Some federal firefighters still await pay raise

BY JOE DAVIDSON

The Washington Post Federal firefighters still haven't received a pay boost ap-

proved last year. It's not known which employees will get the money once it is implemented. In some high-risk areas, the U.S. Forest Service has only half the staff it needs.

Meanwhile, the number of acres burned as of June 1 was 112% higher than the 10year average, according to the government's wildland fire outlook. Drought, heat and wind are creating additional fire hazards.

Yet the nation risks losing wildland firefighters because a pay hike, signed into law by President Joe Biden in November as part of his massive infrastructure act, has not been delivered. Under the law, that boost would only apply to firefighters in "a specified geographic area in which it is difficult to "recruit or retain" them. It provides for increasing annual pay by \$20,000 or 50% of base pay, whichever is less.

Officials say they are still studying recruitment and retention data to decide where to deliver the raises — but firefighters say those challenges apply everywhere, and so should the pay boosts.

"All federal wildland fire agencies are experiencing some hiring, recruitment and retention challenges in locations where state and private firefighter wages are out-competing federal firefighter wages, housing costs are not affordable, and positions are in remote locations, especially with our temporary (seasonal)



Firefighter Rick Ontiveroz takes a minute to breathe while battling the Grandview Fire near Sisters in 2021. Some federal firefighters are still waiting for pay raises promised last year by President Biden.

firefighters," the Forest Service said in a statement. "Maintaining our ability to hire and retain firefighters as we see the complexity of the firefighting environment grow exponentially is a challenge that we take seriously."

In testimony to a Senate Appropriations Interior subcommittee hearing last month, Forest Service Chief Randy Moore said his agency's staffing levels are at 90% overall. But "it's as low as 50% in some areas," he added, citing Oregon, Washington state and California.

"Fifty percent sounds a little scary," replied the subcommittee's chairman, Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., whose home state is in deficient territory.

Recruitment and retention, along with pay, are scary challenges not just for the Forest Service and the Interior Department's firefighting components, but also for the individuals who risk their lives beating flames.

"Congress appropriated this money months ago, and yet, federal wildland firefighters have still not seen a dime of it," National Federation of Federal **Employees President Randy** Erwin complained in a letter Wednesday to top Biden administration officials. "Congress intended this money to move quickly into the hands of wildland firefighters, a very large percentage of whom experience significant difficulty making ends meet on their current salaries.

Aana Kulaas and her husband, Chad Bresnahan, are Forest Service firefighters in Washington state. Although she has a bachelor's degree in natural resource science and 23 years of

experience, Kulaas, speaking as a union official, said she earned \$23,023.52 last year. She had no overtime pay because she had to care for three children.

Her husband did earn overtime pay. Without it, "we would not be able to afford our mortgage or my medical bills," she added. "Our financial well-being is directly tied to how severe the fire season is. The busier the season, the more money he makes . . . While the overtime keeps us afloat, the downside is all the family time and mental and physical health that must be sacrificed."

To make matters worse, "we work in an unsupportive environment, so there is no rest and recovery even during the brief offseason," Kulaas, 42, added.

"There's just this constant cycle of being chewed up and spit out and the expectation to perform at a high level."

Eric Franta, 45, has fought fires or worked to prevent them in 16 states from Alaska to Florida. The 15-year Forest Service veteran, speaking as a union steward, said he has a "very badly herniated disk" and a burn scar on his back to show for his efforts.

What he doesn't have is a desire to recommend his job to

"In the last couple years, I have begun dissuading folks from pursuing this as anything other than a short-term pursuit of a 'life experience' if they desire any semblance of a 'normal' life," he said by email. What firefighters must do "to make the money juice worth the squeeze, is beyond most folk's tolerance."

Franta, of La Grande, said his

base pay is \$19.68 hourly, not including overtime and hazard pay. The main thing that keeps him on the job is his time off the job. Firefighting is seasonal work, giving Franta four months free. "If I had to do this job year-round," he said, "I never would have stayed in it past a couple, few years."

Biden pledged a short-term firefighter pay increase last year and "more than 11,300 firefighters received an additional \$24.3 million in pay in 2021," according to the Forest Service. Officials "are working diligently with the Office of Personnel Management on the increased payments for our employees," the agency said. "Our goal is to have these payments into paychecks by this summer." A statement from the Bureau of Land Management said the "pay increases require a more detailed analysis of recruitment and retention to fulfill the goals of the legislation."

No lengthy study is needed, argues Erwin, the union president.

"In truth, there should be no complex analysis to do. Every geographical area in the country has a proven recruitment and retention problem," he wrote to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland and Office of Personnel Management Director Kiran Ahuja.

'Our wildland firefighters need pay raises to take effect immediately. Every single federal wildland firefighter is substantially underpaid regardless of their location," Erwin's letter pleaded.

"The time for you to act is now."



