

United States Senate

June 22, 2021

The Honorable Chris Van Hollen
Chairman
Subcommittee on Financial Services
and General Government
Committee on Appropriations

The Honorable Cindy Hyde-Smith
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Financial Services
and General Government
Committee on Appropriations

Dear Chairman Van Hollen and Ranking Member Hyde-Smith:

As the Committee considers the FY2022 Financial Services and General Government Appropriations bill, we ask that you include language requiring the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to address pay disparities between federal wildland firefighters and their counterparts employed by state and local wildfire agencies.

Year after year, the annual wildfire season is growing longer and more intense. Last year, the United States experienced one of the most destructive seasons on record with 58,950 wildfires burning more than 10 million acres. In California alone, 9,900 wildfires burned a record-setting 4.25 million acres, killing 33 people and destroying 10,500 structures, more than 5,000 of which were homes. Severe drought conditions and early fire activity this year portend another dangerous fire season ahead.

Despite these warning signs, agencies have an inability to hire and retain enough federal wildland firefighters and support fire personnel such as look-outs and fire prevention technicians, primarily due to low pay. Federal wildland firefighters' salaries are significantly less than their counterparts at state and local wildland fire agencies, even though they have comparable job duties. For example, the starting salary for a Forest Service firefighter in the San Francisco Bay Area—which has a high cost-of-living—is \$33,912, compared to a \$58,668 starting salary for Cal Fire firefighters. This disparity is especially problematic for California, where the federal government manages 58 percent of the State's forest land.

We believe strongly that the U.S. Government must modernize and update federal wildland firefighters' job classifications and pay grading, which were established more than 30 years ago and are now woefully out of sync with the current wildfire risk and job market. Therefore, we ask that you include bill language included in the attachment in the FY2022 Financial Services and General Government Appropriations bill. Thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,



Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Kyrsten Sinema
United States Senator



Steve Daines
United States Senator

Requested Bill Language

SEC. ____. *The Director of the Office of Personnel Management, in consultation with the Chief Human Capital Officers of the Departments of Interior and Agriculture, Chief of the Forest Service, the Director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, the Director of the Bureau of Land Management, and the Director of the National Park Service, shall—*

(1) not later than 90 days after the date of enactment of this Act, submit to Congress the results of an assessment of the comparability of the rates of basic pay with respect to wildland firefighters in each jurisdiction identified by the Departments of Interior and Agriculture employed by the Federal Government and wildland firefighters employed by State and local governments;

(2) not later than 180 days after the date of enactment of this Act, submit to Congress a plan to establish comparable rates of pay payable to wildland firefighters employed by the Federal Government, as compared to the rates of basic pay payable for similar work by wildland firefighters employed by State and local governments in each jurisdiction identified by the Departments of Interior and Agriculture, which shall—

(A) take into consideration the results of the assessment conducted under paragraph (1);

(B) determine whether fire personnel positions need to be removed from the General Schedule using processes from the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 in order to provide the proper compensation for these positions regardless of current position classification standards;

(C) provide an actuary cost accounting and method of direct conversion of transitioning seasonal fire personnel to permanent, full time employees; and

(D) include recommendations for any legislative changes, if necessary; and

(3) not later than 1 year after the date of enactment of this Act, fully implement any necessary regulation or OPM authorized changes to establish the new position classification and qualification standards—

(A) for employees across the Federal Government, the job responsibilities of whom involve wildland firefighting;

(B) which shall reflect the comparable rates of basic pay established in the plan submitted under paragraph (2); And

(C) confirms all eligible employees as determined by the Departments of Interior and Agriculture have been transitioned to the new system – including any necessary changes by the payroll providers, health, and retirement systems.