

Testimony of Ms. Riva Duncan,
Fire Staff Officer, US Forest Service, Umpqua National Forest (Retired)
Executive Secretary, Grassroots Wildland Firefighters

Before

The House Natural Resource Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands
*“Wildfire in a Warming World: Opportunities to Improve Community Collaboration,
Climate Resilience, and Workforce Capacity.”*
April 29, 2021

Opening Remarks

Thank you Chairman Grijalva, Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Westerman, Ranking Member Fulcher, and members of the subcommittee for allowing me to appear before you today. My name is Riva Duncan and I am currently the Executive Secretary of the Grassroots Wildland Firefighters advocacy group. On December 31, 2020, I retired from the US Forest Service after 31 years with the agency. My position upon retirement was the Chief Fire Staff Officer for the Umpqua National Forest and Roseburg and Coos Bay BLM Districts in southwest Oregon. Over the course of my career I worked in five Forest Service regions on seven national forests in Pennsylvania, Florida, Utah, California, North Carolina, and Oregon. I have extensive experience on Type 2 initial attack crews, engines, a hotshot crew, helitack, and in fuels management. In my position as Chief Fire Staff Officer I also provided critical agency leadership and guidance during large national wildfire incidents throughout the US.

There is much discussion on the ‘wildfire problem’ – larger and more destructive wildfires, a fire year instead of a fire season, significant socio-economic impacts to communities and businesses and tragic loss of life and property. Increasing demands on federal firefighters on the frontlines have become a year-round requirement.. While I am not a climate scientist like Dr. Law, I can attest to the increases in size, intensity, duration, and complexity of wildfires since I started my career. The five federal land management agencies have failed to keep pace with this changing dynamic, burdening the firefighters.

The current federal fire workforce is woefully understaffed and overworked, and people are at their breaking point leaving a wake of mental health issues, suicides, high divorce rates, and very concerning numbers surrounding high incidences of cancer and cardiovascular disease. All from a career of undocumented exposure to smoke, particulate matter, and other effects from hazardous conditions faced on every operational shift worked on wildfires.

These agencies rely on a largely seasonal workforce. Many firefighters’ tour of duty is six months. Several elected officials have called for the Forest Service to create a full-time, year-round fire workforce. And while this seems like a viable solution on the

surface, it is fraught with unseen consequences that detrimentally affect federal firefighters.

As wildfires grow larger and last longer, federal firefighters answer the call of duty, leaving behind their lives and families for upwards of six months annually, working an average of 16-hour daily shifts, sleeping in the dirt, going without showers, working and sleeping in smoke, and given limited time off to reset and reconnect with loved ones. Pushing the current workforce beyond the brink to accomplish more with less on a year-round basis, without a pay increase to support a living wage and increasing staffing levels, will only exacerbate these issues and accelerate resignations and more acute and long term physical and mental health issues.

Technically and officially, there are no 'wildland firefighters' in the federal government. Most who fight fire are classified as forestry technicians, many are range technicians, and some are biologists and administrators. Yet all must hold paramount qualifications and meet physical fitness requirements. Wildland firefighters do more than respond to wildfires. Federal wildland firefighters assist with hurricanes, floods, and COVID-19 vaccines. They proudly responded to the 9/11 attacks in New York and at the Pentagon and assisted in Space Shuttle recovery. Yet the agencies won't officially recognize them even as first responders.

Because of the embarrassingly low pay, most wildland firefighters must rely on extensive amounts of overtime and hazard pay to survive financially. An increase in compensation would alleviate financial burden placed on firefighters and their families and decrease the need for unsustainable amounts of overtime to survive financially. Currently, for much of the federal wildland fire workforce, missing even a single assignment can have lasting financial impacts. Missing one two week assignment due to injury or family emergency can translate into a loss of 10-20% of their annual salary. Having a stable and plannable income from an increase in base wage would alleviate the financial burden and protect employees from financial hardship in the event of job related injury.

