

U.S. seeks to bolster firefighter ranks as wildfires increase

■ Proposals in Congress to make at least 1,000 seasonal firefighters year-round

By Keith Ridler and Matthew Brown
Associated Press

BOISE — U.S. wildfire managers are considering shifting to more full-time firefighting crews to deal with what has become a year-round wildfire season and making the jobs more attractive by increasing pay and benefits.

There's a push in Congress to increase firefighter pay and convert at least 1,000 seasonal wildland firefighters to year-round workers, furthering a shift in their ranks over the past decade as fires have grown more severe.

It comes as fires raging in Western states parched by severe drought and record heat have burned more than 2,000 square miles this year.

That's ahead of the pace in 2020, which ultimately saw a near-record 15,000 square miles burned as well as more than 17,000 homes and other structures destroyed.

U.S. Forest Service Deputy Chief Christopher French testified Thursday, June 24 before the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources that firefighters need more pay in recognition of the growing workload.

The year-round firefighters could also remove brush and other hazardous fuels when not battling wildfires. French said the Forest Service treats 3 million acres (4,700 square miles) annually, but to make progress would need to treat two to four times that much in the 193 million acres (301,500 square miles) it manages.

He called for a "paradigm shift" in forest management to address the impacts of climate change.

"We have a crisis," French said while testifying on an infrastructure bill sponsored by West Virginia Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin. "We must address it at the scale of the problem, and bring long-term relief to our firefighters, our communities and our forests."

The challenge has increased in recent decades as more homes were built outside cities and towns, forcing wildland firefighters to protect the structures.

President Joe Biden this week called for an increase in firefighter pay from \$13 an hour.

"That's a ridiculously low salary to pay federal firefighters," he said.

Firefighters can often boost pay by working overtime, a regular occurrence on bad fire years.

The Forest Service and Department of Interior combined employ about 15,000 firefighters. Roughly 70% are full-time and 30% are



Eric Paul Zamora/Fresno Bee-TNS

Calfire firefighters proceed up a cleared hill after burning downed dead trees and brush along Sugarloaf Road on Feb. 10, 2021, near Meadow Lakes, California.

"We have a crisis. We must address it at the scale of the problem, and bring long-term relief to our firefighters, our communities and our forests."

— Christopher French, deputy chief, U.S. Forest Service

seasonal. Those figures used to be reversed, said Forest Service spokesman Stanton Florea.

Increased pay and more full-time firefighters were included in infrastructure legislation sponsored by Manchin, the chair of the energy and natural resources committee and a key swing vote in the evenly divided Senate. He was among a bipartisan group of 10 lawmakers who announced a deal Thursday with Biden on a pared-down version of the administration's plan.

Montana Democratic Sen. Jon Tester, also in the group, said the package would contain money for addressing wildfires but was unclear whether raises were included. If not, Tester said raises would be addressed in next year's federal budget.

"This is dangerous work, folks need to be paid for it. We're going to need to hire people to do this work," he said.

Still, officials at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise said they face a potential shortage of firefighters this year because the \$13 starting wage isn't enough.

"There's not technically a shortage of firefighters because we always overprepare," said Jessica Gardetto, a fire center spokeswoman with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and a former wildland firefighter. "But it's a concern right now. We're seeing people taking jobs at local businesses that pay the same or more than starting fire positions."

She also said the length of time firefighters spend in

the field has been increasing. That can be a problem for seasonal firefighters who are college students and need to get back to class.

"In the past we had fire seasons, now we have fire years," she said. Officials at the center on Tuesday raised the national preparedness level to 4 on a 1-5 scale, the second earliest dating back to 1990. The primary reason is the drought will likely make it harder to put out fires and strain firefighting resources.

"We don't know what kind of support we're going to be able to get from other agencies," said Sharla Arledge, spokeswoman for the Idaho Department of Lands, which is responsible for protecting state and some federal land. "It's a tinderbox out there."

More than 90% of the U.S. West is in drought. Forecasters expect the drought will persist at least through September across most of the region.

