Wildland

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The Bootleg Fire is burning in the Fremont-Winema National Forest in southern Oregon. U.S. FOREST SERVICE

from their families for weeks at a time, and are typically paid less per hour and get fewer benefits than traditional municipal firefighters.

Many don't stay in the job long, and it's a struggle to find replacements. About 20% of available federal firefighting positions currently remain unfilled, and in some localities, such as California, the shortfall is even higher.

"The scarcity of resources is probably something you're going to hear about all summer," said John Huston, Division Program Manager for Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). "The reason they're scarce is there's fires burning across the whole state and most of the West, and everybody's kind of trying to hold on to what they have."

Another historic fire season

Federal land management agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service and those under the umbrella of the Department of the Interior (Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service and Bureau of Indian Affairs), have an array of fire fighting resources at their disposal. According to NIFC, these include more than 17,000 personnel, 348 helicopters, 1,320 engines and 36 air tankers.

It's the largest professional firefighting force in the world, but with fire seasons growing progressively longer and more intense, effectively allocating these resources has become a perennial dilemma.

Nationwide data compiled by the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) shows that while the annual number of wildfires has decreased slightly since the 1990s, the total acreage burned has grown dramatically.

Over the past 10 years, an average of 34,000 wildfires has burned each year, charring about 3.8 million acres.

Already this year — before the typical peak fire season in the Northwest has even begun, more than 37,000 wildfires have burned more than 3.4 million acres.

"I spend most of my day on the phone constantly looking for resources for these fires," Kip Colby, a Prescribed Fire & Fuels Specialist with the U.S. Forest Service in Montana said. "I do my best to put in the most bodies I can, and try and figure out how to get more resources here to fight fires in this district, but there's a whole lot of other people doing the same thing.

"My biggest concern is for the lightning that comes tomorrow, and trying to figure out where to find the resources to fight the fires that are already burning, but any new ones," he added.

The five worst wildfire seasons since 1960 have all occurred since 2007. In 2020, 10.12 million acres burned, the second-worst fire season on record. Nearly 40% of the acres were in California.

"Almost 10,000 fires burned more than 4% of the state — 4.2 million acres — during California's 2020 wildfire season," the Record Searchlight in Redding reported. "The most extensive, the August Complex, burned more than a million acres across seven Northern California counties."

Ballooning costs

Statistics from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that the U.S. Forest Service's discretionary budget has remained stable over the past decade, with incremental increases occurring year over year. The agency's discretionary budget went from $4.85 billion in 2012 to $5.14 billion in 2020.

A more significant change has come in how those dollars are spent.

In 1995, roughly 16% of the Forest Service's budget was dedicated to Wildland Fire Management. In 2020, it was more than half, leaving little room for expenditures on other Forest Service priorities such as conservation, forestry and recreation.

State governments also are incurring increasing costs for wildland fire suppression.

Firefighting costs in Oregon reached $354 million in 2020 during the deadliest and most destructive season on record.

The most expensive fire season in Oregon's history was actually 2018, which reached $514 million due to multiple large fires that started early in the southern half of the state and threatened communities all summer — even though it ultimately didn't destroy nearly as many homes as 2020.

While resources are not yet stretched thin on Oregon's fires, lawmakers this year took steps to ensure such shortages are not a part of the state's wildfire fighting future.

One of the 2021 legislative session's crowning achievements was Senate Bill 762, a bipartisan wildfire resiliency and preparedness bill that required the creation of defensible space requirements, new building codes, a statewide wildfire risk map and health systems for monitoring the public health risks of wildfire smoke.

It also committed $55 million to allow the State Fire Marshal to increase its wildfire readiness and response capacity. This includes bolstering its personnel for response and administrative support and improving efficiency through technological innovation and modernizing its systems.

Funds can also be used for prepositioning of resources and contracting with other entities for fire prevention, suppression and response.

Proponents of the legislation said in addition to protecting property and lives, the bill would ultimately save the state money by prioritizing preparedness and coordination between agencies.

"This is a framework upon which we can build sustainable resiliency: mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery strategies and capacities," Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, said when the bill passed the House. "These reforms are reflective of our needs right now. Climate change is the fight of our lifetimes."

