



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

President's 2024 budget and the proposed wildland fire management workforce reforms

April 17, 2023

The document provides answers to frequently asked questions about the wildland fire workforce reforms proposed in the President's 2024 budget request.

Background

To address recruitment and retention challenges, and to better meet the demands of today's workload, the President's 2024 budget request proposes significant workforce reforms and further investments for the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service. The cornerstone of the reforms is a permanent pay increase for federal wildland firefighters and similar pay increases for Tribal personnel. The reforms require Congress to provide additional funding and enact authorizing legislation proposed by the Administration.

The proposals will begin to modernize the nation's wildland firefighting workforce and build on the Administration's temporary special pay supplements for federal wildland firefighters during 2021 and, under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), in 2022 and 2023.

The President's 2024 budget request, including the workforce reform proposals, supports the equivalent of 370 additional Federal personnel for Interior, as well as the equivalent of 55 more Tribal personnel. For USDA, the budget supports the equivalent of 970 additional Federal firefighters and support personnel.

These proposals support our ongoing effort to shift away from a temporary, seasonal workforce toward a more permanent team that can conduct wildland fire management year-round, including activities to reduce wildfire risk throughout the country.

In total, this proposal package addresses the following topics successfully and comprehensively to begin reforming the wildland fire workforce and support systems:

- Increase compensation
- Improve training and professional development
- Enhance mental health, safety, and wellbeing
- Increase workforce capacity
- Increase housing for wildland fire personnel
- Provide state-of-the-art information technology and equipment
- Improve wildland firefighter recruitment and retention



Wildland Fire Program Pay Initiatives

1. What are the effective dates of the proposed workforce reforms?

The special base rate table and the new premium pay are proposed to be effective the first pay period commencing on or after October 1, 2023.

The annual pay cap changes are proposed to take effect the beginning of the pay calendar year 2024.

2. What are the pay proposals that are included in the 2024 budget request?

The pay proposals include a special base rate table for wildland firefighters and a new premium pay for incident responders.

3. Who would receive the wildland firefighter special base rates?

The special base rate table would apply to (1) those employees that are covered under the special retirement provisions for firefighters, or, (2) would be covered based on duties performed but for not meeting certain requirements (i.e., did not meet requirements for coverage upon movement to a supervisory or administrative position or temporary or intermittent employees who are ineligible for retirement benefits).

4. What are the key facts related to the proposed special base rate table?

Higher special base rates are established in place of General Schedule (GS) base rates at all grades, with the highest increases at lower GS levels and progressively smaller increases at the higher GS levels.

Locality pay would be paid on top of the higher special base rates. The higher special base rates would produce higher overtime and other premium pay rates. They would also augment retirement benefits by increasing retirement-creditable basic pay.

Increases above GS base rates shown in table below applied to by GS grade and step:

Proposed Special Base Rate Percentage Increase for Wildland Firefighters

GS Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
% increase	42	39	36	33	30	27	24	21	18	15	12	9	6	3	1.5



5. What is the proposed new premium pay?

The new proposed premium pay is a type of portal-to-portal to pay introduced as *Wildland Fire Incident Standby Premium Pay*. It is intended to compensate wildland fire responders for sleep and rest time during deployments. Responders would receive some compensation for all hours of a 24-hour day period. It will also standardize and stabilize compensation by assuming, for pay computation purposes, a standard 15 hours in work status and 9 hours in sleep/rest status, regardless of actual hours worked.

6. What is the proposed new premium pay rate?

The proposed premium pay would compensate at half (50%) an employee's basic rate (including locality pay).

7. How would the new proposed premium pay compute with other premium pays such as hazard pay and night differential?

The proposed premium pay is a stand-alone premium pay; hazard pay and/or night differential will not be applied to the designated 9 hours of the sleep/rest period.

8. Will the proposed new premium pay affect FLSA overtime computations?

Incident standby premium pay and associated hours are not considered in FLSA overtime pay computations for non-exempt firefighters. This is to the benefit of the employee because, if incident standby premium pay and associated hours were included in FLSA computations, that would reduce the straight rate and hourly regular rate used in computing FLSA overtime pay.