The nation's wildland firefighting system is a network of local, state and federal agencies, and in Idaho includes a unique program where ranchers are trained and given equipment to keep wildfires small until help arrives. The vast majority of wildfires are put out within days, but some grow to thousands of acres and draw hundreds of firefighters.

Major blazes that raged in Oregon, California, Washington and other states in 2020 revealed how stretched thin the ranks of firefighters have become. By September, with more than 30,000 firefighters deployed, there were so many fires burning that

hundreds of requests for help went unfulfilled as agencies scrambled to get enough firefighters, aircraft, engines and support personnel.

Firefighters from across the U.S. and other countries including Canada and Israel were summoned to help fill the personnel shortage.

Idaho officials have struggled to retain state wildland firefighters who are sometimes poached by federal agencies after gaining on-the-ground experience. Starting pay for an Idaho wildland firefighter is \$12.55 an hour.

As of Friday, June 25 the National Interagency Fire Center said almost 9,000 firefighters were battling wild fires across the U.S. About 80% of wildfires annually are started by people, often while enjoying outdoor activities or using fireworks.

Heat wave obliterates Oregon records

PORTLAND (AP) — Intense. Prolonged. Record-breaking. Unprecedented. Abnormal. Dangerous.

That's how the National Weather Service described the historic heat wave hitting the Pacific Northwest, pushing daytime temperatures into the triple digits, disrupting Olympic qualifying events and breaking all-time high temperature records in places unaccustomed to such extreme heat.

Portland reached 112 degrees Sunday, June 27, breaking the all-time temperature record of 108, which was set just a day earlier.

In Eugene, the U.S. track and field trials were halted Sunday afternoon and fans were asked to evacuate the stadium due to extreme heat. The National Weather Service said it hit 110 in Eugene, breaking the all-time record of 108.

Oregon's capital city, Salem, also recorded the highest temperature in its history on Sunday: 113, breaking the old mark by five degrees.

But that record, much like Portland's, was short-lived. On Monday, June 28, Salem soared to 115 degrees.

The temperature hit 104 in Seattle. The NWS said that was an all-time record for the city better known for rain than heat and was the first time the area recorded two consecutive triple digit days since records began being kept in 1894.

Records were being broken across the region, and the sizzling temperatures were expected to get even hotter Monday before beginning to cool Tuesday.

There were also some power outages. Portland General Electric said about 3,000 customers were without electricity in the greater Portland area Sunday afternoon. Puget Sound Energy reported 3,400 customers down in the greater Seattle area.

Sizzling State

Oregon's three biggest cities each set an all-time high temperature record on Sunday, June 27.

PORTLAND

Sunday high: 112
Previous record, 108 (set the day before; prior to this heat wave, the all-time record was 107, set in 1965 and matched in 1981)

SALEM

Monday high: 115
Previous record, 113 (set the day before; prior to this heat wave, the all-time record was 108, set in 1941 and matched in 1981)

EUGENE

Sunday high: 111
Previous record, 108, set in 1981

Time has come...

hit the trail with a set of the best!

We've got what you want!

Come see our full line of ATV/UTV tires and wheels

Low Brothers Tire Service

541-523-3679

210 Bridge St. Baker City, OR



BY APPOINTMENT ONLY!

Call Baker County Health Department to Schedule @ 541-523-8211

2021 WELLNESS EVENT

Ages 12 to 21 years old
YOUR HEALTH IS IMPORTANT!

- Primary Care Providers
- Mental Health Providers
- Physical Therapy
- Public Health Specialist, Immunizations and Relationship Safety
- Yearly Preventative Checkups
- Sports Physicals Available

"Take care of your body it's the only place you have to live."

~ Jim Rohn

July 27, 28, & 29th
5:30 to 7:30 pm

Adolescents under 15 must be accompanied by a parent

Drawings every night

Bring Insurance cards if available *

*NOTE: We cannot access your insurance cards with St. Luke's

St. Luke's Clinic
3950 17th St.
Baker City OR 97814

Call Baker Health Department to schedule an appointment
541-523-8211

Registration packets available at The Baker County Health Dept. and <https://www.bakercounty.org/health/forms.html>