Over the past 10 years, Montana has spent an average of $21 million annually to fund its wildland firefighting efforts through the DNRC. In big fire years, the costs have been much higher.

Montana experienced its worst fire season in more than a century in 2017, when roughly 1.4 million acres of timber and grasslands burned. That year, the state's share of firefighting costs ballooned to $65 million.

In 2020, the Washington State Legislature passed a bill allocating $500 million over the next eight years to help the state fight wildfires and create prevention programs. The legislation came at the urging of Hilary Franz, state commissioner of public lands.

Not enough wildland firefighters

The most significant shortfall amongst federal firefighting agencies is in the recruitment and retention of trained and experienced wildland firefighters.

"We have the same number of tankers we had in the past, the same number of helicopters," said Sara Mayben, acting supervisor for the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest, "but we are running short of people who put boots on the ground. We are struggling to fill those positions and keep those positions filled when we have folks vacate."

Official data on firefighter staffing shortages within the U.S. Forest Service and Department of Interior is difficult to ascertain. However, the wildland firefighter advocacy group, Grassroots Wildland Firefighters (GWF), estimates that nationally, 20% of available federal firefighting positions remain unfilled, and in some localities, such as California, the shortfall is even higher.

One major disincentive is low pay. According to GWF, the starting wage for a temporary seasonal firefighter working for a federal agency is $13.45 per hour — less than what a newly hired clerk at Target is paid.

Extensive amounts of overtime pad the paychecks of most temporary seasonal firefighters, but even permanent firefighters are leaving federal service.

"We've had a lot of folks who ... have stopped being firefighters because they don't feel like they're getting paid enough to put their lives at risk," Mayben said. "We are short in human resources, especially Hot Shot crews. We're finding that across the western U.S."

Mayben noted a growing trend within federal firefighting agencies wherein both newly trained seasonal firefighters and experienced veterans are migrating to state and local firefighting agencies where the pay is sometimes double that being offered by the federal government.

"Firefighters are leaving in droves to take advantage of better pay and better working conditions within state and private firefighting organizations," said Brandon Dunham, a former wildland firefighter with both the BLM and USFS, and a founding board member of the advocacy group Grassroots Wildland Firefighters.

At a conference with western governors on June 30, President Joe Biden described the salaries paid to federal firefighters as "ridiculously low" and announced an immediate, one-time 10% wage bonus for permanent federal firefighters and a $1,000 spot award for temporary ones. He promised to work with Congress to make the wage increases permanent.

"A one-time boost is not enough," Biden said. "These courageous women and men take an incredible risk of running toward the fire, and they deserve to be paid and paid good wages."

Low wages are not the only factor turning firefighters away from federal service.

As fire seasons have progressively grown longer and more intense, the physical and emotional toll of fire fighting has grown with it. According to Dunham, the unending grind of days with little rest was a major factor in his decision to leave firefighting.

"The way the schedule works for any wildland firefighter out there ... you can work for 16 hours a day for 14 days up to 21 days straight," Dunham said. "You then must take two mandatory days off for rest and recovery — then do that cycle all over again for as long as the fire season dictates.

"That's 224 hours of work in a two-week pay period. It's excruciatingly hard labor and its very hazardous," he said. "You have a lot of fatigue and a lot of time away from home.

"That's one of the many reasons why I got out of the game. I didn't want to be a part-time father, I didn't want to be a part-time husband."

Depression and psychological trauma are endemic among firefighters. A 2018 study by the Ruderman Family Foundation found rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorders among firefighters are as much as five times higher than that of the general population and that firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty.

"These year-after-year cycles of going 110-miles-per-hour to practically slamming the car into reverse ... it builds up. It kind of accumulates over time," Dunham said of the six months on, six months off schedule that most wildland firefighters contend with. "You tend to develop some form of complex Post Traumatic Stress Injury (PTSI)."

Given the drawbacks of employment as a wildland firefighter, why would anyone choose it as a career? Dunham said the personal fulfillment he experienced as a firefighter almost outweighed its disadvantages.

"It is the single most fulfilling and purposeful thing that I've ever done in my life," he said. "It has taught me leadership, it has taught me patience, it has developed me as a human. The camaraderie is amazing. The places that you'll go that are completely untouched by humanity, in the middle of nowhere ... you'll never experience that in any other profession."

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