

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

September 8, 2025

The Honorable Tom Schultz
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Chief Schultz,

As the United States faces wildfires of increasing frequency and severity, we also face a growing crisis among the wildland firefighters on the front lines protecting our lives and homes. Wildland firefighters employed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), National Park Service (NPS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) face unsafe working conditions, extreme health risks, and premature death from smoke inhalation. Recent reporting suggests that federal agencies are neglecting their duty to protect the health of wildland firefighters.¹ Making matters worse, agencies are already struggling to fill vacant wildland firefighter positions. Neglecting the health of current firefighters will make future recruitment harder and leave our communities vulnerable. We write to request a briefing on your efforts to meet the needs of the firefighters that serve us.

As wildfires become more frequent and extreme, smoke in ambient air is increasing.² In 2024, 8.9 million acres burned in the United States,³ exposing millions of people to noxious smoke. By virtue of their proximity to the origin of the smoke, federal wildland firefighters face elevated risk of morbidity and mortality from smoke inhalation and toxics while on the job.⁴ Wildfire smoke contains more than 30 carcinogens,⁵ fine particulate matter, volatile organic compounds, and many other classes of toxic compounds.⁶ Exposure to biomass smoke can lead to asthma and

¹ The New York Times, *Wildfire Fighters, Unmasked in Toxic Smoke, Are Getting Sick and Dying*. August 17, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/17/us/wildfire-firefighters-masks-smoke.html>

² National Institutes of Health Library of Medicine, *Wildfire and prescribed burning impacts on air quality in the United States*. June 2020. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7932990/>

³ National Interagency Coordination Center, *Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics Annual Report 2024*. https://www.nifc.gov/sites/default/files/NICC/2-Predictive%20Services/Intelligence/Annual%20Reports/2024/annual_report_2024.pdf

⁴ U.S. Forest Service, *Wildland firefighter smoke exposure and risk of lung cancer and cardiovascular disease mortality*. March 26, 2019. https://www.fs.usda.gov/pnw/pubs/journals/pnw_2019_navarro001.pdf

⁵ Molly West, et al. *A review of occupational exposures to carcinogens among wildland firefighters*. October 2, 2024. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15459624.2024.2388532>

⁶ NOAA Climate Program Office, *Understanding Volatile Organic Compound Emissions from Wildfires in the Western US with Modeling Comparisons*. June 16, 2023. <https://cpo.noaa.gov/Understanding-Volatile-Organic-Compound-Emissions-from-Wildfires-in-the-Western-US-with-Modeling-Comparisons/>

respiratory infections, as well as cancer, heart disease, and death.⁷ A recent study found that wildfire smoke increases the risk of death following exposure.⁸ The wildland-urban interface poses an even greater threat to wildland firefighters due to additional exposures to pollutants from burning structures. The Los Angeles Fire Human Exposure and Long-Term Health consortium, launched after the LA fires in January 2025, found that firefighters, who often worked without respiratory protection, had high levels of mercury and lead in their blood after the fire.⁹

The best way to deal with toxic exposures and the health effects that accompany them is to prevent them. The federal government has known for decades that masks protect firefighters from the harmful effects of smoke inhalation. In 1992, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released recommendations from an investigation of reports by firefighters in Yellowstone National Park of multiple health problems after fighting major fires there. A key recommendation was to prohibit the use of bandanas, which are frequently worn by firefighters as personal protective equipment (PPE), and to instead promote the use of fit-tested disposable respirators with exhalation valves to increase comfort.¹⁰ It is clear that cloth barriers are insufficient to protect from toxic pollutants and particulate matter in the smoke, and can put firefighters at additional risk if the bandanas are flammable.¹¹ The U.S. Forest Service has since conducted further research concluding that bandanas offer minimal protection.¹²

Though the National Fire Protection Association has developed a standard for wildland respiratory protection,¹³ current USFS guidance still does not require the use of PPE that

⁷ Yong Ho Kim et al. *Mutagenicity and Lung Toxicity of Smoldering vs. Flaming Emissions from Various Biomass Fuels: Implications for Health Effects from Wildland Fires*. January 26, 2018. <https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/10.1289/EHP2200>

⁸ Anna Alari, et al. *Quantifying the short-term mortality effects of wildfire smoke in Europe: a multicountry epidemiological study in 654 contiguous regions*. August 2025. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196\(25\)00174-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196(25)00174-3/fulltext)

⁹ Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, *Lead, mercury levels higher in firefighters who fought L.A. urban blazes*. April 3, 2025. <https://hsph.harvard.edu/news/lead-mercury-levels-higher-in-firefighters-who-fought-l-a-urban-blazes/#:~:text=Kari%20Nadeau%2C%20John%20Rock%20Professor,Fire%20Study%2C%20Nadeau%20old%20CNN>.

¹⁰ Centers for Disease Control Investigation requested by the U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service regarding Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. February 1992. <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe/reports/pdfs/1988-0320-2176.pdf>

¹¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate, *Respiratory Protection Wildland Firefighting*. Updated April 10, 2025. <https://www.dhs.gov/science-and-technology/saver/respiratory-protection-wildland-firefighting>

¹² The New York Times, *Wildfire Fighters, Unmasked in Toxic Smoke, Are Getting Sick and Dying*. August 17, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/17/us/wildfire-firefighters-masks-smoke.html>

¹³ National Fire Protection Association, *Standard on Respirators for Wildland Fire-Fighting and Wildland Urban Interface Operations 2022*. <https://www.nfpa.org/codes-and-standards/nfpa-1984-standard-development/1984>

provides protection specifically from smoke exposure, even though the serious health risks of smoke inhalation have been well-documented for decades.

