



ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT

FEDERAL IMPACT

## Firefighters question leaders' role in Washington immigration raid

Wildfire veterans believe top officials on the fire sent their crews into an immigration check.

BY: **ALEX BROWN** - AUGUST 31, 2025 3:11 PM



📷 A firefighter moves hazard fuel while working on the Bear Gulch fire this summer. Many in the wildland fire community believe the leadership team managing the fire sent crews into an ambush by federal immigration agents. (Photo by Bear Gulch Fire 2025 via Facebook)

Wildland firefighters were stunned when federal immigration authorities last week raided an active wildfire response in Washington state, arresting two firefighters and sidelining crews for hours.

Wildfire veterans say the operation was nearly unprecedented, a breach in longstanding protocol that federal agents don't disrupt emergency responders to check immigration status.

Worse, many wildfire veterans believe the management team overseeing the fire crews played a key role in handing over the firefighters to immigration authorities.

Stateline spoke to nearly a dozen firefighters, agency staffers and contractors familiar with the incident, who shared their belief that the top officials assigned to the fire deployed the crews to a remote location under false pretenses so federal agents could check their immigration status. Most of them spoke privately for fear of retaliation.

The raid has reverberated among fire crews, agency leaders and contractors. Wildfire veterans say the arrests have stoked fear and distrust among firefighters on the ground. They worry that crews may be scared to deploy if they may become a target for immigration raids.

"There's really no way [the wildfire management team] could not have been involved," said Riva Duncan, a former wildland fire chief who served more than 30 years with the U.S. Forest Service. "We're all talking about it. People are wondering if they go on a fire with this team, if that could happen to them."

Since the incident became public, the wildfire world has been abuzz with anger at that team – California Interagency Incident Management Team 7. Made up of federal, state and local fire professionals, the team was assigned to oversee the response to the Bear Gulch fire, which has burned 9,000 acres in and around Olympic National Park in Washington state.

One firefighter who was present at the raid said he is convinced that Team 7 leaders sent their crews into a trap.

"I felt beyond betrayed," said the firefighter, who requested anonymity to protect his career. "What they did was messed up. They'd been talking in their briefings about building relationships and trust. For them to say that and then go do this is mind-boggling. It boiled my blood."

Team 7 Incident Commander Tom Clemo, in an email, declined to comment, citing an active investigation. Tom Stokesberry, the

team's public information officer, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

According to daily Incident Action Plans filed by Team 7 and posted online, the crews had previously been digging holding lines, working to protect structures and conducting mop-up work. The two crews targeted by federal agents had not been assigned to work together in the days leading up to the raid.

Then, on Aug. 27, both crews – workers from private companies contracted to help fight the fire – were told to deploy to a staging area where they would cut firewood for the local community. The firefighter who was present at the raid told Stateline that a division supervisor told the crews he would meet them at the site, but never showed up.

After arriving at the site, the firefighter said, the crews found piles of logs, seemingly from a timber operation. Not wanting to damage a logging company's property, they waited for a management team leader to show up with further instructions.

After an hour, unmarked law enforcement vehicles pulled up to the site and federal officials began questioning the firefighters. Duncan, the former Forest Service firefighter, said immigration agents would not have been able to access the site without help from Team 7 leaders.

"Fire areas are officially closed, very secure and there are roadblocks," she said. "Somebody would have had to tell these agents how to get there."

In a news release, U.S. Customs and Border Protection said its agents assisted with an investigation led by the federal Bureau of Land Management. While the agency's release did not mention the nature of the investigation, multiple wildfire sources said the feds claimed they had uncovered fraud on time cards submitted by the crews.

Table Rock Forestry Inc., an Oregon-based company whose crew was one of the two at the scene, was allegedly subjected to the raid due to a half-hour discrepancy on a time sheet, said Scott Polhamus, secretary of the Organization of Fire Contractors and Affiliates. Table Rock Forestry is a member of the fire contractors' group.

## Immigration raid at Washington blaze stokes fear in wildfire crews nationwide



Federal immigration officials in Washington state arrived on the scene of the largest wildfire in the state on Wednesday and arrested two firefighters who had been working to contain the blaze. Wildfire veterans say it's nearly unprecedented for federal agents to conduct immigration

enforcement near the front lines of an active wildfire. Some fear the ...

