

Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Federal Lands
Oversight Hearing
1324 Longworth House Office Building
May 16, 2023
2:00 PM

"Examining the Challenges Facing Forest Management, Wildfire Suppression, and Wildland Firefighters Ahead of the 2023 Wildfire Year"

Questions from Chairman Westerman for Jaelith Hall-Rivera, Deputy Chief, State and Private Forestry, United States Forest Service

1. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provided \$600 million to increase base firefighter pay. Those funds were supposed to last until Fiscal Year 2026, yet in your testimony you share that those funds will be nearly exhausted by the end of September. How do you explain the funds being exhausted after only 2 years?

Answer: Section 40803(d)(4)(B) of the IIJA provides a supplemental salary increase of \$20,000 per year, or 50% of base salary (whichever is less), for wildland firefighters employed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI). The supplemental salary increase is payable upon a determination by the Secretary of each Department, in coordination with the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), that the wildland firefighter is located in an area where it is difficult to recruit or retain wildland firefighters.

A study on the recruitment and retention of wildland firefighters was carried out jointly by the DOI and Forest Service. The study analyzed the rate of employment, promotion, and resignation of firefighting positions from the agencies. This study demonstrated that recruitment and retention issues were universal to all geographic regions, which meant that a broad application of the pay supplement provided through IIJA should be applied. The DOI and Forest Service determined that the pay supplement should be paid to all firefighting positions covered under fire retirement in all geographic areas. For the Forest Service, more than 14,000 firefighters have or are receiving the pay supplement. The Forest Service and the DOI will exhaust Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding for the firefighter pay supplement around the end of Fiscal Year 2023.

2. Last year, the House debated a Wildfire Response package on the floor that purported to boost wildland firefighter pay to \$20 per hour but did not actually provide any funding to meet that pay standard. If we fail to properly fund any new pay tables, what would be the consequences? Would there be layoffs of wildland firefighters?

Answer: If new pay requirements were to be established without funding to support those requirements, impacts would occur to the size of our wildland firefighter workforce. Efforts would be made to ensure the permanent federal workforce receives the new pay rates to the full extent possible, while hiring of temporary seasonal employees would likely need to decrease. Annual temporary seasonal

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hiring is a critical pipeline to building the current and future wildland firefighting workforce.

3. Can you provide the amount of standing sawtimber on unreserved National Forest System lands in the lower 48 states, as identified by the Forest Inventory and Analysis program databases?

Answer: The numbers below are an estimate of standing sawtimber volume on unreserved National Forest System lands. Reserved lands are defined as National Forest System lands that are permanently prohibited from being managed to produce wood products through statute or agency mandate, such that the prohibition cannot be changed through a decision by the land manager. However, it is important to understand that standing sawtimber on unreserved land is not an indicator of the amount available or accessible for harvest. A variety of factors influence what is available and accessible, for example:

- Land Management Plans and the Management Areas, desired conditions, goals, standards and guidelines defined within them can restrict the availability of material through, for example, designations of suitable/unsuitable areas for timber harvest.
- Market factors determine what is economically accessible.
- Areas may be unsuitable due to site-specific conditions such as steep slopes, erosive soils, being too wet, etc.
- Threatened and Endangered Species and Critical Habitat designations can restrict miles of open or closed roads, impacting accessibility of an area.

Please be aware that these and other factors affect the availability of standing sawtimber volume for utilization.

Unreserved National Forest Service land Sawtimber volume (million)	estimate
Cubic-foot	211,882
Board-foot	1,312,238

4. How much standing sawtimber is located on lands designated as "insect and disease treatment areas" under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act?

Answer: Estimates of sawtimber volume within insect and disease areas designated under sections 602 and 603 of the Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA) were generated using Forest Inventory and Analysis plots located within HFRA areas designated on a spatial layer from the Forest Service Enterprise Data Warehouse.

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Sawtimber volume on non-reserved National Forest System lands within areas designated under sections 602 and 603 of the HFRA (million) estimate: 108,335 cubic feet (1,300,072 board feet).

5. One of the things the Forest Service is required to do under the National Forest Management Act is to develop Forest Plans. Among other things, these plans must include the amount of timber that could be sustainably harvested from each National Forest System unit over the 10-year life of the Forest Plan. Can the Forest Service accurately tally the current Allowable Sale Quantity, or Permissible Timber Sale Quantity, found in current National Forest Plans, by National Forest, and aggregated both for each Forest Service Region and Nationally? Please ensure that these ASQ's/PTSQ's factor in site specific or forest specific plan amendments, whether required by court order or created by the agency.

Answer: We do not corporately track Allowable Sale Quantity (ASQ) or Permissible Timber Sale Quantity (PTSQ). These are not considered land allocations or designations. Rather, they provide a ceiling of how much volume may be cut from a particular unit per its Land Management Plan. Plans promulgated under the old 1982 Planning Rule have an ASQ calculation and PTSQ is what is calculated under the 2012 Planning Rule. ASQ and PTSQ are located within the Land Management Plans for individual National Forests and to obtain those values for each forest is not feasible in the timeline required for this response.

