firelines, where vegetation is cleared ahead of a wildfire in an effort to stop the fire's spread or to slow it sufficiently to allow firefighters to attack the fire directly. Firefighters use chainsaws, shovels, and other hand tools to accomplish this task. The most highly skilled handcrews are known as "hotshot crews." Other firefighters work on engine crews, which use specialized vehicles—wildland fire engines—that carry equipment to spray water and foam to help stop or slow wildfires. Engine crews also perform other tasks, such as patrolling forests and grasslands to look for signs of wildfires and responding to reports of new wildfires. Other firefighters operate machinery, such as dozers, to help construct firelines, or aircraft, including helicopters and fixed-wing air tankers, to drop water or retardant on wildfires to help stop

or slow them.¹⁴ When not actively fighting fires, firefighters may carry out other activities, such as reducing vegetation to limit the spread of future fires.¹⁵ Figure 3 shows federal wildland firefighters carrying out various fire management activities.

Figure 3: Federal Wildland Firefighters Performing Various Fire Management Activities



Source: National Interagency Fire Center. | GAO-23-105517

¹⁴Helicopters generally drop water directly on a fire, whereas air tankers generally drop fire retardant ahead of a fire, often near a fireline that firefighters have constructed, to slow a fire's spread.

¹⁵See GAO, *Wildland Fire: Federal Agencies' Efforts to Reduce Wildland Fuels and Lower Risk to Communities and Ecosystems*, [GAO-20-52](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 19, 2019).

Firefighting crews are typically deployed as a group to 14-day assignments fighting wildfires.¹⁶ To be deployed, crews have a minimum number of members and qualifications that must be met, according to interagency fire standards.¹⁷ For example, handcrews generally must have a minimum of 18 crew members, while engine crews generally must have a minimum of 2 to 3 members, depending on the type of engine. When deployed, firefighters often stay in primitive camps in remote areas near the location of the fire and may work up to 16 hours per day. According to the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, firefighters must pass knowledge and physical fitness tests that prepare them for working in high-risk and physically demanding conditions.¹⁸ In the field, firefighters regularly work in steep terrain and hot temperatures and are exposed to dangerous situations, such as out-of-control fires, falling trees, possible explosions, and other hazardous conditions.

Because a single firefighting entity may not be able to handle all wildfires in its jurisdiction, agencies in the United States use an interagency incident management system that depends on the close cooperation and coordination of federal, state, tribal, and local fire protection agencies. According to the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior, federal and nonfederal entities generally share their firefighting personnel, equipment, and supplies and work together to fight fires, regardless of who has jurisdiction over the burning lands. To enable firefighters from federal and nonfederal entities to work together, fire protection agencies have the

¹⁶The standard assignment length is 14 days but can be extended up to 30 days under certain circumstances, such as when life and property are imminently threatened or when replacement resources are unavailable. Departments of the Interior and Agriculture, *Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations*, NFES 2724 (Boise, ID: January 2022).

¹⁷Departments of the Interior and Agriculture, *Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations*.

¹⁸The National Wildfire Coordinating Group provides national leadership to develop, maintain, and communicate interagency standards, guidelines, qualifications, training, and other capabilities that enable interoperability among federal and nonfederal entities. It is composed of representatives from the Forest Service (Fire and Aviation Management and Wildland Fire Management, Research, Development, and Application); Interior (Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service); U.S. Department of Homeland Security (Federal Emergency Management Agency and U.S. Fire Administration); and nonfederal entities, including the International Association of Fire Chiefs, Intertribal Timber Council, and National Association of State Foresters.

same minimum position qualification standards for training, experience, and physical fitness for all wildland firefighters.¹⁹

Federal Workforce Policy

Policies that guide hiring and other human resources functions for federal employees, including the federal wildland firefighter workforce, are provided by OPM. OPM serves as the chief human resources agency and personnel policy manager for the federal government, including the Forest Service and Interior. As such, OPM works with the Forest Service and Interior to provide human capital tools and guidance and is responsible for performing a number of functions to assist agencies in developing workforce policy and recruiting and retaining personnel. For example, to support recruitment and retention efforts, OPM provides agencies with guidance and assistance on using special payment authorities.²⁰ Agencies can use these authorities in certain circumstances to provide additional payments to current employees and offer additional compensation to prospective employees. OPM is also responsible for directing human resources and employee management services, administering retirement benefits, and managing healthcare and insurance programs for the federal workforce.

Federal wildland firefighters are generally paid under the General Schedule (GS) pay system.²¹ Base pay is determined by the GS level of the position, which starts at GS-01 and increases to GS-15, according to position responsibilities. Most federal wildland firefighters are in positions considered to be lower-grade levels. Specifically, 70 percent of the Forest Service's wildland fire workforce and 59 percent of Interior's wildland fire workforce are in grades GS-07 or below, according to Forest Service and Interior officials. OPM may establish higher rates of basic pay—referred to as special rates—for a group of GS positions in one or more geographic areas to address existing or likely significant handicaps in recruiting or retaining well-qualified employees.²²

¹⁹These standards are developed and maintained by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group.

²⁰We use the term "special payment authorities" in this report to refer to compensation flexibilities available government-wide to federal agencies through Title 5 of the United States Code to recruit, retain, or both recruit and retain needed employees.

²¹Some federal wildland firefighters, such as heavy equipment operators, are hired under the Federal Wage System, which is used for federal trade, craft, and laboring employees.

²²See 5 U.S.C. § 5305; 5 C.F.R. pt. 530, subpt. C.

Provisions in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act Related to Wildland Firefighters

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act included a number of provisions related to the federal wildland firefighter workforce.²³ Specifically, the act directed the secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to

- develop, in coordination with the Director of OPM, a distinct “wildland firefighter” occupational series;²⁴
- seek to convert at least 1,000 seasonal wildland firefighters to wildland firefighters who (1) are full-time, permanent, year-round employees, and (2) reduce hazardous fuels on federal land not fewer than 800 hours per year;
- increase the base salary of a federal wildland firefighter by either \$20,000 per year or 50 percent of the base salary, whichever is lesser, if the relevant Secretary, in coordination with the Director of OPM, makes a written determination that the position of the firefighter is located within a specified geographic area in which it is difficult to recruit or retain a firefighter;
- develop and adhere to recommendations for mitigation strategies for wildland firefighters to minimize exposure due to line-of-duty environmental hazards; and
- establish programs for various categories of firefighters to recognize and address mental health needs, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) care.