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Multiple wildfire veterans said that time card discrepancies are not uncommon at wildfires, where crews work long days and it's not always clear if lunch breaks or errands in town count toward working hours. Such mix-ups are typically sorted out between organizational leaders. Calling law enforcement in such a scenario is almost unheard of.

"This is not the first time a crew has been called on the carpet for maybe padding their time a bit," Duncan said. "You deal directly with the company. It's just absolutely mind-boggling to treat it as a criminal issue."

After about five minutes discussing the time card issue, according to the firefighter who was present at the raid, federal agents spent the next three hours checking each firefighter's immigration status.

The Customs and Border Protection news release announcing the immigration arrests made no mention of time sheets or any evidence that the investigation had turned up fraud. It did state that the two companies whose crews were raided had their contracts terminated by the government.

Polhamus, with the fire contractors' group, said that claim is false. While the crews were demobilized and sent home, the feds have not actually ended the companies' contracts or ability to accept future deployments.

A Customs and Border Protection public affairs specialist did not immediately respond to questions about the investigation, the alleged fraud or federal agents' coordination with Team 7.

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources, the state's lead wildfire response agency, said federal officials did not notify their state counterparts about the investigation.

"DNR was not informed of the incident until well after the fact," said Ryan Rodruck, wildfire on-call public information officer with the agency.

Rodruck noted that the fire response was under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service. Press officers with the Forest Service did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Multiple wildfire sources said the crews would not have been sent to the staging area where they were ambushed without the knowledge of top leaders on the fire's management team.

The two crews that were raided have a diverse mix of firefighters, many of them Hispanic. One of the crews has many foreign workers who are legally in the country on H-2B visas. Duncan, the former Forest Service firefighter, said it was likely not a coincidence that two crews with many brown-skinned members were targeted in the raid.

Two of the firefighters were arrested, federal officials said, for being in the country illegally.

One of the firefighters who was arrested is represented by Innovation Law Lab, an Oregon-based legal group that defends refugees and immigrants. Isa Peña, the group's director of strategy, said the Department of Homeland Security has not revealed the whereabouts of their client.

The firefighter, who Peña declined to name, has been in the U.S. since he was four years old and served as a firefighter for the past three years. Immigration advocates are alarmed that the raid was potentially arranged by California Interagency Incident Management Team 7, the leaders charged with overseeing the wildfire response.

"There certainly is concern if that is the case that individuals are being handed over to immigration as they're trying to keep our communities safe," Peña said. "Conducting immigration

enforcement while brave members of our community are risking their lives to protect us is really disgusting.”

Several wildland fire veterans also noted that the raid took place on Team 7’s final day in charge of the fire response, hours before a Washington team rotated in to take command. The California team headed home and left the new team to face the media scrutiny and angry firefighters in camp.

“If you’ve got ICE teams pulling your contractors out, you’d want to cut and run as soon as you can,” Polhamus said.

On a forum for wildland fire professionals on the social media platform Reddit, many expressed anger at Team 7. Firefighters also took issue with the assertion, shared by federal immigration officials, that the raid did not disrupt firefighting operations.

“It’s total bulls\*\*\*,” said Duncan, the former Forest Service firefighter. “Whoever made that statement doesn’t understand the work. To take two crews off of a fire that’s only 13% contained, that seems ridiculous at that point in a fire. That does seem very unusual.”

## Trump’s cuts to federal wildfire crews could have ‘scary’ consequences



ISSAQUAH, Wash. — President Donald Trump’s moves to slash the federal workforce have gutted the ranks of wildland firefighters and support personnel, fire professionals warn, leaving communities to face deadly consequences when big blazes arrive this summer. “There’s going to be firefighters that

die because of this, there will be communities that burn,” said Steve ...

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Many wildfire veterans said that conducting a raid at the site of an active wildfire was reckless and irresponsible.



“Having people on the line that you don’t expect to be there is an issue,” said Polhamus, with the fire contractors’ group. “When you need crews and you are taking resources to check them for immigration status, we can all think of better ways to address that.”

Duncan said she’s spoken with firefighters still assigned to the Bear Gulch fire who are disgusted with the situation and want to leave.

“The three principal wildland fire values are duty, respect, integrity,” she said. “Utmost in that is taking care of your people. If you can’t trust the people you’re working with when things get hairy, that’s a concern.”

In Washington and Oregon, elected leaders have decried the raids and are pushing for more information on the status of the firefighters who were arrested. Federal immigration officials have said little since the news release announcing the arrests.

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