

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES

DELEGATION OFFICE
STATE OF NEW MEXICO
HART SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510
(202) 224 - 8962

June 11, 2022

The Honorable Deb Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20240

The Honorable Kiran Ahuja
Director
Office of Personnel Management
1900 E Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20415

Mr. Randy Moore
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20250

Dear Secretary Haaland, Director Ahuja, and Chief Moore:

We are writing to you about the supplemental pay increase and job classification for federal wildland firefighters authorized by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which was signed into law on November 15, 2021. Wildland firefighters risk their lives and exhibit tremendous courage and strength every time they respond to wildfires on the front lines. It is critical these firefighters have the resources and support necessary to combat wildfires and the pay and recognition that they deserve. Without that, we risk further recruitment and retention issues, leaving the nation less and less prepared to respond to wildfires. We strongly urge you to implement the supplemental pay increase to all federal wildland firefighters across the country immediately.

Due to the climate crisis, wildfire seasons are becoming longer, and the fires are becoming more dangerous and destructive, wreaking havoc on our communities, our forests, and our watersheds. As the underlying conditions worsen, so too does the physical, mental, and financial well-being of federal wildland firefighters. Wildland firefighters have courageously responded, working long hours under dangerous conditions, to protect our wildlands and nearby communities. These same wildland firefighters have also supported hurricane and COVID-19 relief efforts, as well as supporting state and local firefighters in their own wildfire response efforts. And yet federal wildland firefighters remain severely underpaid, especially when compared to other state and local fire services.

In recognition of the discrepancy between the compensation for federal wildland firefighters and state and local firefighters, Congress made \$600 million available to the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture for the establishment of a “wildland firefighter” occupational series, the conversion of certain seasonal wildland firefighters to full-time, permanent employees, the establishment of various mental health programs, and to increase federal wildland firefighters’ base salary by the lesser of \$20,000 per year or 50 percent of their current base salary, with the intention that that pay supplement be made retroactive to October 1, 2021. However, over eight months later, federal wildland firefighters still have not received the supplemental pay increase. We appreciate that conducting reviews and implementing policies of this scale takes time, but federal wildland firefighters and their families do not have time, and it is urgent that they receive the pay increase that Congress authorized last fall. The early and record-breaking fires that New Mexico has already experienced this year only underline the need for the supplemental pay increase to be rolled out as quickly as possible.

We are concerned firefighters and their families have not been sufficiently informed about the timeline for the supplemental pay increase, the amount that each firefighter will receive, and its potentially temporary nature. Firefighters and their families are under a tremendous amount of stress, both from the physical toll and dangers that firefighters face in their line of work and from the financial stress that stems from their current and unacceptable level of compensation. They deserve transparency and clarity regarding who will receive the pay increase, how much they will receive, the length of this supplemental pay increase, and whether it may lapse in the near future.

We are also concerned that the Office of Personnel Management has not issued their decision on a new job classification for a “wildland firefighter” occupational series. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act set a deadline of May 13, 2022, for the completion of that review and the announcement of the new policy. That deadline has passed, and the new classification has not been publically announced. The longer that the implementation of this new classification is delayed, the more resignations of experienced personnel will occur. The agencies will continue to lose capacity and institutional knowledge at an alarming rate, which will only make it harder to respond to wildfires in the future.

As wildfire seasons get longer and more extreme, and in light of the fact that Congress authorized the supplemental pay increase and new classification for a wildland firefighter occupational series over eight months ago, we urge you to implement these new policies as quickly as possible and to clarify what it will entail to the federal wildland firefighting workforce. It is time that these heroes who have served and continue to serve so bravely receive the compensation that they deserve.

Thank you in advance for your prompt attention to this critical issue.

Sincerely,



MARTIN HEINRICH
United States Senator



BEN RAY LUJÁN
United States Senator



MELANIE STANSBURY
United States Representative



TERESA LEGER FERNANDEZ
United States Representative