

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

May 19, 2022

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

As the country braces for another challenging wildfire season, it is more important than ever that our federal wildland firefighting workforce is fully staffed and prepared to suppress catastrophic wildfires, primarily across the West. Decades of fire suppression and mismanagement, along with drought and warming temperatures, have turned wildfire seasons into wildfire years. These conditions have exacerbated numerous issues related to hiring and retaining a full wildland firefighting workforce, such as fair pay, adequate health and retirement benefits, and proper job titles. Given the severity of this crisis, it is also imperative that the agencies are transparent about recruitment and retention shortcomings so Congress can provide the agencies with the tools they need to fight and prevent catastrophic fires.

Recent reports have illuminated alarming and “grim” shortfalls with the recruitment and retention of federal wildland firefighters, particularly in the West, despite assurances by the Forest Service that 2022 staffing goals will be met.¹ As of May 16, 2022, fires have already consumed nearly 1.3 million acres of land and yet the Forest Service has only filled an estimated 73 percent of its firefighting staffing needs.² Earlier this spring, Forest Service officials in California warned there were 50 percent fewer applications for GS-3 through GS-9 firefighter positions this year compared to last year.³ There are also more than 1,560 firefighter vacancies in California and some northern California units are expected to only be 50 percent staffed.⁴ This problem is not unique to California, as Forest Service Chief Randy Moore recently stated that many units have only reached 50 percent of their staffing goal and “there’s a lot of declinations” of offers from potential wildland firefighters.⁵ In addition to recruitment shortcomings, the Forest Service is also failing to retain existing firefighters. Several recent reports have found that 240 former seasonal workers did not return in Montana and Idaho for this year’s fire season and that there were roughly 350 resignations in California.⁶

¹ Brianna Sacks, “A Forest Service Leader Claimed To Congress That a Hiring Push For Firefighters Had Gone ‘Very Well.’ It Hadn’t Started Yet,” BuzzFeed, April 27, 2022, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/briannasacks/firefighters-staffing-forest-service-wildland>.

² National Interagency Fire Center, “National Fire News,” <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/nfn>. Accessed on May 16, 2022. Safo, Nova, “U.S. Forest Service is short thousands of firefighters amid pay raise delay,” Marketplace, May 10, 2022, <https://www.marketplace.org/2022/05/10/u-s-forest-service-is-short-thousands-of-firefighters-amid-pay-raise-delay/>.

³ Ximena Bustillo, “‘Pretty brutal’: Hiring woes plague Biden effort to contain wildfires,” Politico, March 15, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/15/bidens-effort-to-contain-wildfires-threatened-by-staffing-woes-00016419>

⁴ *Id.* National Interagency Fire Center, “National Fire News,” <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/nfn>. Accessed on May 16, 2022.

⁵ Gabbert, Bill, “Forest Service Chief says in some areas only 50% of firefighter positions are filled,” Wildfire Today, May 5, 2022, <https://wildfiretoday.com/2022/05/05/forest-service-chief-says-in-some-areas-only-50-of-firefighter-positions-are-filled/>.

⁶ *Id.*

These shortcomings in the wildland firefighting workforce are particularly foreboding, as the nearly 1.4 million acres currently burned as of May 17, 2022, is over two times greater than the acreage burned the same time last year and nearly four times greater than the record-shattering 2020 wildfire season.⁷ Failing to adequately staff our wildland firefighting workforce will have detrimental and cascading effects on effectively fighting wildland fires and the health and safety of wildland firefighters. Forest Service employees are already sounding the alarm that “engines will sit idle, helicopters won’t be able to fly daily, crews won’t be able to start the season on time, and those who have worked multiple seasons in the field aren’t sure how much more they can stretch themselves without falling apart.”⁸ Recently, a hotshot crew member working on New Mexico’s Cooks Peak Fire stated: “We are already showing difficulties with staffing at the start of the season. All these fires broke, [and] we didn’t have crew orders filled ... [it’s] a trainwreck we are heading into.”⁹ While the Forest Service has publicly stated there are 1,900 applicants in various stages of the hiring process, several reports question the efficacy of recent fire hire events or whether those applicants will be processed quickly enough to fully address concerns about the lack of fire preparedness.¹⁰

Given the importance of ensuring an adequately staffed wildland firefighting workforce, the Committee seeks to understand the steps the Forest Service is taking to enhance firefighting recruitment and retention ahead of the upcoming wildfire season. To assist with our oversight activities, please provide the following documents as soon as possible, but no later than 5:00 p.m. on June 2, 2022.

1. A document sufficient to describe the Forest Service’s progress toward meeting the goal of hiring 11,300 wildland firefighters for the 2022 wildfire year and the number of wildland firefighters currently employed by the agency.
2. A document sufficient to list all federal wildland firefighting hiring events the Forest Service hosted from May 19, 2021, through May 19, 2022, and the recruitment results of those events.
3. A document sufficient to list all federal wildland firefighting hiring events the Forest Service has scheduled through December 31, 2022.
4. A document sufficient to describe the current number of wildland firefighting vacancies by State and Forest Service region.
5. A document sufficient to describe the current number of wildland firefighters employed for the 2022 wildfire year by State and Forest Service region.

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

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6. A document sufficient to describe the retention rates of wildland firefighters over the past 5 years by State and Forest Service region.
7. A document sufficient to describe the number of temporary wildland firefighters converted to permanent wildland firefighters from May 19, 2021, to May 19, 2022.
8. A document sufficient to describe any other actions the Forest Service is taking to address wildland firefighting recruitment and retention challenges.

Please contact the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee Minority staff at HNRR.Oversight@mail.house.gov with any questions about this request and to coordinate the delivery of your response to room 1329 of the Longworth House Office Building. Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Bruce Westerman
Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources