**Analysis: Most of Western United States Unaffordable for Federal Wildland Firefighters**

*Introduction*

Advocacy groups like the Grassroots Wildland Firefighters and National Federation of Federal Employees have spent the last several years highlighting the pay and retention issues facing the wildland firefighting workforce. These efforts were successful when a roughly 50 percent pay increase for federal wildland firefighters was included in the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure bill.

However, federal wildland firefighters have yet to see this money hit their paychecks. One reason for this delay is that the bill included language that the pay increase would only apply to “difficult to recruit / retain” locations. Although Congress intended this pay increase to apply to every wildland firefighter, there are reports that the U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Interior are looking for a “data-based” [justification](https://www.reddit.com/r/Wildfire/comments/tw2uzn/latest_infrastructure_update_as_best_i_know/) that may cut some wildland firefighters out of the intended raise. The U.S. Forest Service [reported](https://www.fs.usda.gov/inside-fs/delivering-mission/excel/wildland-firefighter-pay-classification-infrastructure-law#:~:text=Bipartisan%20Infrastructure%20Law%20requires%20an,difficult%20to%20recruit%20or%20retain.) they are conducting “initial analysis comparing average federal and state wages and house purchasing power for firefighters (delineated to common wildland fire geographic areas) … to determine a ‘specified geopathic area that is difficult to recruit or retain.’”

This analysis compared the salaries of the 2022 GS03 to GS09 pay rates to three cost of living factors: the price of a 1 bedroom rental, monthly food costs, and the total monthly costs of owning a car. Since wildland firefighters rely heavily on overtime and hazard pay, this analysis assumed a firefighter works a six-month season with about 680 hours of overtime but 0 hours of hazard pay. Counties were determined to be affordable if less than 50 percent of salaries went to cost of living. Healthcare, childcare, utility, and retirement costs were not included in this analysis. See end of report for details on methodology.

*Results*

This analysis found that the average cost of living in western counties was $2304 a month. The most expensive county with significant federal public lands presence was Skamania County, just northeast of Portland, Oregon at $3137 a month (Gifford-Pinchot National Forest). Sierra County, south of Albuquerque, New Mexico (Gila National Forest) was the least expensive at $1742 a month.

The majority of Western counties were not determined to be affordable on a GS03-GS09 salary, since living expenses far exceeded 50 percent of wildland firefighter salaries. The following table shows what percent of income a federal wildland firefighter at different GS levels would expect to spend on basic needs across the Western U.S.

| **GS Level** | **Monthly Pay** | **Percent of Pay that goes to Basic Needs** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| GS03 | $2,612 | 88% |
| GS04 | $2,778 | 83% |
| GS05 | $2,936 | 78% |
| GS06 | $3,176 | 72% |
| GS07 | $3,422 | 65% |
| GS08 | $3,672 | 62% |
| GS09 | $3,925 | 58% |

Full data can be found [here](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1zIxHyRJtvhnduc_Yrw-Ufs675ZLDnMdMivx7_5HvqT0/edit?usp=sharing).

*Discussion*

Of course, this is an imperfect analysis that may overestimate cost of living in some respects. Everything here is built on the average cost of these things across the U.S. - some people will be paying more, others less. However, it’s reasonable to assume that many wildland firefighters will have higher living expenses:

* Many wildland firefighters travel hundreds to thousands of miles from their homes to duty stations at the start and end of every season. This travel may cause firefighters to spend above-average costs on fuel and car maintenance.
* Many duty stations are in rural areas where it could take up to an hour to get to the nearest grocery store. Driving to get essential goods could drive up fuel and car maintenance costs.
* Since many firefighters live in one location and fight fire in another, then they may be on the hook for multiple rental / housing payments unless they choose to forgo lodging at their duty station. Signing a short-term lease or breaking a lease could incur greater housing costs.
* This analysis does not include childcare or healthcare expenses. Although the federal government provides good healthcare options, wildland firefighters work a physically and mentally demanding job. Wildland firefighters likely require greater healthcare needs than the average American.
* The USDA does not release their monthly grocery estimate at a county-by-county level; only at the national level. Food in the rural communities directly served by the land management agencies is typically more expensive than food in urban communities.

The goal of this analysis is to get federal wildland firefighters, agency policymakers, and federal lawmakers thinking about the many different components that go into making a wage “livable.” Despite the regional differences, agency policymakers should feel comfortable distributing this pay raise to the entire wildland firefighting workforce due to the national trends affecting everyone’s ability to afford basic needs.

*Methodology*

* A county was considered affordable if it fell within the common “50-30-20” personal budgeting strategy. This strategy says that 50 percent of someone’s income should be spent on necessities, 30 percent on non-essential purchases, and 20 percent on savings / retirement.
* GS salaries come from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management’s [2022 General Schedule](https://www.opm.gov/policy-data-oversight/pay-leave/salaries-wages/2022/general-schedule/). Counties with metropolitan areas with a locality adjustment were given that locality adjustment, otherwise the “Rest of U.S.” locality was used.
  + GS03 is the most common starting wage for federal wildland firefighters in the 0462 job series. GS09 is the most reasonable ending wage in this series; fewer than 400 personnel out of a 10,000-strong workforce go beyond GS09. GS04 and GS05 are the most [common](https://imgur.com/a/w5hGU1Q#wth4duV) pay levels. Someone may qualify for a GS04 after one season of experience, GS05 can take up to four seasons of experience. GS09 can take over a decade of experience.
  + This analysis assumed that a wildland firefighter makes their full annual salary during a six month season which requires about 682 hours of overtime - on average, a 65 hour work week. It did not attempt to estimate hazard pay. Although many crews may work over 1,000 hours of overtime in a season (about 80 hour work weeks), there are slow years where overtime cannot be counted on to make ends meet. This analysis made no assumptions about off-season employment.
* Rental Prices come from the U.S. Department of Housing Fair Market Rent 2022 [estimates](https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/fmr.html). These are the rental units at the 40th percentile in cost - in other words, 60 percent of units cost more, and 39 percent of units cost less. This analysis makes no assumption about multiple people splitting the cost, or if a rental unit is actually available at this price.
* Food costs come from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s “Thrifty Food” [plan](https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/media/file/CostofFoodFeb2022Thrifty.pdf) which is considered adequate for a “bare minimum” diet from the grocery store.
* Transportation costs come from the Center for Neighborhood Technology’s Housing and Transportation (H+T®) [Affordability Index](https://htaindex.cnt.org/about/) release from 2017. It estimates the total costs associated with owning a car: car payment, insurance, gas, and maintenance.

*About the author*

The author is a seasonal wildland firefighter with a background in public policy, specifically in government budgeting and financing. He is currently pursuing a Master’s in Public Policy. He does not speak for the federal government in any official or unofficial capacity.