Firefighters are leaving federal service for more lucrative wildland jobs with state agencies, municipal departments, utility providers and even insurance companies. These are people with many years of specialized experience and training who cannot be readily replaced. In my last two years with the Forest Service we struggled to fill many of our positions. In 2020, for the first time, we could not staff all of our engines 7 days.

Last year firefighters under my charge overcame many challenges: first a pandemic and then an historic wind event in Oregon and Washington that sent wildfires racing down our canyons and into our communities destroying homes, lives, and cherished natural resources. I had more firefighters reach out for help with thoughts of suicide, depression, and traumatic events than at any other time in my career.

I have driven a good friend to rehab; I have held onto a firearm for another friend who was afraid they would use it on themselves; and I have escorted the body of a fallen firefighter home to their family. I myself have struggled with my own demons after having several line of duty deaths and serious accidents occur on my watch.

I am not here to disparage the US Forest Service. These issues are larger than any one agency and will take complex, and expensive, solutions. It truly was my honor to serve the US Forest Service and the American people. I loved working in fire, but I love the people I worked with even more. I have grown weary of losing amazing friends and colleagues, and I have grown impatient with inaction. The US is burning, wildland firefighters are struggling, and some are even dying. The time for reform is now. Thank you.

#End of Opening Statement#

Grassroots Wildland Firefighters Advocacy Group Background

The Grassroots Wildland Firefighters were formed in 2019 by active and retired federal wildland firefighters. The intent of the group is to address the issues surrounding the everyday world of the wildland firefighter, including: modernizing pay, classification and benefits providing comprehensive health and well-being short and long term support, and addressing denied OWCP/DOL claims.

The Grassroots Wildland Firefighters are focused on bringing our diverse group of voices to bear on leadership in the land management agencies and our elected officials, at the local, state and federal level. Our mission is to educate and advocate for proper classification, pay, benefits and comprehensive well being.

We acknowledge these are complex and multifaceted issues spanning many government agencies. Our overarching goal is to create a better quality of life for those who sacrifice so much of themselves and that of their families to protect life, communities, and natural resources.

Our work centers on four foundational pillars.

Pillar 1: Wildland Firefighter Classification, Pay and Benefits

Classification

As stated above, officially federal forestry technician who respond as wildland firefighters are not classified as Wildland Firefighters (there is a very small segment of the federal workforce who are *structural* firefighters in the GS-0081 series).

The legislative efforts with creating a new wildland firefighter job series has been going on for decades. After the [South Canyon Fire](#) tragedy it was decided by senior level management by the federal fire agencies that “wildland fire” positions needed to have [incident qualification requirements](#) associated with each position. But they also decided that the management positions should have a four-year natural resources

degree (or equivalent) because these positions would be classified as GS-0401 (General Biologist).

Consternation in the Forest Service over appropriate job series for “wildland firefighters” was brought up in 2004 with the plan to implement Interagency Fire Program Management standards. The Office of Inspector General (OIG) and the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) did audits in 2008 and 2009. OIG was concerned about the Forest Service’s ability to sustain a viable recruitment pool of fire management candidates for the GS-401 series. It was a valid concern.

As a follow up to a 2008 email instructing the agency to “stand down” in implementing wildland fire positions in the 401 series, Forest Service Chief Gail Kimball penned a [letter](#) on May 29, 2009 referring to the OIG audit and providing interim guidance on job series, including suspension of the 401 job series. The letter also stated, “The Forest Service will be working with the Department to evaluate the options of *establishing two new job series* [emphasis added] to describe wildland fire management work. One series would be a technical wildland fire management series. The technical series would blend the knowledge, skills and abilities required of modern wildland fire suppression and natural resource management. The second series would be a professional wildland fire management series that provides leadership and management for wildland fire management programs in a natural resource organization. These job series would replace the existing 462 and 401 series currently in use for fire positions within the Agency.”

The USFS convened a “summit” of senior executives consisting of top Fire and Aviation Management employees, Human Resources Management, and the National Federation of Federal Employees (union) to develop a plan to “seek immediate near-term and long-term solutions.”