6. Can you provide information about the number of total permits issued by the Forest Service on an annual basis? Can you also breakdown this information to include the category/type of permit these all fall under?

Answer: The Forest Service issues and administers tens of thousands of permits every year for a wide range of uses using about 150 different types of forms. For example, the agency issues about 33,000 recreation special use permits each year. In addition, the agency issued 66,000 permits and small contracts for timber removal, and over 21,000 permits for forest products other than timber. The agency also administers about 6,000 grazing permits associated with nearly 7,200 allotments across 28 states. We would be happy to follow up with any questions you might have on permits of interest.

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Questions from Rep. Bentz for Jaelith Hall-Rivera, Deputy Chief, US Forest Service

1. What role does the Professional Private Wildland Fire industry play in helping the U.S. Forest Service address the lack of resources regarding catastrophic wildfires?

Answer: The Forest Service is just one participant in the national wildland fire system that also includes our partners in the Department of the Interior, state and local governments, Tribes, and private industry. The capability brought to bear by private industry through contractual agreements with the Forest Service is essential for successful response operations across the country. The agency contracts for most of the aviation resources, many hand crews, engines, pieces of heavy equipment, and logistical services like fire camp caterers and shower services. Without these essential services and response resources, the ability to provide for a national response effort in a safe and effective manner would be significantly impacted.

2. It is my understanding that the Professional Private Wildland Fire industry provides over 25,000 pieces of equipment and potentially over 20,000 trained firefighters nationally that respond to wildfires. Is this assessment accurate?

Answer: The Forest Service contracts a significant number of resources and services with private industry and is not the only entity within the wildland fire system doing so. The Department of the Interior, state, and local governments, as well as some private utilities companies and potentially other private entities, are also contracting for wildland fire support services.

All wildland firefighters that operate within the interagency wildland fire system must be qualified for the role that they perform, and those qualifications are verified before an individual can be ordered for fire response operations. The Forest Service currently estimates approximately 11,000 private contract firefighters are active nationally and approximately 17,000 pieces of equipment are available through contracts for response operations.

3. The US Forest Service indicated that they utilize the "closest forces" method for responding to wildfires, however several of the contracts for private wildland fire response DO NOT utilize this method such as a Type 2 Crew Contract. Can USFS describe what process is used in dispatching private resources under contract to a fire for both initial attack and extended attack?

Answer: Type 2 contract crews are not considered initial attack resources. All Type 2 contract crews are dispatched by the National Interagency Coordination Center using an established mathematical formula that considers hourly rate, mileage, and standard assignment duration. All

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Type 2 contract crew orders are filled with the lowest cost, available resource able to meet a reasonable date and time needed as determined by the National Interagency Coordination Center.

Federal, state and local government work collaboratively to establish an agreed upon pre-planned dispatch protocol for ordering resources to ensure a quick response. This information is loaded into the Computer Aided Dispatch system or identified on “run cards.” During initial attack, the pre-identified agency Federal, state and local government, and Tribal resources are dispatched through the Computer Aided Dispatch system containing the “pre-planned dispatch” for a particular area. The ordering process is different for extended attack. Resource requests come into the local dispatch centers who will fill the order based on skills required and availability of resources needed. Agency resources are prioritized, but contracted resources are also considered.

4. Does USFS order the closest forces to the fires?

Answer: As a rule, closest forces mobilization is the most effective and cost efficient and the Forest Service seeks to use that concept for mobilization. There are exceptions. Resource mobilization is situationally based and dependent on the type of fire such as initial attack, extended attack, large fire support, or long duration fire support. For large fire and long duration fire support, agency resources may be mobilized from geographic areas further away that have low risk of fire occurrence rather than closer geographic areas experiencing higher risk and higher resource needs. Using this method, resources are moved based on the highest need and keeps local resources available in areas with fire activity to help cover local initial and extended attack fire suppression needs.

5. Does USFS prioritize Service-operated resources from a greater distance over contracted resources closer to fires? What is the formula for determining least expensive versus fastest available private wildfire response units?

Answer: As a rule, closest forces mobilization is the most effective and cost efficient and the Forest Service seeks to use that concept for mobilization. There are exceptions. Resource mobilization is situationally based and dependent on the type of fire such as initial attack, extended attack, large fire support, or long duration fire support. For large fire and long duration fire support, agency resources may be mobilized from geographic areas further away that have low risk of fire occurrence rather than closer geographic areas experiencing higher risk and higher resource needs. Using this method, resources are moved based on the highest need and keeps local resources available in areas with fire activity to help cover local initial and extended attack fire suppression needs.

During an ongoing fire, the Incident Commander is responsible for developing the overall strategy and tactics for the fire, and for ordering resources accordingly. There are many factors that are considered in this process including the type, quantity, experience, and qualifications of

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resources necessary to achieve the identified management objectives. Current and anticipated fire behavior and the values at risk will also influence the type of resources ordered. The capability brought to bear by private industry through contractual agreements with the Forest Service is essential for successful response operations across the country.