

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 27, 2021

The Honorable Gene Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

As the Western United States enters yet another dangerous fire season, we write to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) conduct an assessment of hiring and retention of federal wildland firefighters at the five federal agencies responsible for wildland fire management - the Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Park Service within the Department of the Interior. We also ask that GAO make recommendations for how these agencies can improve wildfire prevention and suppression efforts by strengthening the federal firefighting workforce, while ensuring taxpayer dollars are being spent efficiently and effectively across agencies.

Western states are bracing for yet another historic and destructive wildfire season, as worsening drought conditions, long-term underinvestment in forest management, and warmer weather continue to bring about increasingly intense wildfires year after year. Last year, the United States experienced one of the most extreme wildfire 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 nearly 10,500 homes and structures.

As the fire season becomes more intense, it is also growing longer in duration as a result of climate change. The Forest Service estimates that current fire seasons are lasting 78 days longer than they did in 1970. Wildfires in the West are now a near-constant threat and we can no longer afford to rely on just a seasonal firefighting workforce. Transitioning to a larger, full-time workforce would add immediate capacity to fight wildfires nationwide, allow for greater flexibility in shifting personnel between regions depending on wildfire activity, provide more stable work opportunities and employee benefits, increase employee retention, and reduce agency costs and burdens associated with the seasonal hiring process.

As the wildfire threat worsens, we are concerned that serious problems exist with the availability of federal fire resources to prevent and respond to wildfire emergencies. Given the increasing threat, and the fact that the federal government is responsible for managing substantial areas of land within Western states, it is crucial that federal agencies have the firefighting capacity and resources they need. To that end, we ask that your assessment take the following into consideration:

1. Identify barriers to recruitment and retention of federal firefighters at the wildland fire agencies, including specifically for women firefighters, and suggest possible remedies

that the agencies, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and Congress might consider to address each barrier.

2. Assess the seasonal firefighter employment model used by wildland fire agencies, and make recommendations for transitioning to a full-time firefighting workforce.
  - a. Please include discussion of potential benefits and challenges of this transition, and outline steps agencies and Congress can take to implement such a change.
  - b. As a part of your assessment, please discuss any parts of the model that should be continued or discontinued, estimated costs of the transition to a full-time workforce, and possible funding sources for such a transition.
  - c. We ask that you also assess the economic benefits that a full-time firefighting workforce might offer through potential cost savings and efficiencies, as well as the impact of added capacity for prevention activities, given the large and increasing costs of wildfire damage.
3. Review the current range of Forest Service and Department of the Interior occupational series that incorporate wildland firefighting, and assess whether OPM should create a new, separate job series and pay scale for federal wildland firefighters to ensure their pay is commensurate with state firefighting agencies and reflects their training requirements and the hazardous conditions they must endure. As part of this review, please describe each of the current occupational series and pay grades that include federal wildland firefighting responsibilities, and identify specific issues that the agencies and OPM would need to consider if a new job series and pay scale were to be established.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



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Dianne Feinstein  
United States Senator



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Kyrsten Sinema  
United States Senator  
Chair, Subcommittee on  
Government Operations and  
Border Management

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Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator

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Steve Daines  
United States Senator

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Alex Padilla  
United States Senator

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Mike Crapo  
United States Senator

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Patty Murray  
United States Senator

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James E. Risch  
United States Senator

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Michael F. Bennet  
United States Senator