Recent reports indicate that masks are not supplied to wildland firefighters; in fact, supervisors may be paying out-of-pocket to provide their crews with masks.¹⁴ At an absolute minimum, respirators should be readily available for wildland firefighters to use on a voluntary basis. Masking requirements, like those in place for urban firefighters, could reduce cancer rates in crews.¹⁵ Former wildland firefighters recently interviewed by the New York Times shared that since developing serious illnesses, they wish that USFS had given crews more warnings and disclosed the long-term health risks associated with smoke inhalation.¹⁶

Recent actions by the Trump administration have undermined progress toward providing support for wildland firefighters who become sick or injured because of their work. If wildland firefighters do get sick or are injured from their work, they must be fully supported. Federal firefighters are covered by the Federal Employees' Compensation Act (FECA), which provides medical expense coverage and compensation benefits if they experience work-related injury, illness, or death. The Department of Labor's Office of Workers Compensation Programs receives over 2,500 compensation claims from federal firefighters each year, many of which include reports of lung disease, heart disease, and cancer.¹⁷ Since the passage of FECA, the Department of Labor acceptance rate for workers compensation claims rose from 29 percent to 90 percent.¹⁸ However, recent Trump administration cuts to administrative staff may have increased the wait time for claim approvals.^{19,20,21}

While all federal wildland firefighters have benefits through FECA, USFS has an additional casualty assistance program that helps USFS firefighters navigate the benefits process for work-

¹⁴ The New York Times, *Wildfire Fighters, Unmasked in Toxic Smoke, Are Getting Sick and Dying*. August 17, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/17/us/wildfire-firefighters-masks-smoke.html>

¹⁵ The New York Times, *Wildfire Fighters, Unmasked in Toxic Smoke, Are Getting Sick and Dying*. August 17, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/17/us/wildfire-firefighters-masks-smoke.html>

¹⁶ The New York Times, *Wildfire Fighters, Unmasked in Toxic Smoke, Are Getting Sick and Dying*. August 17, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/08/17/us/wildfire-firefighters-masks-smoke.html>

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Labor, *US Department of Labor Announces Updates to Better Address Federal Firefighters with Certain Occupational Illnesses' Benefits Claims*. March 20, 2023. <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/owcp/owcp20230320>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The Guardian, *Mass resignations at labor department threaten workers in US and overseas, warn staff – as more cuts loom*. May 3, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/may/03/mass-resignations-at-labor-department-threaten-workers-in-us-and-overseas-warn-staff-as-more-cuts-loom>

²⁰ American Federation of Government Employees, *By Gutting Department of Labor, Trump Is Making American Workers Suffer Again*. April 28, 2025. <https://www.afge.org/article/by-gutting-department-of-labor-trump-is-making-american-workers-suffer-again/>

²¹ United States District Court Northern District of California, *American Federation of Government Employees AFL-CIO et al v. Donald J. Trump et al*. <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.cand.448664/gov.uscourts.cand.448664.85.0.pdf>

related illness, injury, and death.²² Other federal wildland firefighting forces do not have an equivalent program. Stakeholders have advocated for a DOI-wide casualty assistance program to ensure that other federal wildland firefighters receive similar benefits assistance.

Multiple federal agencies have been conducting research on wildland firefighter health and protective equipment. Looming agency reorganization, buyouts, and reduction-in-force plans have derailed much of the research related to wildland firefighter health at USFS, CDC, Environmental Protection Agency, and other agencies. The President's proposed budget for FY 2026 suggests eliminating the Forest and Rangeland Research program at the USFS,²³ which would put an end to agency efforts to better understand and respond to wildland firefighter health outcomes.

To help us better understand the steps that the agency is taking to better protect wildland firefighters and their health, please contact Oversight and Investigations minority staff at NRDems@mail.house.gov with five potential dates and times for a briefing by September 15, 2025. At the briefing, please be prepared to discuss the following items:

1. What steps is your agency taking to prevent wildfire smoke inhalation?
2. What respiratory PPE is currently offered to wildland firefighters? What, if any, PPE is required and under what conditions is it offered or required?
3. When will you require the distribution and use of respiratory protective equipment to wildland firefighters?
4. How much would it cost to provide situationally appropriate respiratory protective equipment to all firefighting crews in your agency?
5. What steps has your agency taken to improve tracking of the long-term health of federal wildland firefighters? How have recent staff and budget cuts affected those studies?
6. How would consolidation of federal wildfire response under the proposed U.S. Wildland Fire Service impact the casualty assistance program?
7. How have recent agency personnel and budget cuts impacted the response rate for wildland firefighter workers compensation claims?
8. How would consolidation of federal wildfire response under the proposed U.S. Wildland Fire Service impact current and future PPE guidance and policy?

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

²² U.S. Forest Service, *Casualty Assistance Program*. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/about-agency/contact-us/national-programs-offices/cap>

²³ U.S. Department of Agriculture, FY 2026 Budget Summary. <https://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/2026-usda-budget-summary.pdf>



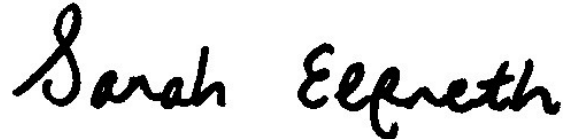
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