On July 8, 2011, Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell rescinded former Chief Kimball’s letter with a new [letter](#). It stated, “The outcome of the meeting was a long-term strategy to pursue the *creation of a unique occupational series for wildland fire management* [emphasis added] that is consistent with the action item in the agency’s Cultural Transformation Plan. However, the creation of a new occupational series is likely to require significant effort and time.” He laid out an interim strategy that designated positions that would remain in the 462 Forestry Technician series (“firefighting and dispatch”) and the 401 series (“IFPM fuels positions”). The letter then stated, “Fire management positions at the GS-09 and above grade levels that are primarily administrative and managerial in nature are in the process of being reclassified in the GS-0301, Miscellaneous Administration and Program Series.”

That letter was the last we formally heard about “a unique occupational series for wildland fire management.” That “interim strategy” has now been in place for nearly 10 years.

There have been numerous bills introduced into the House and Senate calling for a unique wildland firefighter series, including current bills S 1221 and HR 938. While these bills are a step in the right direction, neither introduced bill has gone far enough to include an increase in pay and benefits.

Pay Disparity

Federal job series are connected to pay. There are some series in the Forest Service that receive a higher salary rate on the General Schedule scale (civil engineers, for example, because the pay in the private sector is significantly higher than the federal workforce). This allows the Forest Service to better recruit qualified and high performing employees who would make considerably more in the private sector.

The Forest Service is the premier wildland firefighting service in the country. It employs the majority of wildland firefighters in the nation, over 10,000 employees, combating wildfires in all 50 states and internationally. In addition, the federal government provides advanced-skill units such as Hotshot Crews, Smokejumpers, Rappellers, Helitack Crews, and Wildland Fire Modules -- along with the engines and hand crews it staffs at higher levels than its non-federal counterparts. Every major wildfire in the US relies on a federal wildfire response with federal wildland firefighters and the vital services their specialized crews provide to protect life and property.

Most taxpayers will be shocked to know that an entry level (GS-3) federal wildland firefighter is paid [\\$13.45/hour](#) (less than state minimum wage in CA and many other states by 2023). CalFire (a state-funded wildland fire response organization) is paying base salary nearly double what federal firefighters and fire managers make. Federal wildland firefighters are resigning federal service for higher pay and better benefits for employers like CalFire. Many municipal fire departments in CA that do wildland also pay significantly higher than the federal government. Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) has been implicated in several deadly and costly wildfires, and they have started to build a wildland fire workforce. With the recent announcement that CalFire is set to hire 1400 new firefighters it is expected that many federal wildland firefighters will resign a long career with the federal government in favor of a higher and more stable income with CalFire. As a matter of fact, CalFire is counting on it. The US Forest Service, and the other federal agencies, have invested significant time and money in training its workforce, and many of our most highly skilled and trained personnel will make the unfortunate, yet understandable, decision to leave federal service.

Other state agencies, such as Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control (DFPC) and Oregon Department of Forestry pay more than the federal agencies, as do many municipal fire departments. It begins for entry level firefighters and holds the disparity as one moves up in the ranks.

Hourly Pay	Federal	CalFire	Colorado DFPC
Entry Level FF	\$13.52	\$26	\$22
Captain	\$26.27	\$63	\$35

Considering the oppressive pay disparity, it's becoming a wrenching decision for federal employees to stay in the federal service when their families rely on their income to survive. A lifetime of career earnings and retirement payments is more stable and offers a considerably higher standard of living than continuing to pursue a lifetime of federal career. It's not a zero-sum game, either, when a highly trained and experienced manager leaves federal service to accept a lower position with less responsibility but higher pay. The American public loses that wealth of experience and knowledge. The training costs are expensive and unique, and the necessary skills take years of experience to master. This makes our ability to retain high performing employees fiscally irresponsible for the American taxpayers. Other states are left in the lurch because non-federal resources rarely cross jurisdictional boundaries, making the federal workforce a necessity for robust emergency management response. This national response capacity is imperative for our current wildfire emergency management system, the 2020 fire season proved this long established federal response hit its breaking point; we simply ran out of firefighters last year; the 2021 fire season will likely surpass 2020 in acres burned and homes and resources destroyed .