9. Who is proposed to receive the new premium pay?

Employees who mobilize and respond to wildfire incidents, severity incidents, and prescribed fire incidents that extend beyond a single operational period. This includes firefighters and support personnel.

10. What are the other key facts related to the proposed premium pay?

It is proposed to apply to wildfire incidents, severity incidents, and prescribed fire incidents (excludes initial-response incidents).

It would not be basic pay for any purpose or used in computing annual leave lump-sum payments or workers' compensation benefits.

For full-time employees, leave is still accrued and charged based on the 40-hour basic workweek.

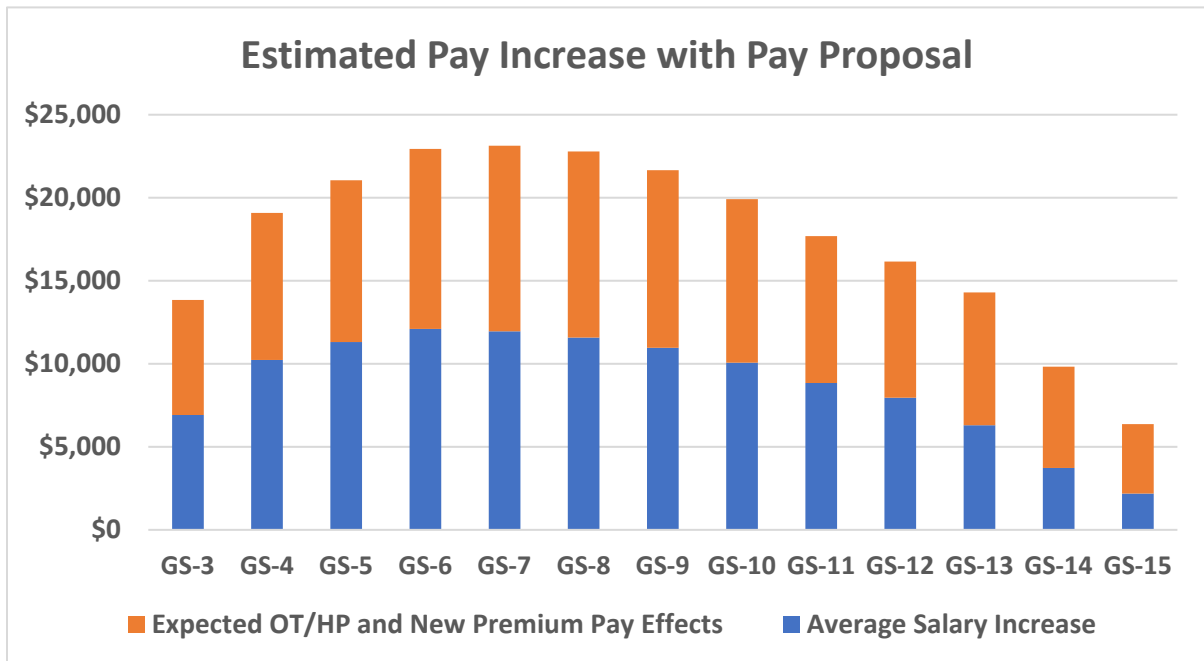


11. How do the collective pay reforms compare to the short term pay supplements provided through BIL?

As noted in the questions and answers above, the main differences are that the supplemental BIL pay was intended to be temporary and is not a base pay increase that would compute towards other benefits, such as retirement benefits and overtime (outside of a small effect on FLSA half rates). The new special base rates will allow for those compounding effects, resulting in increased compensation beyond the increases in the base pay rates alone.

12. How does the pay proposed in the President’s 2024 budget request and the Administration’s proposed legislation compare to the pay supplement provided by BIL?

Interior’s and USDA Forest Service’s analysis indicates that nearly 80% of our firefighting workforce will receive more aggregate pay than they did through the BIL pay supplement, even with a significant reduction in overtime hours. This outcome will be achieved by applying the new special base rates with increased overtime and hazard pay combined with the new Wildland Fire Incident Standby Premium Pay. This analysis does not consider the positive impact on retirement benefits. The increased rates of retirement-creditable basic pay will result in higher agency retirement and Thrift Savings Plan contributions.



