

Environment

The Forest Service Claims It's Fully Staffed for a Worsening Fire Season. Data Shows Thousands of Unfilled Jobs.

DOGE cuts and voluntary resignations have severely hampered the agency as the nation enters the peak of fire season, with more than 1 million acres burning across 10 Western states.



The Dragon Bravo Fire burns on the Grand Canyon's North Rim on Saturday. Joe Rondone/The Arizona Republic/AP, Pool

by Abe Streep

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Despite the Trump administration's public pronouncements that it has hired enough wildland firefighters, documents obtained by ProPublica show a high vacancy rate, as well as internal concern among top officials as more than 1 million acres burn across 10 states.

Less than a month ago, Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins announced that the Trump administration had done a historically good job preparing the nation for the summer fire season. "We are on track to meet and potentially exceed our firefighting hiring goals," said Rollins, during an address to Western governors. Rollins oversees the wildland firefighting workforce at the U.S. Forest Service, a subagency of the Department of Agriculture. Rollins had noted in her remarks that the administration had exempted firefighters from a federal hiring freeze, and she claimed that the administration was outdoing its predecessor: "We have reached 96% of our hiring goal, far outpacing the rate of hiring and onboarding over the past three years and in the previous administration."

Since then, the Forest Service's assertions have gotten even more optimistic: The agency now claims it has reached 99% of its firefighting hiring goal.

But according to internal data obtained by ProPublica, Rollins' characterization is dangerously misleading. She omitted a wave of resignations from the agency this spring and that many senior management positions remain vacant. Layoffs by the Department of Government Efficiency, voluntary deferred resignations and early retirements have severely hampered the wildland firefighting force.

According to the internal national data, which has not been previously reported, more than 4,500 Forest Service firefighting jobs — as many as 27% — remained vacant as of July 17. A Forest Service employee who is familiar with the data said it comes from administrators who input staffing information into a computer tool used to create organization charts. The employee said that while the data could contain inaccuracies in certain forests, it broadly reflects the agency's desired staffing levels. The employee said the data showing "active" unfilled positions was "current and up-to-date for last week."

The Department of Agriculture disputes that assessment, but the figures are supported by anecdotal accounts from wildland firefighters in New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, California and Wyoming. According to a recent survey by Forest Service fire managers in California, 26% of engine captain positions and 42% of engineer positions were vacant. A veteran Forest Service firefighter in California characterized the Trump administration's current estimate of the size of its firefighting workforce as "grossly inaccurate."

Last week, Tom Schultz, the chief of the Forest Service, circulated a letter to high-ranking officials in the agency that underscored the dire moment. "As expected, the 2025 Fire Year is proving to be extremely challenging," wrote Schultz in the letter, a copy of which was obtained by ProPublica. "We know the demand for resources outpaces their availability." Schultz at once directed staff to employ full suppression — stomping out fires as quickly as possible, instead of letting them burn for the sake of landscape management — and acknowledged that the resources necessary to pursue such an aggressive strategy were lacking. All options were on the table, he wrote, including directing human-resources employees to fight fires and asking recently departed employees with firefighting qualifications to return to work.

When asked about the discrepancy between Schultz's memo and Rollins' public statements on firefighting staffing at the Forest Service, an agency spokesperson said that Schultz was referring to employees who can be called on to bolster the agency's response "as fire activity increases," while Rollins was pointing only to full-time firefighters. "The Forest Service remains fully equipped and operationally ready to protect people and communities from wildfire," the spokesperson said, noting that "many individuals that have separated from the Agency either through retirements or voluntary resignations still possess active wildland fire qualifications and are making themselves available to support fire response operations."

The federal government employs thousands of wildland firefighters, but the precise number is opaque. Throughout the Department of the Interior, which is overseen by Secretary Doug Burgum, there are about 5,800 wildland firefighters in four agencies that have been impacted by cuts. An employee at a national park in Colorado that is threatened by wildfire said that they were "severely understaffed during the Biden administration on most fronts, and now it's so much worse than it's ever been."