Our inability to hire and retain wildland firefighters has become readily apparent with record setting fire management vacancy rates throughout the federal service. Hiring managers are finding themselves unable to fill empty positions, and lacking compensation is a primary contributing factor. It takes time and considerable financial investment to develop new employees, but that process can't even begin if there isn't a pool of applicants willing to take a vacant job.

Pillar 2: Comprehensive Health and Wellbeing

Federal Wildland Firefighter Mental Health, Acute and Long-Term Health Risk

The Federal Wildland Firefighter (WFF) workforce is struggling and we need help. If immediate actions are not taken to address the contributing factors to the steep decline in WFF Comprehensive Health and Wellbeing (CHWB) and morale, the federal land management agencies will continue to see a mass exodus of experienced and highly qualified firefighters. This limits the efficacy of federal wildfire response, places the remaining workforce at higher risk of injury and fatality, and leaves our communities vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire.

The current federal wildland fire workforce is understaffed, overworked, and we are burning out, leaving a wake of mental health issues, suicide, high divorce rates, broken homes, and very concerning numbers surrounding high incidence of cancer and

cardiovascular disease from a career of undocumented exposure to smoke, particulate matter, and other effects from hazardous conditions we face every operational shift worked on wildfires.

As wildfires grow exponentially larger, federal forestry technicians continually answer the call of duty, leaving behind their lives and families for upward of eight months annually, working an average of 16 hour daily shifts, sleeping in the dirt without showers, working and sleeping in smoke, and are given limited time off to reset and reconnect with loved ones. Pushing the current workforce beyond the brink to accomplish more with less on a year-round basis, without a pay increase to support a living wage and increasing staffing levels, will only exacerbate these issues and accelerate resignations and more acute and long term physical and mental health issues.

Our two main focus points on comprehensive health and wellbeing are structured around the mental health of our workforce and on identifying, documenting, and protecting our wildland firefighter workforce from the long term health effects of exposure to smoke and particulate matter while on wildfire and prescribed fire.

Contributing Factors to Mental Health Issues in the Federal Wildland Fire Workforce:

1. *Longer Duration “Fire Year”*: More Operational Shifts away from Family

Given the immense year round workload placed on federal wildland firefighters from what has morphed from “fire season” into “fire year” along with the accelerated intensity and destruction of the current wildfire crisis, the ever increasing demand placed on understaffed federal wildland firefighting personnel, is pushing many beyond their limits. Longer fire seasons translate into more operational shifts away from home, children, and family creating an unhealthy disconnectedness from any semblance of a balanced support structure. Leaving children, partners, and loved ones for this long of a time period, over the course of years, creates challenges in every relationship for every firefighter.

2. *Larger Wildfires; with more Intense and Dangerous Fire Behavior*: The larger and more intense the wildfire, the more dangerous and stressful for the wildland firefighter.

As the duration of fire season has increased, so too has the size and intensity of wildfires. The number of acres burned nationally continues to accelerate upward. Fires are becoming more intense, more destructive, and more dangerous, and are spreading an already physically depleted and mentally fatigued workforce unsustainably thin, placing firefighters in more stressful and dangerous situations. The current work schedule of most federal wildland firefighters is unsustainable; there are simply not enough firefighters to safely respond to the current workload given the intensity and danger involved with the nature of the current work, and this is taking its toll.