1. This table shows the expected total pay increase estimated for the average firefighter by grade level. These figures are estimates, and individual firefighters’ pay may vary.



2. The average salary increase is based on the “Rest of United States” (RUS) locality area base rates by grade, step -1 for grades 3-5 and step -3 for grades 6 and higher.
3. The graph uses basic overtime (OT) assumptions for grades GS-3 through GS-9 at a level of 520 hours annually. The overtime levels for grade GS-11 and above were based on actual average overtime hours at those grade levels. (HP = Hazard Pay)
4. The current rates applied for grades GS-3 and GS-4 are based on the 2023 Special Rate Table 001M. This yields a lower dollar increase in the basic salary compared to the increases at higher grades. Compared to the General Schedule base rates (instead of the special rates), the increases at grades GS-3 and GS-4 are larger in percentage terms than the increases at higher grades.

Sample Employee Increase to Expected Gross Pay
Displayed by Locality – Rest of United States and San Francisco Locality Areas
(in Dollars)

The majority of the federal wildland firefighting workforce is located within the Rest of US (RUS) locality area (78% of Interior firefighters and 75% of USDA firefighters). The rest are in special locality areas. The majority of those are within California and Alaska. San Francisco (San Fran) locality is the highest rate within the United States – expected pay effects are displayed below with RUS and San Fran for demonstration. (OT = Overtime; HP = Hazard Pay).

Grade Level	RUS Salary Increase (Step 1)	Expected OT/HP and new Premium Pay Effects (Estimated)	Expected Gross Pay Increase (Estimated)	San Fran Salary Increase (Step 1)	Expected OT/HP and new Premium Pay Effects (Estimated)	Expected Gross Pay Increase (Estimated)
3	6,914	6,934	13,848	13,370	10,828	24,198
4	10,228	8,859	19,087	13,757	11,469	25,226
5	11,309	9,745	21,054	13,992	12,042	26,034
6	11,345	10,134	21,479	14,039	12,576	26,615
7	11,207	10,507	21,714	13,867	13,014	26,881
8	10,860	10,497	21,357	13,437	13,007	26,444
9	10,281	9,995	20,276	12,721	12,399	25,120
10	9,436	9,244	18,680	11,674	11,462	23,136
11	8,292	8,309	16,601	10,261	10,270	20,531
12	7,455	7,657	15,112	9,224	9,480	18,704
13	5,910	7,500	13,410	7,313	9,272	16,585
14	3,491	5,721	9,212	4,321	7,087	11,408
15	2,054	3,901	5,955	2,542	4,845	7,387



- 1. These figures are estimates, and individual firefighters' pay may vary.*
- 2. The current rates given for grades GS-3 and GS-4 are based on the 2023 Special Rate Table 001M. This yields a lower dollar increase in the basic salary compared to the increases at higher grades. Compared to the General Schedule base rates (instead of the special rates), the increases at grades GS-3 and GS-4 are larger in percentage terms than the increases at higher grades*
- 3. The table uses basic overtime assumptions for grades GS-3 through GS-9 at a level of 520 hours annually and the overtime levels for GS-11 and above were based on actual average overtime hours at those grade levels.*

13. Will these pay proposals apply to individuals hired under the Administratively Determined (AD) Pay Plan?

These provisions in the proposed legislation rely on the definition of “employee” in 5 U.S.C. 2105. AD employees are not covered by the definition of “employee” in 5 U.S.C. 2105 and generally are not treated as Federal “employees” under title 5 and other laws outside of certain exceptions like coverage under Federal employee worker’s compensation law in 5 U.S.C. chapter 81. Any changes for ADs would have to follow the discretionary authority within 7 U.S.C. 2226, 16 USC 554e, and 43 U.S.C. 1469 to employ temporary personnel without providing civil service appointments; and then be executed in the AD Pay Plan.

