

United States Senate

September 26, 2023

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Schumer:

We write to underscore the urgent need to authorize and fund a permanent solution to increase wildland firefighter recruitment and retention and prevent a workforce exodus. Bipartisan, bicameral efforts during the 117th Congress – including the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (Public Law 117–58)* – provided temporary relief to the federal wildland firefighter workforce through a short-term pay increase of \$20,000 or 50 percent of their base salary (whichever is less). This relief is running out for the over 14,893 U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and 5,350 Department of the Interior (DOI) firefighters who received temporary raises.

Climate change leads to larger, more frequent, and increasingly destructive wildfires across the nation and our planet. As we all witnessed earlier this year, these fires' smoke can travel thousands of miles and from places unfamiliar with the devastation these fires leave in their wake. As a result, wildland firefighters traveled to Eastern Canada to assist with such efforts as smoke degraded air quality in America. Consequently, this is no longer a uniquely Western problem. Wildland firefighters are on the front lines of these crises, protecting Americans, their communities, and our neighboring countries. Despite their critical work, the federal government has not provided adequate compensation or benefits to wildland firefighters for decades. Difficulties in recruitment and retention have stretched the current wildland firefighter workforce to its limits.

Wildland firefighters are an integral part of the nation's first responder force for large scale disasters including floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and acts of terrorism. Wildland firefighters serve as the front-line fire departments in many urban areas located within national forests and federal lands. They respond to road accidents, house fires, and other urban emergencies like other fire departments and are integrated in mutual response agreements with state and local fire departments across the country, so it is a matter of national security to invest in this workforce.

According to the National Interagency Fire Center, the total acres burned by wildfire has doubled in the last 20 years, with over 7.5 million acres burned in 2022 alone. Between 2017 and 2021, wildfires destroyed over 12,000 homes, businesses, and other structures on average annually, more than triple the preceding five-year period. These fires are exceptionally expensive, with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimating wildfires costs during the past five years reached nearly \$67 billion. Climate dataⁱ shows that wildfire season has increased by 80 days since the 1970s and climate projections show the wildfire season will continue to last longer.

A recent Government Accountability Office report found that low pay, poor work-life balance, and mental health challenges, among other factors, limit federal wildland firefighter recruitment and retention.ⁱⁱ Firefighters deserve fair pay, support for their mental and physical health, and time to recover from their dangerous work. In a future with increasingly catastrophic wildfires, Congress cannot delay and deny this critical workforce's needs.

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We are grateful for the bravery of our wildland firefighters. We remain committed to delivering permanent, comprehensive pay reform for our wildland firefighters by the end of this fiscal year, in line with the President's Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2024 and the specific pay provisions included in the Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act (S. 2272) which include the key components of the Administration's proposal. We urge an immediate vote to advance permanent solutions to ensure they get the pay and benefits they deserve.

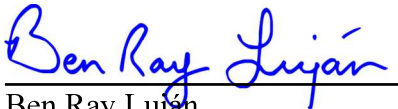
Sincerely,




Michael F. Bennet
United States Senator




Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator



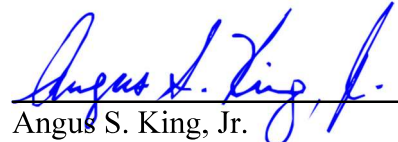
Ben Ray Lujan
United States Senator



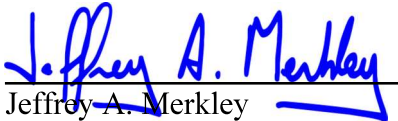
Mark Kelly
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Angus S. King, Jr.
United States Senator



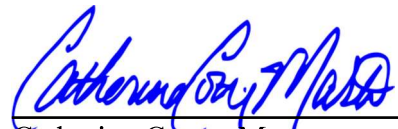
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



John Hickenlooper
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator

United States Senate



Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator

i <https://nca2018.globalchange.gov/downloads>

ii <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-23-106888#:~:text=The%20barriers%20GAO%20found%20were,Low%20pay>