To implement these reforms, the Forest Service, Interior, and OPM established four working groups related to firefighter job classification, pay, retirement, and healthcare and insurance. In addition, in January and April 2022, the Forest Service and Interior reported in publicly released documents on their plans for addressing the increasing risk of wildfire and relevant parts of the act.²⁵

²³Pub. L. 117-58, § 40803, 135 Stat. 429, 1097 (2021).

²⁴From 1972 through 2022, federal wildland firefighters were often hired in the forestry or range technician occupational series.

²⁵U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, *Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A Strategy for Protecting Communities and Improving Resilience in America’s Forests and Confronting the Wildfire Crisis: A 10-Year Implementation Plan* (Washington, D.C.: January 2022); U.S. Department of the Interior, *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act Wildfire Risk Five-Year Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan* (Washington, D.C.: April 2022).

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

Through our analysis of interviews with officials from the Forest Service, Interior agencies, and 16 selected stakeholders, as well as our review of agency documents and other selected studies, we identified seven commonly cited barriers to the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters. The seven barriers identified are (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. 4). More information about each of the barriers, including actions taken and any suggestions from agency officials and selected stakeholders about actions that could be taken, is provided in the sections below.

Figure 4: 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-23-105517

Low Pay

Low pay was the most commonly cited barrier to the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters. Forest Service and Interior officials and all 16 stakeholders we interviewed said that the current pay for federal wildland firefighters, which starts at \$15 per hour for entry-level positions, is low. In addition, officials and eight stakeholders noted that the pay does not reflect the risk or physical demands of the work.²⁶

²⁶In addition to their base pay, federal wildland firefighters may also routinely work overtime and earn additional hazard pay, which can increase their overall pay. A federal wildland firefighter's base pay is based on working 40 hours per week. For hours beyond 40 hours in a week, a wildland firefighter receives overtime pay—under Fair Labor Standards Act rules for nonexempt firefighters and under Title 5 rules for Fair Labor Standards Act-exempt firefighters. Nonwork sleep and standby time during wildfire deployments is not considered compensable hours of work. Hazard pay for fighting wildfires on the fireline is payable at 25 percent of the firefighter's hourly rate of basic pay for all hours in a pay status (including basic and overtime hours) on a day during which the firefighter engages in the covered work.

Moreover, officials and nine stakeholders said that in some cases, firefighters can earn more working for nonfederal firefighting entities. For example, Forest Service and Interior officials said that in California, state firefighters are paid more than federal wildland firefighters, which acts as a disincentive for federal firefighters to remain in federal service. Officials and seven stakeholders also said that potential candidates could seek higher pay for less dangerous work in other fields, such as food service.²⁷

The Forest Service and Interior agencies have taken some steps to increase federal wildland firefighter pay, including:

- **Increased minimum wage.** In August 2021, the agencies implemented the administration’s initiative to increase the minimum hourly wage for federal wildland firefighters from \$13 to \$15 per hour.²⁸ Forest Service and Interior officials noted that the pay increase is intended to compensate firefighters for the hazardous work they perform, while improving the federal agencies’ competitiveness with nonfederal entities. However, even with the increase, officials and eight stakeholders said that the \$15-per-hour minimum wage for entry-level positions does not reflect the risk or demands of the work.
- **Increased firefighter salaries.** The Forest Service and Interior have also started to take other steps to increase salaries for firefighters. For example, 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

²⁷Recently, legislation has been introduced related to firefighter pay, recruitment and retention awards, and overtime pay. For example, one bill would increase firefighter pay to no less than the rate of pay for step 3 of GS-06 of the General Schedule, which, for 2022, was slightly over \$20 per hour, and expand recruitment and retention awards. See H.R. 5631, 117th Cong. (2021). Other bills would exempt federal wildland firefighters from certain premium pay limitations for work relating to wildfire emergencies, including the maximum number of overtime hours that firefighters may earn. See S. 138, 117th Cong. (2021); H.R. 4274, 117th Cong. (2021).

²⁸The 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 GS 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.

base salary in locations where it is difficult to recruit or retain wildland firefighters.²⁹ In June 2022, the agencies announced that the salary increase would apply to wildland firefighters in all geographic locations, as their analysis indicated that recruitment and retention challenges are not limited to certain locations.³⁰ The act authorized funding for the wildland firefighter provisions under the act, including those related to salary increases, for fiscal years 2022 through 2026.³¹

- **Added incentive payments.** The agencies have used incentive payments (i.e., bonuses) to help recruit and retain firefighters.³² For example, in 2021, the Forest Service and Interior agencies paid cash awards of at least \$1,000 to all firefighters at the GS-09 level or below. The agencies have also provided relocation incentives.

Forest Service and Interior officials and four stakeholders said that while recent steps to increase federal wildland firefighter pay are positive, they believe that pay still does not reflect the demands of the job and remains uncompetitive with nonfederal entities. Officials and two stakeholders also pointed out that the funding that the agencies have received from Congress for recent pay increases is only authorized through fiscal year 2026 and that longer-term solutions are needed. Officials said that they are looking at a long-term pay solution, such as establishing a higher pay rate nationwide for wildland firefighters.

Career Advancement Challenges

Challenges related to career advancement for federal wildland firefighters is another commonly cited barrier to recruitment and retention, with Forest Service and Interior officials and 12 stakeholders we interviewed identifying this as a barrier. According to Forest Service and Interior officials, a federal wildland firefighter's career typically starts with

²⁹Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(d)(4)(B), 135 Stat 429, 1101 (2021).

³⁰See 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.

³¹The act also appropriated some funding for the provisions, although not in the full amounts authorized.

³²As noted previously, compensation flexibilities are available to federal agencies to recruit and retain employees. OPM issues regulations and provides guidance to federal agencies on using such authorities. See 5 U.S.C. §§ 5753, 5754; 5 C.F.R. pt. 575, subpts. A, B, C.

physically arduous front-line positions (primary positions), such as working on handcrews or engine crews, and may later involve moving to supervisory positions (secondary positions), such as incident management or administrative positions, that may be less strenuous. For example, an entry-level firefighter may start out on a handcrew and then apply to lead a small crew or work for a specialized crew, such as a hotshot crew. From there, firefighters may move to other positions, such as crew supervisor or fire management officer.

