

Members of the Task Force,

Thank you for reviewing this testimony. Kentucky's wildfire threat is real and intensifying, yet our Emergency Firefighters—the boots on the ground—perform highly skilled, high-risk work without the support they need. Strategic investment in this workforce will retain experienced firefighters, stabilize staffing, and strengthen disaster response—protecting communities while enabling Kentucky crews to tackle the escalating challenges of wildfire and broader emergency preparedness.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further and share practical strategies for strengthening Kentucky's firefighting workforce. You can reach out to me directly—I'm happy to provide insights from my experience, examples from the field, and guidance on building a more resilient, capable team ready to meet the state's wildfire and emergency challenges, including ways these improvements could be sustained.

Thank you,

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Ten Year Summary		
Fire and Acres Burned 2015 - 2024		
Year	Number of Fires	Acres Burned
2015	728	19,209
2016	1,187	71,159
2017	832	23,329
2018	360	7,947
2019	707	9,934
2020	502	7,907
2021	742	22,634
2022	1,246	51,654
2023	1,147	48,845
2024	939	23,924
<b>Totals</b>	<b>8,390</b>	<b>286,542</b>

### Hourly Pay Comparison

Kentucky	Tennessee	North Carolina	Virginia
\$12.60	\$15.00	\$15.60	\$20.60
Michigan	Montana	New Mexico	North Dakota
\$18.00	\$19.05	\$19.24	\$21.53

**Testimony of Zoe Treibitz, Wildland Firefighter,  
(Former) Kentucky Division of Forestry**

Good morning, Co-Chairs Webb and Freeland, and members of the Task Force.

My name is Zoe Treibitz, and I am a wildland firefighter.

When most people in Kentucky hear “wildfire,” they don’t think of our hills, mountains, and forests. They picture the towering infernos out West — the ones splashed across national headlines, with flames devouring entire landscapes on their TV screens. But the reality is, Kentucky faces its own wildfire threats, and they’re growing. Our communities are not immune.

I’m here today not only to raise awareness — but to call for urgent action. Because the truth is, we can do more to respond properly to wildfires here at home, and better prepare for the emergencies that lie ahead.

I am a nationally qualified wildland firefighter with experience on the front lines in multiple states. Until last week, I served with the Kentucky Division of Forestry — the agency responsible for combating wildfires on both state and private lands across the Commonwealth.

Before that, I fought wildfires in Washington State, where I gained valuable insight into how different regions approach wildfire management. During that time, I also engaged with firefighters from other states — having informal discussions, asking questions, and learning how their communities handle prevention, response, and recovery.

Wildfires have become more prominent in the public consciousness as we’ve seen major, destructive burns that have impacted families, created dangerous air pollution, and destroyed millions of dollars in resources and property. What people often don’t realize is that every year, Kentucky experiences hundreds of wildfires that burn tens of thousands of acres, requiring a dedicated firefighting response.

The Kentucky Division of Forestry is organized into regional branches that manage land across the state. I was based in the Hazard Branch, which has the highest wildfire occurrence in Kentucky. Although we cover only seven counties, we routinely respond to



over 400 fires each year. Eastern Kentucky experiences the most frequent wildfires due to a combination of factors — including fuel loading, steep topography, and weather conditions — creating a greater demand for boots on the hill.

Traditionally, in Kentucky, we recognize two “fire seasons,” when conditions align for heightened fire activity:

- Fall Forest Fire Hazard Season: October 1 through December 15
- Spring Forest Fire Hazard Season: February 15 through April 30

During these times, the Division of Forestry — particularly in its busier eastern branches — employs a mix of full-time, seasonal, and “Emergency” wildland firefighters. The latter was my title.

Basic wildfire response techniques have been around for decades. Unlike structure fires, which often have easy access to fire hydrants and water, wildfires — particularly in mountainous terrain — usually occur outside the reach of water sources and vehicle access, making them harder to attack.

With our conditions, this is how we contain wildfires. Our crews hike alongside the fire, often chasing it uphill, building firelines — clear breaks in the fuel the fire needs to spread. Fuel includes timber, leaves, dry grass, and other organic materials.

