



ALASKA STATE EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION

American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees Local 52

VIA ELECTRONIC DELIVERY

July 14, 2023

John Boyle, Commissioner
Department of Natural Resources
State of Alaska
550 W. 7th Ave. Suite 1400
Anchorage, AK 99501-3566

Re: GGU Wildland Firefighters

Dear Commissioner Boyle:

Per your May 31, 2023 request via email, I am writing to outline the concerns of our GGU Wildland Firefighters. As I'm sure you and your management team are quite aware, the Division of Forestry has had a long-standing recruitment and retention problem among all job classes in the Fire Protection Program, but this problem has reached a critical point with our Wildland Firefighters. The primary driver of this is simple: State Wildland Firefighter wages and benefits have lagged behind comparable firefighting entities for so long, and to such an extent, that our firefighters are now forced to make the hard choice between staying in state service, with colleagues and crew they have worked alongside for years, and leaving for better-paying, mostly federal, firefighting jobs. Regrettably, many of our State of Alaska Firefighters have made the choice to leave, which has resulted in the loss of incalculable years of knowledge and experience and left the Division dangerously understaffed and inexperienced.

To illustrate *just* the disparity in pay between our State Wildland Firefighters and federal firefighters, take as an example a State of Alaska Wildland Fire and Resource Tech 3 paid at Range 12 Step B. At that Range and Step, an employee makes \$22.02 an hour (\$42,939 annually). A comparable federal firefighter would fall on the GS scale at GS-7, and the wages for Step 2 on that scale are \$27.89 an hour (\$54,390 annually). That amounts to a 27% difference in pay.

Moreover, federal firefighters receive better incentive and hazard compensation as well as better benefits:

- Geographic differential: The State's current geographic differential system is outdated, and the faulty data used to determine location differentials has resulted in some of the most expensive places to live in Alaska receiving little, and sometimes no, adjustment. Obviously, many of our firefighters work in these rural areas, and the high cost of living, combined with low wages, have further intensified the monetary crunch on them and their families. In contrast, federal firefighters working in Alaska receive an approximate 31% differential to cover the cost of living.
- Hazard pay: State Wildland Firefighters receive 15% hazard pay in 4-hour blocks, but only for certain duties, primarily when working under helicopters. Federal firefighters receive 25% hazard pay in 8-hour blocks for an expanded list of duties that includes all work under a helicopter, and work

on the fire line. Just last year, Governor Brad Little of Idaho raised hazard pay for state wildland firefighters to 25%, stating: “[F]ighting wildland fire is inherently dangerous work.... [S]ince the consequence of making a mistake can be serious injury or death, retaining experienced personnel is crucial for keeping all firefighters safe.”

- **Health Benefits:** Through a Letter of Agreement signed in April 2023, State Wildland Firefighters can now use compensatory time to qualify for health insurance benefits, but that only provides health benefit coverage through the end of the calendar year in a best-case scenario. Federal firefighters have received year-round health insurance benefits since 2012.
- **Retirement Benefits:** State Wildland Firefighters routinely put in a year’s worth of hours in a six-month fire season, yet their hours are not credited towards retirement benefits. While the work is inherently dangerous and hazardous, State Firefighters must work twice as many years as other State of Alaska Public Safety personnel just for parity in retirement benefits. In other words, although State Wildland Firefighters have a 20-year retirement system like other public safety personnel in Alaska, they effectively must work 40 years to qualify for full retirement. To highlight the absurdity of that difference even further, State Wildland Firefighters must work 10 years longer to earn full retirement than every non-public safety employee working for the State.
- **Standby pay:** State Wildland-Firefighters receive 10% of their base wage multiplied by 7.5 for each calendar day they are placed on standby while their federal counterparts receive 50% of their base wage for nine hours every 24-hour duty period for both prescribed fires and wildfires.
- **Retention incentives:** In 2022, the Federal Fire Service recognized a crisis in pay and benefits and was authorized to pay a \$20,000 one-time retention bonus in order to retain their firefighters while they worked on a long-term solution. While the state Division of Forestry has recognized a similar crisis, the only action taken seems to be lip service and performative hand-wringing. It seems clear that management knows there is a problem, but it also seems clear that there is a failure of will when it comes to action.

All this has led to critical understaffing in Forestry’s Fire Protection service. In the interior, the Fairbanks fire office has seven vacant Wildland Fire and Resource Tech positions at the 2/3 level and four vacant at level 4. Delta is down to only 3 Techs out of 9. Those of us who work in public service are familiar with the mandate of “do more with less,” but that is a hollow and dangerous directive when people’s lives and property are at stake. We are at a tipping point, and our Wildland Firefighters need decisive leadership that recognizes the mission of the Division is borne by those with actual boots on the ground. ASEA stands ready to offer any assistance towards what should be our mutual goal of recognizing and compensating our Wildland Firefighters as the invaluable public safety personnel they are.



I appreciate your attention to this critical matter and reiterate my request to meet with you in person to discuss possible solutions to the recruitment and retention crisis plaguing our state Fire Protection Service at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Heidi Drygas
Executive Director

cc: Helge Eng, Director, Division of Forestry
Kate Sheehan, Director, Division of Personnel and Labor Relations
Sen. Cathy Giessel, Co-Chair, Resources Committee
Sen. Click Bishop, Co-Chair, Resources Committee
Sen. Bill Wielechowski, Vice-Chair, Resources Committee
Rep. Tom McKay, Chair, Resources Committee
Rep. George Rauscher, Vice-Chair, Resources Committee