14. What are the proposed changes for the Special Premium Pay Cap?

For wildfire suppression activity premium pay, the premium pay cap is permanently increased from the EX-IV rate (\$183,500) to the EX-II rate (\$212,100) [2023 rates]. All premium payments would be counted in applying the higher EX-II cap. The proposed legislation also provides waiver authority to the Secretary of each department (Interior and Agriculture) to waive the EX-II cap based on established criteria.

Wildland Fire Program Capacity Increases

In a recent workforce assessment, employees reported that their number one concern is the need to increase staffing levels to address expanded mission and longer fire seasons. Likewise, many support personnel indicate that they lack an adequate number of staff and do not have access to additional employees who have the right skills and training, know the work area, and can continue performing while others are on leave or are deployed to a fire incident. With the extended fire season, many employees recommend increasing the number of permanent full-time employees (versus temporary or career-seasonal) because there is sufficient work to fill ten to twelve months of a work year in light of incident response and fuels management needs.



In the workforce assessment, wildland fire employees cited excessive overtime as a major contributor to employee burn out. When hours of overtime worked are compared over years, data shows employees are working more overtime hours to maintain the wildland fire suppression response system and achieve annual compensation levels that are competitive with non-federal counterparts. This is a symptom of a workforce capacity problem. A larger, more permanent workforce will help to shift the workload distribution over a greater number of personnel, thereby reducing the burden on each individual while improving the organization's ability to be more effective and resilient in mission attainment.

The President's 2024 budget increases over FY 2023 include \$35 million for Interior and \$76 million for USDA above the FY 2023 levels for personnel capacity. On top of the capacity funding within the reform effort, the Budget requests an additional +\$231 million to further expand wildland fire personnel capacity (+\$183 million at USDA and \$48 million at DOI). In total, the Budget will support +370 (+10%) more Federal personnel for Interior and +970 (+8.5%) additional Federal firefighters and support personnel for USDA. The budget for Interior also will support the equivalent of +55 more Tribal wildland fire personnel than the FY 2023 enacted level.

Employee Wellbeing and Mental Health

Interior and USDA, at the direction of BIL, are establishing a Joint Wildland Firefighter Behavioral Health Program. It will provide expanded services that address the unique experiences and mental health challenges of our wildland fire personnel in a changing wildland fire environment. A planning summit for the joint program was held in Boise, Idaho, April 11-13, 2023. The summit convened a wide range of wildland fire personnel, mental health experts, and agencies that have implemented successful behavioral health programs. It provided a forum to identify specific needs, evidence-based solutions, and a framework for the program's implementation. This new program will establish year-round prevention and mental health support training, provide post-traumatic stress care, enhance capacity for acute response, and create a system of trauma support services with an emphasis on early intervention.

GS-0456, Wildland Fire Management Occupational Series

15. Was a new Wildland Firefighter classification series created for wildland firefighters?

Yes. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provided that a new occupational series be created that covers positions for which the primary duties involve the prevention, control, suppression, or management of wildland fires. OPM has created GS-0456, Wildland Firefighter series.



16. Who will be impacted by the new GS-0456 Wildland Fire Management series?

Federal wildland firefighters and anyone interested in applying to a Federal wildland firefighter position will be impacted. Current firefighters—defined as Federal employees covered by the General Schedule Classification System under Title 5, United States Code Chapter 51, performing wildland firefighting work—will have the opportunity to elect-in to the new Wildland Firefighter classification series. Interior and USDA will provide guidance to the workforce on how to “elect-in” or remain in their current series. Future firefighters will be able to apply for jobs specifically designated as wildland firefighters by the new series.

17. Do I need to move into the new GS-0456 Wildland Fire Management series to receive the proposed special base rate salary?

No. Eligible employees would receive the proposed special base rate pay based on position descriptions rather than occupational series, provided they continue to meet the eligibility requirements (reference question 3 above).

18. Do I need to be in the GS-0456 Wildland Fire Management series to receive the proposed premium pay?

No. The proposal includes all wildfire incident responders to receive proposed premium pay.