In order to advance in their current position, or move to a different firefighting position, firefighters are required to have a certain amount of experience and meet training and certification requirements, as outlined in interagency fire qualification standards.³³ However, firefighters' extensive work in the field during fire season makes it difficult to attend training needed to advance their careers or to learn new skills for a different position, according to Forest Service and Interior officials and three stakeholders.

Limited time for training is especially challenging for temporary-seasonal firefighters, who may not work for more than 6 months.^{34,35} One individual

³³The National Wildfire Coordination Group issues interagency *Standards for Wildland Fire Position Qualifications*, which establish minimum position qualification standards, including for training, experience, and physical fitness, for national mobilization to wildland fire incidents. For example, to be qualified for a "Crew Boss, Single Resource" position, an applicant must have satisfactory performance as a Firefighter Type 1; completion and certification of National Wildfire Coordination Group Crew Book, Single Resource Position Task Book; ability to meet the "arduous" physical fitness level of the position; and the following required training: "ICS-200, ICS for Single Resources and Initial Action Incidents," "RT-130, Wildland Fire Safety Training Annual Refresher," "S-230, Crew Boss (Single Resource)," and "S-290, Intermediate Fire Behavior."

³⁴Temporary-seasonal federal employees, including firefighters, are required to work less than 1,040 hours, excluding overtime, per service year. See 5 C.F.R. § 316.401(d)(1)(ii). Forest Service and Interior officials said that they have requested that OPM extend the number of hours that temporary-seasonal firefighters may work. OPM has approved past agency requests to provide exceptions to the 1,040-hour time limit, according to documents and officials.

³⁵Temporary-seasonal firefighters face additional challenges that may affect their willingness to remain in federal service, according to officials and three stakeholders. For example, temporary-seasonal firefighters do not receive the same benefits, such as retirement benefits, as permanent firefighters. Legislation was introduced in 2021 that would call for the establishment of a career transition program. See, e.g., H.R. 5631, 117th Cong. (2021). In addition, in June 2021, the bipartisan Federal Retirement Fairness Act was reintroduced, which would provide that civilian service in a temporary position after December 31, 1988, would be creditable service under the Federal Employees Retirement System. See H.R. 4268, 117th Cong. (2021).

we interviewed, who is both a representative of a selected stakeholder organization and a current firefighter, told us that the qualifications for her next firefighter position do not naturally occur in her current position. In order to get those qualifications, she said that she would need to temporarily leave her position with her current crew. However, if she steps out of her current position to obtain those qualifications, it would strain the capabilities of her current crew, which could potentially limit its ability to be deployed. Without time and support to complete training needed to advance their careers, some firefighters may seek other employment opportunities, taking with them the knowledge and experience they gained with the federal agencies, according to three stakeholders.

Forest Service and Interior officials and five stakeholders told us that the way the agencies have classified wildland firefighting positions has further challenged the agencies' recruitment and retention efforts. The officials and stakeholders said that classifying firefighting positions under the forestry or range technician occupational series—as most positions have been since 1972—does not recognize the physical demands of, or expertise involved in, firefighting. This has contributed to low morale, as the individuals in these positions take pride in their work as firefighters and want to be recognized for that work, according to an agency document.³⁶

The Forest Service and Interior agencies have taken some steps to address this barrier, including:

- **Collaborating with OPM to create a federal wildland firefighter occupational series.** 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. OPM announced the new occupational series in June 2022 and directed the Forest

³⁶Office of Personnel Management, Memorandum for Human Resource Directors, *Position Classification Standard for Wildland Fire Management, 0456* (Washington, D.C.: June 2022).

Service and Interior to implement it within 12 months.³⁷ The new occupational series covers positions for which the primary duties involve, among other things, the prevention, control, suppression, or management of wildland fires.³⁸ According to an interagency document and officials, creation of the new occupational series will provide a clear career path, with defined requirements for career advancement.³⁹ In addition, according to officials, the new series should help the agencies recruit and retain new applicants, as well as current firefighters, because they will be able to clearly identify the steps necessary to advance their careers.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ As of August 2022, Forest Service and Interior officials said they were

³⁷The 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.

³⁸Current wildland firefighters—defined as federal employees covered by the GS system under Title 5, United States Code Chapter 51, performing wildland firefighting work—will have the opportunity to opt-in to the new wildland firefighter occupational series. Future firefighters will be able to apply for jobs specifically designated as wildland firefighters. Forest Service and Interior are developing guidance for employees concerning the process for deciding whether to move to the new series, including whether there will be subsequent opportunities to do so. 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)*.

³⁹See 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)*.

⁴⁰Interior agency officials raised concerns that some firefighter positions at Interior required a certain number of college credits, whereas similar positions at the Forest Service did not, thus leading some firefighters who did not meet the education requirements to leave Interior to take positions at the Forest Service. Positions in the new firefighter occupational series do not require a bachelor’s degree or equivalent education. See Office of Personnel Management, Memorandum for Human Resource Directors, *Position Classification Standard for Wildland Fire Management*, 0456.

⁴¹See 5 U.S.C. § 5107.

developing the grade levels for the new occupational series, which is expected to take effect in 2023.

- **Converting temporary-seasonal firefighters to permanent firefighters.** The Forest Service and Interior agencies have also converted some temporary firefighter positions to permanent positions, which may help address some retention challenges, according to officials. 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.⁴² In addition, the Forest Service and Interior are taking steps to convert additional positions, as directed by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.⁴³
- **Creating a firefighter apprentice program.** The Forest Service and Interior offer paid apprenticeships to some entry-level firefighters, which can bring new firefighters into the agencies and help them understand available career paths.⁴⁴ The Wildland Firefighter Apprentice Program helps develop the knowledge and skills necessary to become career firefighters, according to Forest Service and Interior officials. Specifically, the program has a career ladder from GS-03 to GS-05, with extensive training and experience compressed into a shorter time frame, as compared with other federal wildland firefighters. The Forest Service typically hires between 500 and 700 apprentices each year, according to officials. Interior agencies also use the program, but officials said that they generally have fewer apprentices; for example, the Fish and Wildlife Service had 28, as of August 2022.