3. *Traumatic Events experienced on the Fireline*:

The Wildland Fire Environment is extremely dangerous. Beyond the elevated stress levels necessary to effectively respond to and navigate the life-threatening hazards posed from wildfire and other all-risk emergencies, it is not uncommon for firefighters to experience multiple “close calls” or “near misses” throughout a Fire Year or a career. These are instances where one or multiple firefighters narrowly escape injury or death. Traumatic medical events are not uncommon during most wildland fires. In most instances these traumatic medical events involve “one of our own” firefighters, placing an elevated burden on incident responders, creating the higher potential for lasting traumatic effects on those directly on scene, and/or those who are coordinating the emergency from a far, such as incident management team members and dispatchers. While medical events can vary in severity and may not necessarily be fatal, and “close calls” and “near misses” may never be documented or discussed, the lasting impacts on all of those involved can be devastating and evolve into Post Traumatic Stress Disorder if they are not adequately acknowledged and addressed.

Proposed Mental Health Solutions:

In order to fully address our federal firefighters’ mental health issues, we must begin to find solutions to decrease stress levels and alleviate the workforce burdened by an ever-increasing workload. If we want to maximize our effectiveness in responding to incidents and turn the corner on our wildfire crisis, we must focus on taking care of and retaining our current federal wildland fire workforce.

1. Address low base wage and unsustainable work schedule:

The annual salary of a GS-3 through GS-5 “Forestry Technician is \$28,078 - \$35,265, with a GS3 starting at \$13.45 per hour. For a Seasonal Employee (1039 hours) or a Permanent Seasonal Employee that works a maximum of 6 months per calendar year, that equates to an annual salary of \$14,039 - \$17,632. Because most WFF’s must currently rely on extensive amounts of overtime to survive financially, an increase in compensation would alleviate financial burden placed on the WFF and their families and decrease the need for unsustainable amounts of overtime to survive. Currently, most of the federal wildland fire workforce cannot afford to miss a single fire assignment. In some instances, missing a single 14-16 day fire assignment due to injury or family emergency can translate into a loss of 10-20% of their annual salary. Having a stable and plannable income from an increase in base wage would alleviate the financial burden and protect employees from financial hardship in the event of injury. Increasing the current compensated two-days off after a minimum of fourteen days work to 4 or more days off would allow for a more realistic opportunity to reset.

2. Expand current wildland fire workforce and response staffing levels: (see Pillar 4)

Staffing levels must be increased, and more suppression modules must be developed to alleviate the current federal wildland fire workforce and the Incident Management

Team Structure to meet the ever increasing demand of the current and future fire environment. In conjunction with an increase in base wages to incentivize retention, additional modules must be developed and the broader workforce expanded to create the consistent ability to backfill and support personnel who are injured on the job, who are in need of family leave, or who must to take leave to reconnect with loved ones and address mental health care issues during fire season. Expanding staffing levels can provide and maintain consistent coverage without losing the effectiveness of wildfire response. As fire years are growing in size, duration, and intensity, WFFs must have the year-round ability to utilize leave and to temporarily escape the stress of the fire environment to reconnect with loved ones and reset. Expanding the current workforce along with staffing levels also allows for a realistic solution to extending mandatory time off after fourteen day assignment beyond the current two-day standard, which is insufficient for adequate rest and recuperation.

3. Develop and fund a robust Mental Health Support Program

While we are relatively confident of the contributing factors leading to the decline in Federal Wildland Firefighter mental health over time, there are five areas that need continued attention, and increased funding. This First Responder Mental Health Support Model has been derived from successful outcomes achieved by both Structural Fire Departments, Law enforcement Agencies, and Military units:

- **Address Contributing Factors leading to decline in mental health**
- **Mental Health Awareness Campaign**
- **Provide Mental Health Training and Education**
- **Develop Robust Employee Peer Support Network**
- **Provide Structure of “culturally relevant” Mental Health Care Professionals**

Develop Traumatic Exposure Reporting/Tracking Database - Ensure traumatic incidents that occur are reported and documented. Documenting employee exposure to traumatic events occurring on the job and tracking mental health are critical to care for WFFs.

