

**Statement of  
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U.S. Department of the Interior  
Before the  
House Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands  
Hearing on Wildland Firefighter Workforce Reforms**

**October 27, 2021**

Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher, and Members for the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Federal wildland firefighter workforce reforms and the related workforce bills that the Subcommittee is considering today. We appreciate the Subcommittee's interest in the Department's efforts to meaningfully address workforce issues, wildfire risk and mitigate the complexities of increasingly long and challenging wildfire seasons that span an entire year.

**Background**

Climate change leads to drier and hotter weather resulting in the accumulation of dead and dying vegetation that sparks larger and more intense wildfires. As a direct consequence, nearly every western state has a "high" or "very high" wildfire hazard potential according to the U.S. Forest Service's "Wildfire Potential Hazard Map." This means that approximately 159 million acres, or 17 percent, of all land in the western United States, and a total of 208 million acres, or 11 percent, of land across the entire nation, is in a condition where the relative potential for wildfire would be difficult for suppression resources to contain. Many of these areas are in the wildland urban interface where communities in the West are increasingly exposed to wildfires.

As communities continue to expand into the wildland urban interface, we are seeing an increasing risk of these devastating wildfires, which continue to broadly impact infrastructure, public health, firefighter mental wellness and our Nation's natural and cultural resources. The tragic destruction of entire western communities, such as Paradise and Greenville, California, and the heartbreaking losses of firefighters and civilians, are stark reminders of the severity of the current wildfire crisis and the inherent costs of climate change. This year, there have been 15 firefighter fatalities, including two Federal firefighters, and 33 civilian fatalities. Additionally, under these circumstances extreme measures are often needed to protect our Nation's natural and cultural resources. Recently, General Sherman, the world's largest tree by volume, was wrapped in protective aluminum material to minimize its exposure to wildfire at the KNP Complex Wildfire in the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks in California.

While our partnerships with states, Tribal Nations, local governments, and other Federal agencies have never been stronger, our wildland firefighters and firefighting resources are stretched to their limits by the need to operate at maximum response levels for months, rather than weeks, to respond to more frequent and severe wildfires. A wildland fire management

workforce framework that was established in the 1950's must be revised to more effectively manage current conditions.

### **Department of the Interior Wildland Fire Management Program Efforts**

The President is committed to building a more responsive and resilient wildland firefighting workforce, to ensuring that firefighters are fairly compensated for the grueling work they do, and to continue transitioning to a more permanent firefighting workforce that can meet the now year-round challenges of wildfire brought on by climate change. The President stressed his continuing commitment to wildland firefighters and to addressing the increasing threat of wildfires fueled by climate change in his October 1, 2021, Proclamation on Fire Prevention Week. DOI is carrying out an effort to transform its wildland fire workforce to a year-round workforce through position conversions and new hires.

In addition, DOI, USDA Forest Service and the Office of Personnel Management have established a working group to examine a number of issues related to the wildland fire workforce, including pay, benefits, incentives and classification in order to ensure that Federal wildland firefighters are better positioned to meet the increasing challenges and complexities they face. DOI is also assessing its current wildland fire workforce to better inform future needs and to develop a workforce strategy that better aligns with Wildland Fire Management program objectives. We have also coordinated with the USDA Forest Service to identify firefighter and critical support positions making less than \$15.00 per hour and those at risk of leaving for jobs outside the Federal government, providing the basis for initial pay increases and a mix of performance awards and retention incentives to both firefighters and critical support personnel.

The Department is also maintaining its focus on priority work to reduce wildfire risk. In FY 2021, the Department completed over 1.6 million acres of fuels management treatments, an increase of 130,000 acres of treatments over the FY 2020 level. This represents a 38 percent increase in accomplishments over the past 5 years. The President's FY 2022 Budget facilitates collaborative efforts to complete an additional 360,000 acres of fuels treatments and hire 325 additional FTEs above the FY 2021 levels. All hazardous fuels treatments—prescribed fire, mechanical and other treatment types—are critical to achieving resource objectives across the diversity of Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service lands. The Department continues to aggressively develop its own framework to strategically target and better assess the efficacy of these efforts on wildfire risk reduction.

Through the Wildland Fire Leadership Council (WFLC) coordination, the Department is working with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the USDA Forest Service (USFS) to assess the impacts of smoke on air quality and public health from wildfires and prescribed fires in an effort to inform future land management and wildland fire management strategies. Earlier this month, EPA released the initial interagency assessment of two specific case studies, which compare the air quality and public health impacts of smoke from prescribed fire and wildfire. Within the case study locations, the assessment shows that there are air quality and public health impacts from prescribed fire smoke, but smaller than wildfire smoke, and that well-designed prescribed fires targeted for specific locations have the potential to reduce the impacts from wildfire. More

importantly, this work lays the foundation for future collaborative research and analyses by the partnering agencies to inform future land management and fire management strategies with the goal of reducing the air quality and health impacts due to wildland fire smoke. The Department and WFLC are also working on a plan to address the expansion of invasive grasses that are contributing to more frequent and larger wildfires in many places across the West.