⁴²Department of the Interior, *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Wildfire Risk Five-Year Monitoring, Maintenance, and Treatment Plan*.

⁴³Specifically, 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).

⁴⁴The Wildland Firefighter Apprentice Program, established in 1989, is designed to enhance and develop future fire and aviation managers currently employed with the Forest Service and Interior. The intent of the program is to take entry-level firefighters and provide education, training, and paid work experience totaling 3,000 hours over a 12- to 48-month period, depending on experience. Successful completion of the program requires that a firefighter select two of the following four options: engines, handcrews, aviation, and dozers (one of which must be either engines or handcrews). Apprentice positions are permanent employees, with positions available throughout the nation.

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- **Reconfiguring crews.** The Forest Service changed the configuration of its interagency hotshot crews for 2023, according to officials. Under this initiative, some physically arduous firefighter positions will be able to transition into fire management positions to provide a clear pathway for advancement. Specifically, the new configuration includes additional midlevel positions (e.g., two GS-06 Lead Firefighter positions) to provide a more continuous career path from GS-04 and GS-05 firefighters to superintendent of a hotshot crew, a GS-09 position, according to officials.

Poor Work-Life Balance

Poor work-life balance was another commonly cited barrier to firefighter recruitment and retention, with Forest Service and Interior officials and 12 stakeholders we interviewed identifying this as a barrier. Forest Service and Interior officials said that the time and frequency of firefighter deployments are challenges. Specifically, the 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.⁴⁵ For example, a stakeholder said that it may not be possible for firefighters to schedule routine medical appointments during the fire season. In addition, the cumulative number of firefighting deployments can lead to job burnout, according to officials and seven stakeholders. One Interior agency reported that overtime more than doubled from 2019 to 2021.

Although more-frequent deployments may be challenging for firefighters, Forest Service and Interior officials and four stakeholders said that, for a number of reasons, firefighters may find it difficult to turn down a deployment to rest or attend to personal matters. For example, when deployed to a fire, firefighters often work many hours of overtime and may also earn hazard pay, which can help supplement their income.⁴⁶ At Interior, almost half of fire personnel worked between 501 and 1,903 hours of overtime in fiscal year 2021, according to Interior data. In addition, fire crews are required to have a certain number of staff present in order for the crew to be deployed, and individual firefighters may feel

⁴⁵Standard deployments last for 14 days at a time, but assignments can be extended up to 30 days, under certain circumstances.

⁴⁶Federal wildland firefighters can receive hazard pay for participating as a member of a firefighting crew in fighting forest and range fires on the fireline. Federal wildland firefighters are subject to a biweekly premium pay cap, annual premium pay cap, and an aggregate pay cap. In 2021, legislation was introduced that would exempt federal wildland firefighters from certain premium pay limitations for work relating to wildfire emergencies. See, e.g., S. 138, 117th Cong. (2021); H.R. 4274, 117th Cong. (2021).

pressure to continue working so that their absence does not prevent the rest of the crew from being deployed.

Forest Service and Interior officials and four stakeholders 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. 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.⁴⁷ 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 them to continue to use their experience and training to help the agencies achieve their mission as they 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

⁴⁷Under the Civil Service Retirement System, since 1972, firefighters have been included in the hazardous occupations, with a minimum retirement age of 50 for personnel with 20 years of experience. Pub. L. No. 92-382, 86 Stat. 539 (1972) (codified as amended at 5 U.S.C. § 8336(c)). Under the Federal Employees Retirement System, established in 1987, firefighters similarly have a minimum retirement age of 50 for personnel with 20 years of experience, or are eligible to retire at any age after 25 years of experience. Pub. L. No. 99-335, § 101(a), 100 Stat. 514, 524 (codified as amended at 5 U.S.C. § 8412(d)). Firefighters are required to have at least 3 years of service in a rigorous position in order to be entitled to the special retirement coverage for firefighters under the Federal Employees Retirement System before transferring to a supervisory or administrative position. See 5 U.S.C. § 8401(14). Additionally, firefighters who are covered by the special retirement system generally have a mandatory maximum retirement age of 57 and contribute an extra 1/2 percent of pay compared with regular federal employees hired at the same time.

earlier.⁴⁸ 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.

Two stakeholders said that federal agencies would be better positioned to recruit former firefighters back to service if firefighters were eligible to 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. According to OPM officials, the Forest Service and Interior agencies could mitigate this situation by, for example, granting leave without pay to allow firefighters to take time away from their jobs to care for a child or other family member. Federal employees are entitled to up to 12 weeks of leave without pay during any 12-month period for certain family and medical needs.⁴⁹

The Forest Service and Interior have taken some steps aimed at improving work-life balance, including:

- **Borrowing firefighters to complete crews.** The Forest Service and Interior agencies have borrowed staff from other crews or other

⁴⁸If a firefighter has a break in service of more than 3 consecutive days in their primary position and is unable to return to that position or take another primary position or a qualifying secondary position, they become ineligible to receive the retirement coverage they were earning. Under the Civil Service Retirement System, an employee's service in a position that has been determined by the employing agency head to be a qualifying secondary position is covered under the special retirement benefits if the employee, while covered under the special provision, moves directly (that is, without a break in service exceeding 3 days) from a primary position to a secondary position and, if applicable, the employee has been continuously employed in a secondary position or positions since moving from a rigorous position without a break in service exceeding 3 days. See 5 C.F.R. § 831.904(a). Under the Federal Employees Retirement System, in addition to those conditions, in order to be covered under the special retirement benefits, the employee must have completed 3 years of service in a rigorous position, as noted previously. See 5 C.F.R. § 842.803(b)(1).

⁴⁹Leave without pay is a temporary nonpay status and absence from duty that, in most cases, is granted at the employee's request. In most instances, leave without pay is a matter of supervisory discretion and may be limited by agency internal policy. Employees, however, are entitled to leave without pay in certain situations. For example, under the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, covered employees are entitled to up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave during any 12-month period for certain family and medical needs. Pub. L. No. 103-3, 107 Stat. 6 (codified as amended at 5 U.S.C. §§ 6381-87). See also 5 C.F.R. pt. 630, subpt. L. In addition, employees may not be in a pay status while receiving workers' compensation payments from the Department of Labor.

agencies to fill in for crew members who take time off, a practice known as a “detail.” This practice allows crews to have enough members to be deployed and to maintain the agency’s fire response ability while also allowing firefighters to take time away from work, according to officials.