But the Forest Service is by far the largest employer of wildland firefighters, and it has long used gymnastic arithmetic to paint an optimistic picture of its staffing. Last summer, ProPublica reported that the Forest Service under President Joe Biden had overstated its capacity. Robert Kuhn, a former Forest Service official who between 2009 and 2011 co-authored an assessment of the agency's personnel needs, recently said that the practice of selectively counting firefighters dates back years. "What the public needs to understand is, that is just a very small number of what is needed every summer," he said. Riva Duncan, a retired Forest Service fire chief and the vice president of Grassroots Wildland Firefighters, a labor advocacy organization, said staffing is a constant frustration for managers on the ground. "We have engines that are completely unstaffed," said Duncan, who remains active in wildland firefighting, having worked in temporary roles this summer. "We have vacant positions in management."

That said, there is a difference this fire season from years past. Officials in the previous administration publicly acknowledged the danger presented by an exodus of experienced wildland firefighters. The

Trump administration has taken a different approach — claiming to have solved the problem while simultaneously exacerbating it. When asked about the staffing cuts, Anna Kelly, a White House deputy press secretary, wrote, “President Trump is proud of all Secretary Rollins has accomplished to improve forest management, including by ending the 2001 Roadless Rule for stronger fire prevention, and Secretary Burgum’s great work protecting our nation’s treasured public lands.”

In March, Congress finally codified a permanent raise for federal wildland firefighters via the appropriations process, a change that advocates have sought for years. In her remarks in June, Rollins credited the president: “Out of gratitude for the selfless service of our Forest Service firefighters, President Trump permanently increased the pay for our federal wildland firefighters.”

But in February, the Trump administration laid off about 700 employees who support wildland fire operations, from human-resource managers to ecologists and trail-crew workers. Those employees possess what are known as red cards — certifications that allow them to work on fire crews. Many were subsequently rehired, but the administration then pushed Forest Service employees to accept deferred resignations and early retirements.

Last month, President Donald Trump issued an executive order directing the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior to combine their firefighting forces. For the moment, it’s unknown what form that restructuring will take, but many Forest Service firefighters are anticipating further staffing cuts. A spokesperson for the Department of the Interior wrote, “We are taking steps to unify federal wildfire programs to streamline bureaucracy.”

Administration officials have maintained that employees primarily assigned to wildland fire were exempted from the resignation offers this spring. But according to another internal data set obtained by ProPublica, of the more than 4,000 Forest Service employees who accepted deferred resignations and early retirements, approximately 1,600 had red cards. (A spokesperson for the Department of Agriculture wrote that the actual number was 1,400, adding that 85 of them “have decided to return for the season.”)

Even those figures don’t account for all the lost institutional knowledge. The departures included meteorologists who provided long-range forecasts, allowing fire managers to decide where to deploy crews. One of the meteorologists who left was Charles Maxwell, who had for more than 20 years interpreted weather models predicting summer monsoons at the Southwest Coordination Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico, an interagency office. The thunderstorms can fuel wildfire, with lightning and wind, and extinguish them, with great rains. Lately, according to Maxwell, the monsoons have become less and less reliable, and understanding their nuances can be challenging. Maxwell said that he’d already been planning to retire next year. But he also said he “was concerned with the degree of chaos, the potential degradation of services and what would happen to my job.”

Maxwell noted that his work had been covered by knowledgeable fill-ins from out of state. But another firefighter who worked on blazes in New Mexico said that Maxwell’s understanding of the monsoon had been missed. A spokesperson for the Department of the Interior, which oversees the interagency office where Maxwell worked, wrote, “We do not comment on personnel matters.”

The monsoon season is now here and has brought deadly flash flooding along old burn scars in Ruidoso, New Mexico, while distributing sporadic rain in the state’s Gila National Forest.

It is shaping up to be a severe fire season. On Monday, federal firefighters reported 86 new fires across the West; by Tuesday, there were 105 more. And there’s already been some criticism of the federal response. Arizona’s governor and members of Congress have called for an investigation into the Park Service’s handling of a blaze this month that leveled a historic lodge on the Grand Canyon’s North Rim. Last month, Rollins acknowledged, “Fires don’t know Republican or Democrat, or which side of the aisle you are on.” This much, at least, is true.

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