We use a mix of tools to create these lines: chainsaws, leaf blowers, and bulldozers, along with hand tools like shovels, hoes, rakes, axes, and specialized wildfire equipment. We remove everything flammable—leaf litter, brush, and downed trees—to create a total break in fuel. When the fire hits this line, it has nothing left to burn and stops moving.

We work hard to build a fireline all the way around the fire, often using features like cliffs, creeks, or old roads to anchor us.

Sometimes, we extend these lines with backburns — controlled fires set inside the line to burn up any fuel between us and the wildfire. This helps slow or stop the fire’s progress.

The size and placement of the lines depend on the type of fuel, wind, and slope. We must watch for embers that might blow past the line, rolling logs, and dangerous dead trees that could fall.

Even after the fire is contained, the job isn't done. We still must "mop up" — digging through dirt, breaking apart smoldering stumps and brush, and making sure every hot spot is fully out. Without this careful work, in the right conditions, the fire could start again and escape.

As you can see, this process requires extreme manual labor and can take days or even weeks, and it requires a large, dedicated team working together.

During fire season and increasingly outside of the traditional season, Kentucky's wildland firefighters answer the call for marathons of fire response. We often work 12, 14, or 16+ hour shifts for days or weeks at a time, leaving behind our lives and families.

We do this in dangerous conditions: dodging falling trees weakened by fire, working near cliff lines and coal mine breaks, and managing rapidly shifting flame fronts. A few years ago, a young firefighter in our branch suffered serious burns during a fire. Situations change quickly, and danger is constant.

Our gear does not include masks or respirators like structure firefighters. We breathe smoke for hours as we work. Recent studies — including those following wildland firefighters in L.A. — are starting to link this exposure to elevated health risks, including breathing issues and cancer.

The physical toll is immense: carrying gear uphill, suffering muscle strains, lacerations, impact injuries, and chronic fatigue from long hours and little rest. Or injuries that don't jump off the page, like the painful heel blisters I spent weeks dealing with, trying to fight off infection, and dealing with pain in every step.

Despite the dangers we face and the expertise the job demands, wildland firefighters across the country have long struggled for recognition. Our work has too often been dismissed as "unskilled labor" — a label that has justified low pay, limited benefits, and few opportunities for advancement.



But let me be clear: this work is anything but unskilled.

Our job requires us to be part meteorologist, part topographer, and part biologist — constantly reading the land, the weather, and the fuel to predict how a fire will move. We make real-time risk assessments in life-threatening conditions to guide strategy and keep our crews safe. These are not skills you can pick up overnight. They come only through rigorous training and boots-on-the-ground experience.

We use specialized tools and tactics in dangerous and remote terrain — making the split-second decisions that protect lives, homes, and natural resources. We are firefighters, scientists, strategists, and first responders all at once.

Calling this “unskilled” isn’t just wrong — it’s dangerous. Because when skilled, experienced firefighters are undervalued, they leave. And when they leave, the communities we protect are left more vulnerable.

Earlier this year, my crew was working along a mountain ridge on a windy day — one of the most dangerous conditions a wildland firefighter can face. We were preparing to cut a new section of fireline when, suddenly and urgently, my crew leader — an individual with decades of experience — suddenly told us to retreat back the way we came.

Within 30 seconds, the spot where we had just been standing was swallowed by fire.

Maybe someone else would’ve caught the warning signs. But his instinct, sharpened by decades on the line, saved us from a dangerous spot.

That kind of institutional knowledge — the ability to read subtle shifts in wind, terrain, and fire behavior — is what keeps crews and communities safe. It’s not something you can teach in a classroom. It’s earned over years of experience, and it’s invaluable on the fireline.

This is why investing in experienced, highly trained wildland firefighters isn’t just important — it’s critical for public safety and disaster preparedness.

In the past few years, wildfire behavior has grown more intense — driven by the same weather patterns fueling other disasters across Kentucky. In the fall of 2023, the situation became so severe that we had to call in out-of-state support to keep up.

The need for a stable, skilled, and fully staffed firefighting force in Kentucky has never been more urgent. The safety of our communities depends on it.

