

# WILDLAND FIREFIGHTING

*The IAFF supports efforts to improve the compensation and benefits for wildland fire fighters and prohibit contracting out wildland fire fighting operations to private, non-governmental companies.*

## BACKGROUND

The buildup of housing in the wildland-urban interface has significantly increased the dangers wildland fires pose to life and property in the United States. Close cooperation and coordination among federal, state, and local jurisdictions is indispensable to effectively prevent, combat, and contain wildfires in order to mitigate wildfire risks. Multiple federal agencies are engaged in protecting federal lands, assisting state and local governments, and helping landowners in the aftermath of a wildfire disaster. The largest is the Fire and Aviation Management (FAAM) Division within the United States Forestry Service (USFS) in the Department of Agriculture. Over the past 20 years, the wildland FAAM portion of the USFS total budget has almost quadrupled, increasing from 13% to 48%. Over the past decade, the USFS has adopted a business model that relies on contracting out fire fighting operations to poorly trained and inadequately resourced private contractors. In 1970, USFS employed no outside contractors for suppression activities. Currently, over 30% of FAAM's budget is allocated to private contractors. The IAFF strongly believes that fire fighting is an inherently governmental function. If USFS requires assistance to respond to a large-scale wildland incident, such aid should be provided by state and local governmental agencies.

From an employment perspective, federal wildland fire fighters have historically been poorly compensated. Unlike other fire fighters they are not entitled to receive "portal to portal pay" and do not receive compensation for down time spent at "fire camps." Many wildland fires last several weeks, during which time fire fighters are confined to the base/fire camp. However, they are only compensated for the work performed during their specified shift.

## CURRENT LEGISLATION

*U.S. House:* H.R. 4488, the National Wildfire Infrastructure and Cost Containment Act

Sponsor: Representative Bob Filner (D-CA)

*Summary:* H.R. 4488 is a proposal to address many issues impacting federal wildland fire fighters. The IAFF does **not** support the legislation as currently drafted.

The IAFF fully supports certain provisions of H.R. 4488, including:

- Creating a Wildland Fire Fighter pay classification within the federal pay structure. Currently, many federal wildland fire fighters are misclassified as "forestry technicians."
- Establishing a pilot program to address the issue of portal to portal pay.
- Creating a process to address the issue of compensating fire fighters while deployed at base/fire camps.
- Classifying wildland fire fighting as a "hazardous occupation" and including hazardous duty pay in pension calculations.

Unfortunately, the bill also has provisions the IAFF views as problematic:

- Increasing the mandatory retirement age to 65. Raising the retirement age poses a life safety hazard for both the individual fire fighter and their co-workers.
- Prohibiting contracting out with state or local agencies. Such contracts are often an effective and cost-efficient way to supplement federal resources.

· Granting authority to investigate line of duty fatalities of federal wildland fire fighters to an agency with no expertise in conducting such investigations rather than the federal agency with years of experience.

### **CONGRESSIONAL ACTION**

On January 21, 2010, H.R. 4488 was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives and referred to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, as well as the Committees on Natural Resources, Agriculture and Armed Services.