

Update: Wildland Firefighter Pay Protection Act

July 26, 2023



As the wildfire year continues to see an uptick in large wildfires in states like Arizona, Oregon, Washington, Utah and California, bipartisan Congressional advocates Senators Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, Joe Manchin of West Virginia, John Barrasso of Wyoming, Jon Tester of Montana, Steve Daines of Montana, and Alex Padilla of California are spearheading an effort to avoid what's been called the firefighter fiscal pay cliff.

At the end of September, wildland firefighters face a pay cut when the temporary Bipartisan Infrastructure Law "retention incentives" runs out of funds.

Faced with this dilemma, land management agency representatives, lawmakers and wildland firefighter advocates have been working to craft bipartisan legislation that has the greatest chance of passing both chambers and making it to the President's desk.

The Wildland Firefighter Pay Protection Act (S.2272) chief sponsored by Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona recently passed its first hurdle in clearing the US Senate's Homeland Security and Government Affairs committee making it eligible for action on the Senate floor or inclusion of other packages of legislation such as appropriations bills.

The wildland firefighter advocacy group Grassroots Wildland Firefighters is urging other lawmakers to get behind this bill and avoid a potential major loss to the workforce when firefighters are faced with the tough

decision of whether to stay with their agencies or seek work in municipal or state wildland fire organizations where the pay incentives are more attractive.

“While a pay increase is a step in the right direction, the WFPPA is just the anchor point in what looks to be a longer process; we will continue to work with agency leaders and legislators to ensure the people who chose this profession come out at the end of a successful career as a whole person who has been cared for financially, mentally and physically,” GWF President Luke Mayfield recently said.

“Lawmakers like Senators Sinema, Manchin, Daines, Tester, Barrasso, and Padilla, who have come together in a bipartisan fashion to support our federal wildland firefighters, are what’s needed at this critical moment,” Vice President Riva Duncan said. “Grassroots Wildland Firefighters urge other members of Congress to get behind federal wildland firefighters and support this legislation to avoid unnecessarily losing dedicated public servants.”

Over time, as wildfires have grown in size, frequency and duration the federal workforce tasked with responding to these incidents has seen an uptick in resignations. This trend is due to a variety of factors including a mental health crisis, lack of affordable housing and more attractive pay incentives elsewhere. Recently, over 12,000 wildland firefighters and supporters signed a petition to tell congress what’s at stake if a permanent pay fix isn’t accomplished. Some of the responses include:

“One third of the permanent fire employees I know will have to leave the wildland fire profession to pay their mortgage.” - Anonymous Wildland Firefighter

“As a fire family, this would hit us hard. These men and women who battle fires daily to prevent homes from being burned deserve the most.” -Fire Family Member

“Thousands of firefighters walking off the job. Many of us are planning for what happens if they do nothing.” - Anonymous Wildland Firefighter

Next week, Grassroots Wildland Firefighters will be delivering the results of this petition to members of Congress who might not know the severity of what’s at stake to the Nation’s workforce tasked with wildland fire response.

“When you read the petition responses from thousands of dedicated public servants who have intense passion for their mission but can barely keep afloat financially, you start to understand the gravity of the situation,” GWF President Luke Mayfield said. “We need every member of Congress to support the Wildland Firefighter Pay Protection Act, and we need them to see what further reforms are needed to sustain this critical workforce.”