## **2021 Fire Year**

At the height of this year's fire season, every geographic area was experiencing large wildfires for extended periods. As of October 20, 2021, nearly 48,000 wildfires have burned over 6.5 million acres of land; this is in line with the number of wildfires that burned over the past 10 years and about 95 percent of the acres burned. However, what makes this year unique is how early the Nation reached Preparedness Level (PL) 4—June 22, 2021—and how long the Nation stayed at either PL 4 or PL 5—99 days—which is a record for the highest number of consecutive days at either PL 4 or 5.

Additionally, mitigating the spread of COVID-19 before, during and after wildland fire operations continues to be a top priority for the interagency wildland fire management community. Many of the protocols that were adopted last year, consistent with CDC guidelines and recommendations, continue to remain in place. We are also implementing the Safer Federal Workforce Task Force requirements on vaccination and developing subsequent COVID-19 testing protocols to be used on wildfire incidents.

The bills under consideration support workforce reforms that substantially invest in wildland firefighters, recognizing the arduous work that they perform throughout extended periods of the year. These investments support interagency wildfire response and the Administration is reviewing whether and to what extent these and other wildland fire workforce reforms are necessary.

### ***H.R. 5631, "Tim Hart Wildland Firefighter Classification and Pay Parity Act"***

H.R. 5631 promotes competitive pay and benefits with state and private employers and takes steps to address firefighter physical and mental well-being. Section 2 of H.R. 5631 establishes a "Wildland Firefighter" occupational series and increases firefighter pay to no less than \$20/hour. It expands firefighter incentives, including unpaid leave to care for family members, recruitment and retention awards, housing allowances and a career transition program. Section 2 also requires DOI to establish a mental health program for firefighters that includes mental health support services, provides for mental health leave and expands worker compensation benefits. Section 3 of the bill would address retirement benefits for firefighters.

The Department of the Interior welcomes the opportunity to work with the Committee and bill sponsor on these creative ideas, and we support the intent of addressing the problems we are facing. The Administration is generally supportive of the Subcommittee's efforts to mitigate the challenges facing the wildland fire workforce, though we are not able to endorse specific legislative proposals at this time. We note that, in response to Congressional direction included in section 1701 of the "Extending Government Funding and Delivering Emergency Assistance Act," DOI is developing a report outlining a framework to modernize the Federal wildland firefighting workforce. The completion of these studies and assessments will inform DOI's

workforce management strategy so that future workforce needs are aligned with long-term goals and objectives.

DOI would like to work with the Committee and sponsor to ensure that compensation reform efforts and proposals effectively address identified workforce needs and goals.

***H.R. 4274, “Wildland Firefighter Fair Pay Act”***

H.R. 4247 would raise the annual premium pay cap for wildland firefighters to level II of the Executive Schedule, retroactive to January 1, 2020. H.R. 5305, “Extending Government Funding and Delivering Emergency Assistance Act,” provided annual premium pay cap relief for calendar year 2021. We support the intent of H.R. 4274, and we are striving to implement workforce reforms that would alleviate the challenges encountered with the annual premium pay cap over the past two years. The Administration wishes to note that Federal Labor Standards Act (FLSA) overtime pay does not count in applying the title 5 premium pay cap, so this item mainly affects FLSA-exempt employees at higher grades. Additionally, the Administration remains mindful of budget constraints and of new pay inequities created within these agencies, and across the greater workforce by the temporary lifting of the pay cap waiver where mission critical work is also occurring.

Section 3 of H.R. 4274 requires DOI to prepare a workforce report on the resources, policies, personnel and other investments that are needed to support a full-time, year-round firefighting workforce. The report includes other workforce and wildland fire management assessments. As noted above, DOI is in the process of developing multiple reports and studies that assess workforce needs in order to inform a broader wildland firefighter workforce strategy. These analyses will address the workforce reporting requirements in Section 3 of the bill. Finally, DOI would like to work with the sponsor on various technical modifications to the reporting requirements to ensure that they better inform wildland fire management practices.

Finally, the Department notes some of the workforce provisions included in both bills contain overlapping provisions and duplicate the nature of some provisions contained in H.R. 3684, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act.

**Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss these important wildland fire management workforce reforms. We appreciate the Subcommittee’s attention to these important issues and efforts to substantially improve wildland fire management across the Nation.

This concludes my written statement. I am happy to answer any questions.