- **Increasing crew size.** The Forest Service has increased the size of some firefighting crews, which can allow for some members of the crew to take time off for rest or personal reasons without affecting the crew’s ability to meet minimum crew size to be deployed. For example, the standard crew size for Forest Service hotshot crews for 2023 is 25 rather than 20, according to officials.
- **Increasing rest.** In 2021, the Forest Service updated its rest guidelines to require 3 days, rather than 2 days, of rest for every 14 days worked. In announcing the change, which was made permanent in April 2022, the Chief of the Forest Service noted that high stress and extended time away from families can affect a firefighter’s physical and psychological resilience.⁵⁰ Forest Service officials said that a third day off between deployments supports better quality of life and general well-being for firefighters throughout the fire season.⁵¹

Three stakeholders we interviewed also suggested that changing the agencies’ approach to deploying wildland firefighters may provide better work-life balance. For example, one stakeholder said that, whereas the federal agencies typically deploy firefighters for 14 days at a time, one state firefighting agency deploys firefighters for shorter periods, allowing firefighters to return home more frequently. The stakeholder suggested that federal agencies could consider a similar approach.

Mental Health Challenges

Mental health challenges from the stresses of wildland firefighting was another commonly cited barrier to retaining the federal wildland firefighting workforce, with Forest Service and Interior officials and 13 stakeholders we interviewed identifying this as a barrier. The exposure to trauma and life-threatening situations and the physical strain of working

⁵⁰U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, *Forest Service Chief’s Letter of Intent for Wildfire—2022* (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 14, 2022).

⁵¹Interior continues to provide 2 days of rest for every 14 days worked. Interior officials said that local managers have the flexibility to increase the number of rest days, if firefighters need additional time off to rest and recover. For example, if a recent deployment was particularly stressful, or if the crew had been deployed a number of times in quick succession, the local manager can offer time off beyond the required 2 days.

long hours on little to no sleep can negatively affect mental health, according to the National Wildfire Coordinating Group.⁵² These working conditions can negatively affect firefighters' mental health over time and can contribute to increased mental health challenges, such as PTSD, substance abuse, and suicide, according to documents, officials, and eight stakeholders.

Officials and two stakeholders told us that there are some mental health services available to federal wildland firefighters but that those services are inadequate. One service available to firefighters is the Employee Assistance Program—a voluntary, confidential program within each federal agency that provides counseling services to federal employees with personal- or work-related concerns, such as stress or financial issues. Interior officials told us that the Employee Assistance Program is a valuable resource but said that it does not address all firefighter mental health needs. For example, according to Interior officials and a stakeholder, the Employee Assistance Program has traditionally not provided trauma-trained clinicians or mental health professionals with first-responder experience to help firefighters who suffer from PTSD. In addition, such programs are run through federal agencies, so firefighters must be employed by an agency in order to access the program. Thus, temporary-seasonal firefighters (approximately 33 percent of the federal firefighting workforce) are generally unable to receive help through the programs during the off-season, when they may begin to experience mental health challenges.⁵³ Interior officials stated that federal agencies need to do more to advance mental health care, suicide prevention, and PTSD aftercare for firefighters.

The Forest Service and Interior agencies have taken some steps to help address mental health challenges faced by federal wildland firefighters, including:

- **Increasing the number of clinicians and expanding services.** In 2021, the Forest Service implemented changes to its Employee Assistance Program. These included increasing the number of clinicians in rural areas and expanding preventative services focused on mental health, such as crisis intervention, life coaching, work/life

⁵²National Wildfire Coordinating Group, *A Preparedness Guide for Wildland Firefighters and their Families* (February 2022).

⁵³According to the National Wildfire Coordinating Group and two stakeholders, firefighters may feel isolated in the off-season without the support of other firefighters who have had similar experiences, which can contribute to mental health challenges.

consultations, and mindfulness-based stress-reduction training, according to officials.

- **Extending rest and recovery time.** In 2021, the Forest Service extended the amount of rest and recovery time required between fire assignments from 2 days to 3 days for every 14 days worked.
- **Offering training.** Some Interior agencies now offer Critical Incident Stress Management training for their employees, and one agency created a stress management program that includes peer-supporters and a mental health component.
- **Assessing mental health needs.** Interior officials told us that, as of July 2022, they were in the process of conducting a comprehensive needs assessment of gaps in addressing the mental health needs of federal wildland firefighters. They said that this included looking at year-round prevention and training, ensuring adequate staffing to respond to mental health needs, and early intervention.

Two stakeholders also suggested that the agencies provide more support services, such as marriage counseling and peer-support calls, to temporary firefighters in the off-season to better support mental health.⁵⁴

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act directs the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior to establish programs for wildland firefighters to recognize and address mental health needs, including PTSD care.⁵⁵ As of August 2022, the Forest Service and Interior have taken steps to begin establishing such programs. For example, the Forest Service is increasing staffing to provide support for mental health program development and has added two new positions in its behavioral health and employee well-being branch. Interior is enhancing its Critical Incident

⁵⁴Temporary-seasonal firefighters are generally not eligible to receive services from the agencies outside the period of their employment. However, according to Forest Service officials, the agency makes available services offered under the Employee Assistance Program to temporary-seasonal workers for up to 6 months after they have separated from the agency.

⁵⁵Specifically, the act calls for the agencies, not later than October 1, 2022, to establish programs for permanent, temporary, seasonal, and year-round wildland firefighters to recognize and address mental health needs, including PTSD care. See Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(d)(5)(B), 135 Stat. 429, 1101 (2021). Additionally, in 2021, legislation was introduced that would call for agencies to establish or enhance various programs related to mental health for firefighters, such as peer-support behavioral health and wellness programs and awareness and support programs, and provide for mental health leave. See, e.g., H.R. 1480, 117th Cong. (2021); H.R. 5631, 117th Cong. (2021); S. 2700, 117th Cong. (2021).