Increased rates of Cancer and Cardiovascular Disease from Exposure to Smoke, Particulate Matter, and Hazardous Conditions Experienced on Wildfires and Prescribed Fire:

During the most active months of the Fire Year, it is not uncommon for communities to be inundated by thick and unrelenting smoke and particulate matter released by burning organic and non-organic debris from wildfires. The civilian population is advised to stay indoors, outdoor and sporting events are regularly cancelled due to unhealthy air conditions, and air filtration systems are highly recommended. Catastrophic wildfires continue to impact communities and densely populated areas, where harmful toxins are often released as a result of burning structures and other non-organic debris that are making smoke and particulate matter more hazardous to firefighters. Yet, there is rarely mention of the acute and long-term health impacts from smoke on our federal wildland firefighters who are battling the source of these toxins on the front lines of the wildfires

for upward of seven months, working and sleeping outdoors in consistently unhealthy conditions.

Our current federal WFF workforce is regularly exposed to smoke and particulate matter known to cause higher rates of cancer and heart disease. It is well documented that smoke from wildfires is a significant threat to public and firefighter health and safety. The current reporting system in place for documenting smoke and particulate exposure for federal wildland firefighters is deeply flawed and ineffective, and the burdensome process de-incentivizes employees from reporting exposure.

For well over 25 years the private, public, and federal agencies have funded research and have determined smoke from wildfire can potentially cause long term health effects. Unlike many Municipal Fire Departments and State Agencies who already acknowledge existing data, risk, and recommendations, federal agencies have yet to fully acknowledge and act on the premise that increased risk of Cancer and Cardiovascular disease are effects from the smoke, particulate matter, and intense working conditions experienced on wildfire. For many of these State and Local Departments, cancer is regularly determined to be a presumptive factor of the position after only a few years of service in a firefighter position. No such system or acknowledgement exists for the federal wildland fire workforce.

The federal current smoke exposure reporting systems are deeply flawed and can often take multiple days or weeks for employees and supervisors to complete. To adequately report exposure from smoke on wildfires, employees would need to complete exposure forms daily. Given the length of the current 16 hour standard work shift and grossly understaffed federal wildfire modules, it is nearly impossible to accurately report exposures at the standard necessary to document the frequency and severity of daily occurrence. Without having the administrative support dedicated to this process, a fireline supervisor would carry the brunt of this workload, limiting supervision necessary for safe fireline operations. Because the current reporting systems are so time consuming and so burdensome, most employees and supervisors are not able to accurately capture the true extent of the current workforce exposure, nor do they have the time or administrative support. There have been several internal efforts to streamline this process, but no progress has been made.

Proposed Solutions to Acute and Long Term Exposure to Smoke and Hazardous Working Conditions:

1. Federal Land Management Agencies review and list Cancer and Cardiovascular Disease as a presumptive factor for the Federal Wildland Firefighter Workforce (similar to many state agencies and local departments).
2. Improve the federal smoke exposure reporting process by developing a national smoke exposure tracking database for all federal wildland fire personnel, Incident Management teams, and federal employees supporting wildfires.
3. Create a Federal Wildland Fire personnel long term data health tracking system for all federal employee and federal personnel responding to fire incidents and prescribed fires.

4. Factor acute and long-term health risks into position description and compensate Federal Wildland Firefighters accordingly with higher pay and long term benefits to cover lasting health issues.
5. Require Incident Management Teams to exhaust all reasonable means to ensure fire camp is not located in an inversion area, forcing firefighters to sleep in heavy smoke. If no reasonable alternative is found, documentation of justification shall be submitted.

Pillar 3: Federal Wildland Fire Service

If the US Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service cannot come together and address the critical issues facing federal firefighters then serious consideration should be made to develop a national federal wildland fire service. A fire service that values and recognizes its firefighters by providing wages and benefits that reflect the work they do, the hazards they encounter, and the sacrifices they and their families make. A federal fire service could reduce cost and increase efficiency by maintaining a highly skilled workforce dedicated to the task of managing wildfires. Having multiple agencies with redundant administrative positions is inefficient and wasteful.

Pillar 4: Expanded Workforce

We either have Land Management agencies with a fire problem or Fire Agencies with a land management problem. Competing objectives and a lack of personnel to complete field work is the crux of the problem.