Wallowa Mountain Hells Canyon Trails Association/Contributed photo

Go Wild: American Adventures is combining their catered camping trips with trail work on June 17-19 in a partnership with the Wallowa **Mountain Hells Canyon Trails Association.**

Trail

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The main work day is Saturday, June 18. Sizer said maintenance will include cutting small trees out of the trail, trimming back bushes and clearing rocks.

"The point is to get folks out and have a good time," Sizer said. "We can find something for anyone to do."

And it's OK to enjoy the

"Take breaks, enjoy the scenery, have fun doing trail work," he said.

Sunday, June 19, includes breakfast, cleaning up camp, and an after-party.

For more information, or to register, go to www.gowildusa. com/volunteervacations.

Trail work

The trail work will be facilitated by members of the Wallowa Mountain Hells Canyon Trail Association, which started in 2017.

"Our mission is to help the Forest Service maintain the trails," said Mike Hansen, executive director.

The association works with the Forest Service to identify "deferred maintenance trails."

"Those are the ones they haven't gotten to in three years or more," Hansen said.

So far, he said the group has worked on about eight projects since March in the Hells Canyon area.

The Go Wild excursion will continue work they've already started.

"Any help his group can give us is really welcome," Hansen said.

He said the association has members from Wallowa, Union and Baker counties. Membership is \$20 per person, \$30 per family, or \$10 for students.

Some projects take just a day, and may include a yearly check on a familiar trail.

"Some members have a favorite trail they do every year," he said.

Multiple days are required to access the backcountry. "It takes a day of hiking for

To learn more about the association, visit the website at www.wmhcta.org.

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some of them," Hansen said.

Proposals

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Guyer's motion to not respond to the county's request for proposals.

Mayor Kerry McQuisten and Councilor Shane Alderson voted no. Councilor Jason Spriet was absent May 24. Guyer said during the

meeting that "the city still has the possibility of stepping back into" the ambulance service issue depending on what county commissioners decide after reviewing any proposals they receive.

But Commissioner Bruce Nichols said on Monday, June 6 that, with the county having received two proposals, he is skeptical that the city can reinsert itself into the discussion.

"I think they've burned their bridge," Nichols said. "I think we've gone too far down the path. To me they made it clear they're not interested" in continuing to

operate ambulances. Nichols said the county is not legally obligated to choose either of the two proposals it received, however.

Under Oregon law, the county is responsible for ensuring ambulance service throughout the county.

Commissioners sent out the request for proposals after the City Council, on March 22, notified the county that the city intended to discontinue ambulance service Sept. 30, 2022.

City Manager Jonathan Cannon has told councilors several times that he doesn't believe the city can afford to continue operating ambulances because the difference between the cost to do so, and the amount the city collects from ambulance bills, will continue to grow.

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The difference over the past several years has averaged around \$700,000.

Members of the union that represents the city's firefighter/paramedics, however, dispute Cannon's claims. They contend the city can afford to continue ambulance service for at least the fiscal year that starts July 1.

Both county commissioners and city councilors have discussed the possibility of asking voters in May 2023, both inside the city and elsewhere in the county, to approve a tax levy or create a new ambulance or ambulance/fire district that would serve as a new, long-term source of revenue for ambulance service.

If Baker City does stop operating ambulances, it would lose about \$1 million in annual revenue. Ambulance runs also account for 80% to 85% of service calls for the city fire department.

The proposed city budget for the new fiscal year - which the City Council has to adopt by June 30 includes reducing the fire department staffing from the current 16.25 full-time equivalents to 10.5.

County to evaluate proposals

Baker County commissioners, during their June 1 meeting, appointed members to a committee that will evaluate the two ambulance proposals.

Committee members are Tony Alexander, Wayne Endersby, Peter Johnson, Debra Duggan, Pat Sullivan, David Richards, Loran Joseph, Jeanne Peacock and Randy Daugherty.
"The task before them is

to evaluate whether or not all of the bids are as we requested, how well they fill the requirements," Com-

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mission Chairman Bill Harvey said on June 1. Yencopal said the coun-

ty's initial timeline called for commissioners to approve a notice of intention to award a contract for ambulance services by June 29.

But he said the county might try to accelerate that schedule, in part because staffing shortages in the city fire department — the department has three openings for firefighter/paramedics prompted commissioners on May 24 to declare an emergency.

The county hired American Medical Response (AMR) to have an ambulance available in Baker City and Baker County from May 27 to June 6. Yencopal said the county has extended that contract to June 10, and it possibly could be extended again.

AMR has brought two ambulances to Baker City, but only one is staffed, Yencopal said.

Both ambulances are parked at Second Street and Valley Avenue. The second ambulance is a backup in case the other ambulance has a mechanical issue.

The county is paying AMR \$3,700 per day.

Yencopal said the company will reimburse the county up to \$500 per ambulance run.

He said AMR's ambulance has been the first on-call ambulance to maximize the number of runs the company responds to, making it easier for it to reimburse the county for part of the cost.

Yencopal said the county's attorney, Kim Mosier, advised county officials not to publicly release the proposals from Metro West Ambulance and Victory EMS until the commissioners approve a notice to award a contract to one of the companies.

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