Stress Management training capacity and contributing to interagency efforts, such as those of the National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Mental Health Subcommittee, according to officials.⁵⁶

Remote or Expensive Duty Stations

Another barrier to the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters is that many wildland firefighter duty stations are in areas that are remote or expensive, or both, with Forest Service and Interior officials and 10 stakeholders we interviewed identifying this as a barrier. For example, Forest Service and Interior officials and a stakeholder told us that firefighting duty stations located in remote areas may lack services, including easy access to schools, grocery stores, or broadband coverage, which may make these areas less desirable for some wildland firefighters.

Officials and five stakeholders also said that many duty stations are located in expensive areas, further contributing to the challenge of recruiting and retaining wildland firefighters. Officials and two stakeholders noted that in some cases federal agencies are losing prospective candidates and trained firefighters to nonfederal firefighting entities that may pay more.

Federal agencies have taken some steps to address this barrier, including:

- **Providing relocation incentives.** The Forest Service and Interior have provided wildland firefighters with relocation incentives to help recruit firefighters to duty stations where the agencies have had difficulties filling positions.⁵⁷ From fiscal years 2020 through 2022, the Forest Service reported using 345 relocation incentives for permanent wildland firefighters—more than double the amount of other recruitment and retention incentives provided to permanent firefighters, according to Forest Service data. In fiscal years 2020 and 2021, Interior agencies used a total of 27 relocation incentives, according to Interior's Federal Personnel and Payroll System. Interior

⁵⁶The National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Mental Health Subcommittee promotes and facilitates a national interagency approach to identifying and addressing firefighter mental health.

⁵⁷Agencies may use incentive payments to help recruit and retain employees. Incentive payments can come in the form of recruitment incentives, retention incentives, and relocation incentives. Relocation incentives can be paid to certain current employees, who must relocate to accept a position in a different geographic area and whose position is difficult to fill.

officials noted that greater use of relocation incentives could bolster their recruiting and retention efforts.

- **Providing federal housing.** The Forest Service and Interior provide federal wildland firefighters access to federal housing, such as barracks or bunkhouses, in some remote locations. However, these options are only available in certain areas, according to officials. In order to expand availability of federal housing for firefighters, Forest Service and Interior officials stated that additional funding would be necessary to construct and maintain new housing. However, officials also noted that it would not make sense for the agencies to provide federal housing in all locations, including in more urban areas.

Officials and four stakeholders told us that the agencies could further address this barrier by targeting recruitment efforts to local residents and issuing housing stipends. Specifically, officials and two stakeholders said that if the agencies targeted their recruitment efforts toward people already living in an area (e.g., college students living with their parents), then the lack of affordable housing could be less of a barrier. Officials also stated that providing housing stipends for firefighters would be helpful in mitigating housing costs; however, officials said that they do not currently have the authority to issue housing stipends, which they said they would need to obtain from Congress. Officials told us that they are exploring other options to address this barrier, including establishing a higher pay rate nationwide for wildland firefighters, which could reduce the impact of the high cost of living at some duty stations.

Limited Workforce Diversity

Another barrier to the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters is limited diversity of the wildland firefighting workforce, with Forest Service and Interior officials and 15 stakeholders we interviewed identifying this as a barrier. According to personnel data from the Forest Service and Interior agencies, in fiscal year 2021, a majority of the firefighters identified as men, representing 84 percent of the total workforce. Additionally, in fiscal year 2021, a majority of firefighters identified as White, comprising 72 percent of the workforce. According to Forest Service officials and four stakeholders, the homogenous makeup of the firefighting workforce, along with the nature of the work, has sometimes made it difficult for women and underrepresented racial and

ethnic groups to feel accepted as part of the firefighting workforce.⁵⁸ In addition, some women firefighters have experienced sexual harassment, according to Forest Service and Interior officials and eight stakeholders.⁵⁹

Officials and three stakeholders also said that recruitment and retention of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups to wildland firefighting positions has been a challenge, partially because of the limited diversity in the firefighting workforce. Officials and three stakeholders told us that remote, rural duty stations are also a contributing factor, since some surrounding communities may be predominantly White and not reflective of applicants and employees from diverse backgrounds. One stakeholder commented that assigning firefighters from diverse backgrounds to work in remote communities can sometimes contribute to feelings of isolation. According to Interior officials and documents, increasing diversity and inclusion in the wildland fire workforce is a clear need.

The agencies have taken some steps to help address challenges associated with limited diversity in the workforce, including:

- **Recruiting women and applicants from underrepresented groups.** The Forest Service and Interior have recruited women and applicants from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, including through the Wildland Firefighter Apprentice Program. For example, in fiscal year 2022, more than 20 percent of the 420 firefighters that the Forest Service recruited through the program were women, and nearly 50 percent of total recruits were from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. In addition, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has utilized a policy that allows qualified American Indians or Alaska Natives to receive preference for vacant positions within the agency, including its firefighting workforce.⁶⁰ Officials said that the use of the policy has

⁵⁸According to the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, having a homogenous workforce is one of 12 factors that the commission identified as increasing the risk of harassment occurring in the workplace. Other risk factors include young workforces, isolated workplaces, and decentralized workplaces.

⁵⁹Forest Service officials and four stakeholders told us that the male-dominated culture of wildland firefighting can foster a workplace environment where sexual harassment is present. A stakeholder said that sexual harassment has been a source of dissatisfaction and poor morale for some women firefighters and, ultimately, can push some women to leave the job.

⁶⁰The Bureau of Indian Affairs is authorized to extend preference in its recruitment and hiring processes to encourage qualified American Indians and Alaska Natives to seek employment with the agency. See 25 U.S.C. § 5116; 25 C.F.R. pt. 5.

been effective in increasing the number of American Indian and Alaska Native firefighters at the agency.

