

Writers on the Range: Wildland firefighters need our support

August 22, 2023



At any given moment during this smoky summer of 2023, hundreds of wildfires were blazing in the United States — more than 850 as of late July, according to the nonprofit Fire, Weather & Avalanche Center. Most of those wildfires ignited in the forests of the American West.

Fires were also burning by the thousands in Canada, creating a pall of particulate-dense smoke that blotted out views of the Chicago skyline and the Washington Mall. Those fires are expected to burn well into fall.

This hellish aspect lends weight to historian Stephen Pyne’s conclusion that we live now in an age of fire called the “Pyrocene.”

Assembled to combat these blazes is a massive army of wildland firefighters. Some are volunteers, some are prison work crews earning time credited against their sentences. Some are municipal firefighters dispatched to the woods.

Some 11,300 of them are federal firefighters, called “forestry technicians,” who work under the aegis of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior.

For all of them, it’s exhausting work. Wildland firefighters typically log 16-hour days for weeks at a time, burning 4,000 to 6,000 calories a day while carrying heavy backpacks.

It’s punishing labor and always dangerous. Barely a year has gone by in the last quarter-century that has not seen at least 15 wildland firefighter deaths, the victims not just of flames and smoke but also of heat exhaustion, vehicle accidents, air crashes, falling trees and heart attacks.

Often, they don’t die alone. In June 2013, 19 “Hotshots” burned to death in a horrific Arizona wildfire, the third-greatest loss of wildland firefighters in U.S. history.

Yet despite the hardships and the history, a mandated pay raise in June 2021, spurred by President Joe Biden, brought the minimum wage for federal wildland firefighters up to a mere \$15 an hour.

Firefighters of my acquaintance seldom cite money as a motivator for their work. They fight fires in the spirit of public service, while in some rural communities, as a young Apache firefighter told me, “It gives us something to do.”

But firefighters, like everyone else, must shoulder rents and mortgages and groceries, and a paycheck of less than \$3,000 a month just doesn’t cut it.

Enter a temporary order from President Biden raising that base pay rate by 50 percent. Put in place in August 2022, and retroactive to the previous October as part of a hotly contested package of infrastructure-funding policies, the pay raise was funded only until September 30, 2023, after which pay for wildland firefighters drops back to 2020 levels.

Wildland firefighters lobbied for Biden’s pay raise to be made permanent but they made few inroads. That was until they finally found an ally in Arizona’s Sen. Kyrsten Sinema. Now an independent, Sinema allied with Republican Sens. John Barrasso of Wyoming and Steve Daines of Montana, and Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Jon Tester of Montana, to introduce the bipartisan Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act. It would fund permanent pay increases.

By late June of 2023, their bill had passed out of committee by a vote of 10 to 1, the only no vote coming from Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky. When it reaches the Senate floor, it will be open to debate and a full vote.

There, however, the politicians are likely to squabble, especially on the House side. Larger issues loom, too, such as the need to revise policy so that forests are better managed to improve the conditions that now foster massive wildfires. Those conditions are the product of a “wise use” regime that saw forests as profitable tree farms and not as living systems. The Forest Service also had a decades-long policy of dousing all wildfires as early as possible.

While Washington deliberates, and while a more comprehensive bill compensating wildland firefighters struggles to gain traction, fires continue to burn in the outback. Without a pay raise, federal officials fear, some firefighters will walk away from a risky and insultingly low-paying job.

Wildland firefighters are needed right now, and we need to pay them what they deserve through the Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act. They will be needed even more in a future of climbing temperatures and widespread drought causing even more massive wildfires.

We can only hope that we will have the firefighters to confront them.

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