

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

Thursday, September 14, 2023

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader Schumer and Minority Leader McConnell:

We are writing to urge you to take all necessary steps to avoid mass resignations within the wildland firefighter ranks by ensuring the prompt passage of S. 2272, the Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act.

The Federal wildland firefighting workforce is composed of approximately 19,000 firefighters from the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of the Interior (DOI), who are responsible for protecting public lands and communities across the United States.¹ As the fire season lengthens and the size and severity of wildland fires increase, USDA and DOI have faced mounting challenges related to the recruitment and retention of qualified wildland firefighters.²

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently published a report regarding this difficulty in recruitment and retention at USDA and DOI. This report found that factors such as low pay, poor work life balance, and the excruciating mental and physical toll of working longer and more brutal fire seasons has caused many wildland firefighters to pursue better employment opportunities at state agencies and in the private sector. In this report, low pay was the most commonly cited barrier to Federal wildland firefighter recruitment and retention.³

Until recently, most Federal wildland firefighters earned minimum wage-level incomes, and have not kept pace with industry competitors such as California's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE). In many states, entry to mid-level Federal fire positions are not competitive with private sector opportunities.⁴

In order to rectify this escalating crisis, in 2021 Congress provided a temporary pay increase to wildland firefighters by raising rates of pay across the wildland firefighting workforce by the lesser of \$20,000 per year or 50 percent of salary.⁵ However, these funds will begin to run out at the end

¹ Government Accountability Office, *Wildland Fire: Barriers to Recruitment and Retention of Federal Wildland Firefighters* (GAO-23-105517) (Nov. 17, 2022).

² Id.

³ Id.

⁴ Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, *Hearing to Examine the Federal Response to Escalating Wildfires and to Evaluate Reforms to Land Management and Wildland Firefighter Recruitment and Retention*, 118th Cong. (June 8, 2023) (S. Hrg. 118-XX).

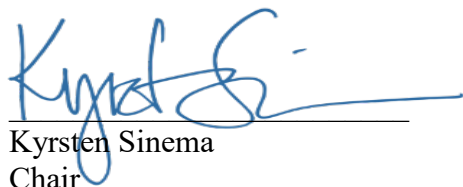
⁵ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, Pub. L. No. 117-58, Sec. 40803(d).

of this month, reverting all wildland firefighters to the paltry pay levels seen just a few years ago.⁶ When asked about the impact of the looming pay cuts at a June 2023 Senate hearing, Forest Service Deputy Chief Hall-Rivera said that an estimated “30 percent to 50 percent of our firefighting workforce would leave the service and go elsewhere.”⁷ Such an event would be nothing short of calamitous for America’s forests and nearby communities.

To ensure the continued protection of communities and public lands across the United States, the bipartisan S. 2272, the Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act, was introduced to permanently increase wildland firefighter pay by establishing a new pay scale and additional pay supplement for wildland firefighters, and to require consistency between USDA and DOI in policies related to work-life balance. This legislation, drafted to ensure fiscal responsibility, was reported out of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs with broad bipartisan support.⁸

Due to the dangers that wildfires pose to our forests and communities, a lack of action to ensure the fair treatment of our Federal wildland firefighting workforce would jeopardize national security. Therefore, we request that you take all possible actions to ensure this critical legislation passes into law before the end of the fiscal year.

Sincerely,



Kyrsten Sinema
Chair
Subcommittee on Government Operations
and Border Management



John Barrasso, M.D.
Ranking Member
Senate Committee on Energy
and Natural Resources



Joe Manchin III
Chairman
Senate Committee on Energy
and Natural Resources



Steve Daines
United States Senator

⁶ The White House: *Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration Announces New Pay Raises & Supports for Wildland Firefighter Workforce from Bipartisan Infrastructure Law* (June 21, 2022); *The Biden Team Announces Pay Raises of Up to \$20,000 Annually for Federal Firefighters*, Government Executive (June 21, 2022) (www.govexec.com/pay-benefits/2022/06/biden-team-announces-pay-raises-20000-annually-federal-firefighters/368401/).

⁷ Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, *supra* note 4.

⁸ Senate Report No. 118-97 (2023).



Alex Padilla
United States Senator



Cynthia Lummis
United States Senator



Jon Tester
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Martin Heinrich
United States Senator