The 2015-2020 Forest Service Strategic plan:

- Strategic Goal: Sustain our Nation's Forests and Grassland
Strategic Objectives
 - A. Foster resilient, adaptive ecosystems to mitigate climate change
 - B. Mitigate wildfire risk
 - C. Conserve Open Space
- Strategic Goal: Deliver Benefits to the Public
Strategic Objectives
 - D. Provide Abundant Clean Water
 - E. Strengthen Communities
 - F. Connect People to the Outdoors
- Strategic Goal: Apply Knowledge Globally
Strategic Objectives
 - G. Advance Knowledge
 - H. Transfer Technology and Advancement
 - I. Exchange Natural Resource Expertise
- Management Goal: Excel as a High-Performing Agency
 - A. Recruit a Diverse Workforce

- B. Promote an inclusive Culture
- C. Attract and Retain Top Employees

An expanded workforce and a clear definition of duties is part of the answer to actually meet the US Forest Service's goals and objectives. The current fire environment is a national emergency and needs to be one of the Nation's top priorities.

Each goal and objective listed is directly intertwined with our Nation's ability to respond to wildfire. The current environmental state of the fire environment are resulting in:

1. Communities that are being wiped of the map and historical loss of U.S. infrastructure and lives from wildland fire
2. An excess of 80 million acres of land at moderate to high risk of catastrophic fire
3. 11 million acres of federal land that needs to be reforested
4. Inaccessible open space
5. A growing threat to the Nation's water sheds – 55% of the Nation's drinking water originates from National Forests
6. Toxic air quality that crosses the country and adversely affects all Americans from Maine to California
7. An outdoor experience that is forever altered or inaccessible
8. A workforce that is dwindling in knowledge, skill, and ability
9. A strong inability to attract or retain top employees

The United States Forest Service attempts to hire and enlist 10,000 Forestry Technicians mostly on a seasonal basis to meet its stated objectives and goals. This is a failed model that does not promote resiliency in its workforce or the landscape.

Fire suppression and land management are directly opposing forces for most of the fire year, due to a limited number of employees with a limited amount of time who are asked to meet the objectives of both.

The federal fire response is built on fluidity and flexibility. The ability to bring resources from the East Coast to the West Coast at a moment's notice to assist and engage with the suppression and management of wildland fire on the landscape is essential. Nowhere in the world does a system work in the same manner. Thousands of people are dispatched across the Nation every year to take part in fire management and fire suppression. This is at the expense of land management and the entire national response system is under significant threat due to a concerning migration of fire personnel from federal employment to state and local agencies who are not obligated to maintain national response capabilities or meet land management needs.

The existing workforce needs to be taken care of, properly classified, and compensated. A distinct and separate workforce needs to be created to address the lack of land management capability and retain federal response capacity.

The workforce needs to be doubled at a minimum. Half of this workforce needs to be directly responsible for land management activities in the form of.

1. Hazardous Fuels Mitigation
2. Forest Infrastructure and access
3. Hydrology and fisheries
4. Timber

Environmental and Infrastructure Benefits:

1. Fire resilient communities
2. Fire resilient natural landscapes
3. Carbon storage
4. Enhanced wildlife habitat
5. Water sources
6. Air sheds
7. Conserved open spaces

Public Benefits:

1. Access to federal land and a connection to the outdoors
2. Access to clean drinking water
3. Clean air to breath

Employee Benefits:

1. Workforce resiliency and morale
2. Workforce availability and staffing
3. An ability to retain its best and brightest
4. A diverse and inclusive workforce
5. An agency that people want to work for again

This solution may not exist with our current antiquated personnel system that we have built over the last 50 years. It's a problem that we have written into policy and refrain from adjusting. This is a problem that needs consistent funding. Meeting these expansive objectives will require a significant investment in both time and funding. This needed investment represents an opportunity for the 117th Congress to make a statement of commitment to a better and more sustainable future.

Now is the time to pay the cost up front to ensure that future generations have clean water to drink, clean air to breath, and the same outdoor opportunities that we have been afforded.