

AS THE DIXIE FIRE AND OTHERS BURN, THE US STRUGGLES TO FIND ENOUGH FIREFIGHTERS

Low pay and a booming economy leave US Forest Service struggling to hire the personnel it needs in a dangerous fire season

By Alicia A. Caldwell
August 9, 2021

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the case of California's Tamarack Fire, which started south of Lake Tahoe on July 4, Forest Service officials said they counted more than 20 other fires in that area and decided

to monitor the Tamarack fire and not initially send crews. It later crossed into Nevada, destroying at least 14 homes and prompting evacuations of hundreds of people.

The Dixie Fire, which started in mid-July in Northern California, has grown to more than 463,000 acres and is now the second largest in state history. About 5,100 personnel have been deployed to combat the blaze, which destroyed most of the small town of Greenville Wednesday night.

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

Tom Wiecezorek, director for the Center for Public Safety Management, a research and consulting firm, said there is a shortage of first responders and firefighters at every level, including the Forest Service.

"We are struggling to find enough resources to deploy across the country," Mr. Wiecezorek said.

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

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

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

State firefighters also work more palatable shifts, he said – typically three straight days followed by several days off, compared with 14-day rotations for federal firefighters, who routinely deploy around the country.

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

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

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

Low wages and tough conditions make the retention of experienced wildland firefighters difficult, potentially hurting teams' effectiveness, people who work in the field say.

“When those kinds of things are coming up, when people are stressed for resources, that’s when people don’t make as good a decision as possible,” said Mr. Sloop.