

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 4, 2025

The Honorable Tom Schultz
Chief
U.S. Forest Service
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Chief Schultz,

We are writing to express extreme concern about recent reports of inadequate working conditions for wildland firefighters employed by the United States Forest Service (USFS) and understaffing across the agency. Given the increasing severity and frequency of wildfires across the country, especially in the Western United States, it is critical to ensure that our federal firefighting workforce is sufficiently staffed, trained, fed, and ready to respond to wildfire emergencies.

Recent reporting has indicated unsafe working conditions for federal wildland firefighters as they face the toxicity of wildfire smoke without adequate protective equipment—exposing these brave men and women to extreme health risks. The toxic wildfire smoke that wildland firefighters are exposed to has been linked to countless dangerous health conditions, including cancers, and yet your agency has not provided protective equipment to firefighters, even on a voluntary basis. The USFS’ own research has outlined the dangers of wildfire smoke and called for additional protective equipment, but the agency has not done so.¹

These firefighters have also been asked to take on additional responsibilities outside the usual scope of their duties in response to diminished staff capacity at USFS. Firefighters have reportedly been asked to cover ranger station positions, mow lawns, and clean toilets. Many employees who support wildland fire operations have been subject to layoffs and subsequent re-hiring which places additional strain on remaining employees, including firefighters.

Additional reports outline how firefighters battling active wildfires in the Pacific Northwest also “went hungry for several days, ran short of medical supplies, and had to scrounge for chainsaw fuel” because of staff vacancies in key positions who support the frontline firefighters.² This is completely unacceptable and shameful. The brave men and women who are putting their lives on the line to battle wildfires deserve much more, and at the very least, they should be able to count on the USFS to provide reliable food and supplies.

Many of the employees who have left the USFS since the start of the year have also held Incident Qualification Cards, or red cards, which are issued to individuals who successfully complete the required training, experience, and physical fitness test by firefighting agencies. These individuals provide invaluable support during fire emergencies and are often called in by agency leadership to fill gaps in personnel during emergency scenarios, despite their regular, full-time jobs outside of incident response within the agency. You have acknowledged the importance of these red-card

¹ [New York Times](#): “Wildfire Fighters, Unmasked in Toxic Smoke, Are Getting Sick and Dying.”

² [Reuters](#): “As US wildfires rage, Trump staff cuts force firefighters to clean toilets, critics say.”

holding employees, requesting that any employees who left the agency this year but hold a red card come back to work for the summer months.

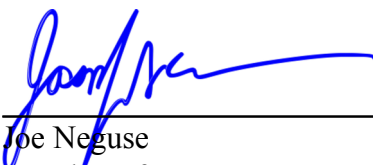
In addition, despite statements from the USFS and U.S. Department of Agriculture that your agencies have hired 96-99% of your firefighters for the season, reports also indicate that there are 4,500 vacant firefighting positions at USFS, or 27% of the workforce.³ The American public and fire managers deserve to know the truth about the number of employees who are employed at the agency, and the extent that the workforce is understaffed.

In response to these concerning reports about the working conditions and staffing of your agency, we request urgent answers to the following questions:

1. How many federal wildland firefighters are currently employed by USFS?
2. How many employees are currently employed by USFS who are red-card certified?
3. What steps has USFS taken, and plans to take, to ensure there is always adequate food, fuel, and other basic supplies provided for wildland firefighters without any lapse?
4. Going forward, will protective equipment such as N95 masks be free and easily available to USFS firefighters? Will this equipment be part of the cache automatically sent to all large fires moving forward?
5. Has the USFS conferred with or received any guidance from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration regarding the wearing of N95s on firelines and/or holding firelines?
6. What steps is USFS taking to support wildland firefighters in response to the health risks associated with wildland fire response?

Thank you for your ongoing attention to our national wildfire preparedness and response capacity. We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

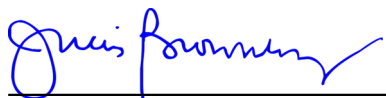


Joe Neguse
Member of Congress
Ranking Member,
Subcommittee on Federal
Lands

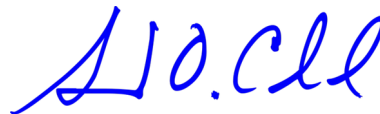


Jared Huffman
Member of Congress
Ranking Member, Committee
on Natural Resources

³ [ProPublica](#): The Forest Service Claims It's Fully Staffed for a Worsening Fire Season. Data Shows Thousands of Unfilled Jobs.



Julia Brownley
Member of Congress



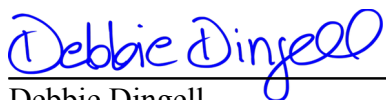
Salud Carbajal
Member of Congress



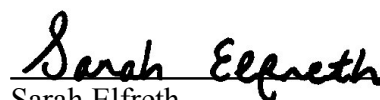
Jim Costa
Member of Congress



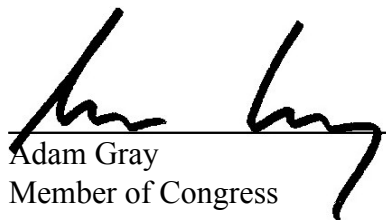
Maxine Dexter
Member of Congress



Debbie Dingell
Member of Congress



Sarah Elfreth
Member of Congress



Adam Gray
Member of Congress



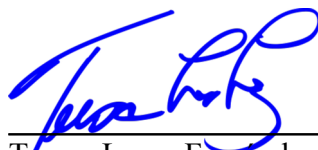
Josh Harder
Member of Congress



Val Hoyle
Member of Congress



Susie Lee
Member of Congress



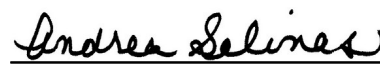
Teresa Leger Fernandez
Member of Congress



Dave Min
Member of Congress



Scott H. Peters
Member of Congress



Andrea Salinas
Member of Congress



Kim Schrier, M.D.
Member of Congress



George Whitesides
Member of Congress