- **Offering training.** The Forest Service has trained approximately 1,600 firefighters on the psychological and physical effects of sexual harassment and sponsored conferences and workshops aimed at increasing the diversity of the workforce, according to officials. For example, the Forest Service held biweekly trainings from March through May of 2022 that focused on creating a culture of respect throughout the agency and identifying root causes that lead to toxic work environments. Other efforts include the Forest Service’s Safety³ (Safety cubed) initiative, which aims to increase awareness of risk for harassment in the wildland fire work environment. Similarly, Interior agencies have implemented a “Do What’s Right” training program that trains firefighters on topics such as discrimination and harassment, inclusion and respect, and ethical behavior in the workplace.⁶¹ Nearly 90 percent of the Bureau of Land Management’s permanent wildland firefighters have completed the “Do What’s Right” training, according to agency information. In addition, the National Park Service developed a training course on the importance of diversity to the mission of its wildland fire program.
- **Supporting all-women fire crews and training.** The National Park Service has partnered with the Student Conservation Association and other organizations to support the use of nonagency, all-women fire crews in national park units in Alaska, California, and Montana, according to agency officials.⁶² Members of these crews are not employed by the National Park Service, but women firefighters working for the agency mentor them while they receive training and gain experience. National Park Service officials said that the agency extended job offers to women from these crews in 2021.

Similarly, the Bureau of Land Management has partnered with other organizations to provide training, experience, and employment opportunities to women firefighters. For example, in 2019, the Bureau of Land Management’s Colorado State Office partnered with the

⁶¹The “Do What’s Right” training program was established by the Bureau of Land Management and is mandatory for all fire personnel from the bureau and the Fish and Wildlife Service, according to officials.

⁶²The Student Conservation Association is a nonprofit organization with the mission to build the next generation of conservation leaders and inspire lifelong stewardship of the environment and communities by engaging young people in hands-on service to the land. The Student Conservation Association works to protect and restore national parks, marine sanctuaries, cultural landmarks, and community green spaces.

Western Colorado Conservation Corps to create an all-women fire crew. The Bureau of Land Management has also held training programs for women firefighters, such as Women in Wildfire bootcamps, according to officials. In 2020, the Bureau of Indian Affairs began sponsoring the Women-In-Fire training exchange, which provides training modules for women firefighters that focus on Indigenous prescribed burning practices.⁶³

According to Forest Service and Interior officials and documents, federal agencies are considering additional ways to increase diversity in the wildland firefighter workforce, including supporting the use of more women-only fire crews and creating additional diversity training courses. Officials and six stakeholders suggested additional steps that the agencies could take to increase diversity. For example, one stakeholder said that providing recruitment training could help increase diversity in the workforce, as recruiters need to know how to connect with potential applicants from diverse backgrounds. Others suggested increasing outreach to women and underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. In addition, officials and two stakeholders said that improving work-life balance could help recruit and retain more women for the wildland firefighter workforce.

Hiring Process Challenges

Another barrier to the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters is the application and hiring process, with Forest Service and Interior officials and five stakeholders we interviewed identifying this as a barrier. These officials and four stakeholders said that the application and hiring process for federal wildland firefighters is challenging to navigate and lengthy, which may contribute to the agencies' difficulties with recruitment and retention. For example, they said that

- the online federal application system—USA Jobs—can be confusing to potential candidates, who may decide not to submit an application;⁶⁴
- the agencies may take a long time (e.g., over 2 months) to let applicants know if they will be offered a position. In the meantime,

⁶³The Women-In-Fire training exchange is a 12-day program that combines practical training with learning and discussion to advance participants' skills, qualifications, connections, and understanding of Indigenous fire practices.

⁶⁴USA Jobs is the federal government's official employment website, managing the hiring process for federal agencies. Federal agencies, including the Forest Service and Interior agencies, post all vacant positions and accept job applications on www.usajobs.gov.

some candidates may decide to accept a position elsewhere. In addition, there are sometimes months of delay between when applicants are hired by the agencies (e.g., in the winter) and when they start their positions (e.g., in the spring), leading some applicants to accept other positions; and

- the agencies may post vacancy announcements for the next fire season during the fire season, when firefighters are deployed in the field and thus may not be able to meet application deadlines.

The Forest Service and Interior agencies have taken some steps to address hiring process challenges, including:

- **Providing information on the application process.** The Forest Service and Interior agencies have posted directions and videos on their websites and social media to guide applicants on how to search and apply for federal wildland firefighter jobs. The Forest Service and Interior agencies also offer live webinars, during which officials respond to questions from prospective applicants. The Forest Service also has a live help desk to assist prospective applicants with their job applications. Prospective applicants can also read information online on the roles and responsibilities of a career firefighter and view video recordings of the type of work that firefighters conduct in the field.
- **Requesting and using direct-hire authority.** To hire wildland firefighters more quickly, the Forest Service and Interior have requested that OPM grant them direct-hire authority, which OPM has granted and the agencies have used since 2019 and 2020, respectively.⁶⁵ Direct-hire authority enables an agency to hire, without regard to typical requirements, candidates directly to positions for which public notice has been given and OPM has determined that there exists a severe shortage of candidates or that there is a critical hiring need.⁶⁶ Officials said that their use of direct-hire authority has

⁶⁵When requesting direct-hire authority from OPM, agencies request a certain number of positions to be filled using the authority within a specified time frame.

⁶⁶See 5 U.S.C. § 3304(a)(3). An agency, when requesting direct-hire authority, or OPM, when deciding on its own, must (1) identify the position(s) that must be filled, (2) describe the event or circumstance that has created the need to fill the position(s), (3) specify the duration for which the critical hiring need is expected to exist, and (4) include supporting evidence that demonstrates why the use of other hiring authorities is impracticable or ineffective. 5 C.F.R. § 337.205(b). Direct-hire authority expedites hiring by eliminating competitive rating and ranking; veterans' preference; and "rule of three" procedures, which requires managers to select new employees from among the top three available candidates rated and referred to them by an examining office, according to agency documents.

enabled them to hire firefighters more quickly because they do not have to follow standard procedures. For example, when using direct-hire authority, the agencies do not have to competitively rate and rank applicants before making a job offer and can use it to make on-the-spot job offers. Forest Service officials said that using direct-hire authority decreases by half the amount of time needed to hire firefighters.

As of April 2022, the Forest Service had used direct-hire authority to fill almost all fire vacancies for GS-03 to GS-13 positions since 2019, according to officials. Interior has also used the authority extensively since 2020, according to agency data and officials. For example, from March 2020 to July 2022, two Interior agencies hired over 340 firefighters using direct-hire authority. The Forest Service and Interior have requested extensions to their direct-hire authority, including easing limitations on the number of positions that may be filled through this authority. For example, in May 2022, OPM approved the Forest Service's request to hire an additional 15,000 firefighter positions using direct-hire authority through December 2025.

- **Instituted year-round hiring and extended job announcements.** Forest Service and Interior officials said that they started conducting the hiring process for firefighters year-round instead of only during the winter months. Year-round hiring spreads out the workload for agency human capital staff, officials said, which can reduce the length of time that the hiring process takes. Forest Service and Interior officials also said that they had used longer time frames for vacancy announcements to allow for more potential candidates to apply, including current firefighters who might be deployed, which they said could help ensure a larger pool of qualified applicants.
- **Held recruiting events and job fairs.** The Forest Service and Interior have held recruiting events and in-person job fairs to help make hiring quicker, and officials said that they are hoping to do more in-person recruitment in the future. For example, the Forest Service has held hiring events at universities and plans to hold two in-person job fairs in 2023. Forest Service officials also said that they recognize that they need to improve recruitment efforts by advertising vacancies in local newspapers nationwide. Interior held a multiday firefighter job fair in February 2020, advertising job vacancies in all four Interior agencies, and plans to hold additional job fairs in November 2022. Officials said that they made 100 job offers during the 2020 job fair and that the fair helped demonstrate how the recruitment and hiring process can be conducted more quickly.

Officials and four stakeholders suggested other steps that agencies could take to further address this barrier. For example, one stakeholder suggested that the agencies provide more training to agency recruiters and ensure that recruiters understand the agencies' hiring and application processes. Three stakeholders suggested that the agencies be more targeted in their recruitment efforts, such as increasing outreach to local high schools and colleges.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to USDA, Interior, and OPM for review and comment. The Forest Service, responding on behalf of USDA, told us that it had no comments on the report. Interior and OPM provided technical comments on the report, which we incorporated, as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Agriculture, the Secretary of the Interior, the Director of OPM, and other interested parties. In addition, the report will be available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3841 or JohnsonCD1@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix II.



Cardell Johnson
Acting Director, Natural Resources and Environment

List of Requesters

The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
Chair
Subcommittee on Government Operations and Border Management
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Michael F. Bennet
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Crapo
United States Senate

The Honorable Steve Daines
United States Senate

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
United States Senate

The Honorable Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senate

The Honorable Patty Murray
United States Senate

The Honorable Alex Padilla
United States Senate

The Honorable James E. Risch
United States Senate

The Honorable Kim Schrier
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Our objective was to describe barriers to recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters, including women firefighters, and steps that agencies have taken to address those barriers.

To understand the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior's processes for, and barriers to, recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters, we reviewed laws, regulations, program guidance, and other agency documents. We also interviewed senior officials from the Forest Service and Interior agencies, including both wildland fire and human capital managers, as well as officials from the Office of Personnel Management (OPM). During our interviews, we also asked about steps that the agencies and OPM are taking to implement firefighter workforce provisions in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.¹

To further identify and describe barriers, we asked officials from the Forest Service and Interior to describe barriers to recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters, including any barriers specific to women firefighters. We also interviewed representatives from nonfederal stakeholders, including nongovernmental organizations representing active and retired federal firefighters, such as employee associations, and other organizations involved in firefighting issues, such as the National Association of State Foresters and the Western Governors' Association. We identified stakeholders through our review of wildland fire documents and interviews with agency officials, and we asked those interviewed to suggest others. We selected to interview 16 nonfederal stakeholders that we found to be most engaged with issues associated with recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters.²

In our interviews with stakeholders, we asked representatives to describe, in their view, the most significant barriers to the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters, including any barriers specific to women firefighters, as well as how the barriers might be addressed. We also asked for their perspectives on recent and ongoing changes related to the federal wildland firefighter workforce, including changes directed by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. We conducted our interviews with stakeholders from January through March 2022. Views from the selected

¹Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803, 135 Stat. 429, 1097 (2021).

²Some of the 16 stakeholders were identified during the course of our interviews with other stakeholders.

stakeholders cannot be generalized to those we did not select and interview as part of our review.

To corroborate the barriers identified in agency documents and by agency officials and nonfederal stakeholders, we conducted a literature search to identify journal articles, studies, and other documents related to the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters. We conducted searches of various databases, such as AGRIS, EconLit, ProQuest, and Social SciSearch. Our literature search covered documents published from 2011 through March 2022. Through the literature search, we identified 14 documents that discussed barriers to recruiting and retaining firefighters.

To determine commonly cited barriers to the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters, we analyzed information identified in our interviews with officials and stakeholders and our review of documents. One analyst conducted the initial categorization, and a team of analysts reviewed the categories and came to agreement on the categorization. We identified seven categories of barriers. In developing these categories, we grouped related information. For example, we included information related to competition from state and local fire departments in our low pay category. We focused our analysis on and corroborated with other documents the most commonly cited barriers identified by responsible agency officials and representatives of stakeholder organizations. Therefore, we may not have identified every barrier to recruiting and retaining federal wildland firefighters. In considering the barriers identified, we examined federal regulations, agency guidance, and federal standards for internal control, to provide context for suggestions from officials and stakeholders on ways that agencies could improve their recruitment and retention of wildland firefighters.³

To provide context on the composition of the federal wildland firefighter workforce, we analyzed data from the Forest Service and Interior agencies. For the Forest Service, we analyzed workforce data from the National Finance Center. For the Interior agencies, we analyzed workforce data from the Federal Personnel and Payroll System. We analyzed data from fiscal year 2021 (the most recent data available at the time we began our review), including the number of federal wildland firefighters that were classified as permanent, permanent-seasonal, and

³GAO, *Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government*, [GAO-14-704G](#) (Washington, D.C.: September 2014).

temporary-seasonal and their gender and race. We assessed the reliability of the data by reviewing related documentation, interviewing officials, and checking for missing or duplicate data. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable for understanding the current composition of the federal wildland firefighter workforce.

We conducted this performance audit from November 2021 to November 2022 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

Cardell Johnson at (202) 512-3841 or JohnsonCD1@gao.gov

Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Jonathan Dent (Assistant Director), Lesley Rinner (Analyst in Charge), Luqman Abdullah, Farah Angersola, Lilia Chaidez, Ellen Fried, Cindy Gilbert, Gwen Kirby, Patricia Moye, Steven Lozano, Leslie Pollock, and Sara Sullivan made key contributions to this report.

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