That's why I'm here today. In Kentucky's most fire-prone areas, high turnover and chronic understaffing are putting both firefighters and communities at risk. But this is a problem we can solve. With the right investment in our state's wildland firefighters, we have a real opportunity to strengthen wildfire response — and improve disaster preparedness across the Commonwealth.

We do this work because we believe in it. We love it.

We hike into the smoke, dig fireline through the hills, and work long, exhausting shifts — not for the paycheck, but because we care deeply about our communities, our forests, and the people we serve alongside. This job is a calling. It's hard, dangerous, and demanding — but it's also meaningful, and we're proud to do it.

But every year, Emergency Firefighters are forced to leave the work they love — not because they want to, but because they simply can't afford to stay.

Let me be clear: Emergency Firefighters are not just support staff. We are the majority of the boots on the ground protecting Kentucky from wildfires. In the Hazard Branch, when fully staffed, there would be 15 full-time employees, 20 seasonal firefighters, and 63 Emergency Firefighters. That means the people doing most of the on-the-ground, high-risk fire response are the ones treated as temporary and replaceable.

Even the title — “Emergency” — is misleading. It sounds like we're only called in for rare, urgent events. The truth is we're there every high-fire danger day, every fire large and small, working just as hard — often harder — than anyone else.

Yet we receive no health insurance. No paid sick leave. No vacation time. No retirement. And we make just \$12.60 an hour.

That was only recently raised from \$12. And while that 60-cent raise was appreciated, it also felt like a slap in the face. Because when you're risking your life, putting your body on the line, and missing time with your family to serve your community, 60 cents doesn't reflect your worth. It doesn't pay the bills. It doesn't show respect.



This low and unpredictable pay forces good firefighters to walk away. I've watched coworkers skip meals during long shifts just to make sure their kids could eat at home. I've seen dedicated, skilled firefighters torn between the job they love and the families they're trying to support.

These are not just jobs — this is service. Emergency Firefighters don't show up for the money; they show up for the mission. But if we want them to stay — if we want to keep these experienced, passionate public servants in the ranks — we must give them a reason to stay.

That means fair pay. That means basic benefits. That means recognition of the skill, commitment, and sacrifice it takes to do this work.

It's time to stop treating wildland firefighters as expendable. It's time to invest in the people who are investing everything they have in protecting this state.

When I speak to Kentuckians, they're shocked to hear how little we're paid. It's not that people don't want to invest in first responders — they just don't know.

This isn't just a Kentucky problem — wildland firefighters across the country have been fighting for recognition and fair compensation for years. And only recently have those efforts started to gain ground at the federal level.

Earlier this year, Congress passed the Wildland Firefighter Paycheck Protection Act with broad bipartisan support. This legislation finally acknowledged the dangerous and essential nature of wildland firefighting — and took real steps to improve pay and retention for federal crews.

Now, entry-level federal wildland firefighters earn \$20.93 an hour in base pay — a significant step up from what many of us in Kentucky currently make.

In addition, they've introduced a new benefit called Incident Response Premium Pay, which increases compensation dramatically during extended wildfire operations. Once a federal firefighter has been assigned to a fire for more than 36 hours, they begin earning 4.5 times their base pay for the remainder of that deployment. That means during long, dangerous



campaigns — the kind that demand the most from firefighters — they're finally being paid something closer to what their work is worth.

In August, I traveled with a 20-person Kentucky wildfire crew to help respond to fires in Louisiana. Because Kentucky's peak fire seasons don't always overlap with those in other parts of the country, we're able to send crews to support other states during their times of need — without compromising our own readiness at home.

These out-of-state assignments not only provide critical help to partner agencies during major fire events, but they also generate revenue for Kentucky, as our resources and firefighters are paid through interagency agreements. It's a win-win: we gain valuable experience, represent our state proudly, and bring in funding that can support our own fire programs.

I was proud to be part of that crew. But I also saw the sacrifice it required. Two of our firefighters had newborn babies less than a month old — and yet they still made the difficult decision to leave their families and join the deployment. They didn't go because they wanted to be away during such an important time — they went because they needed the money.

Technically, we were representing Kentucky—but only the full-time and seasonal employees were on the state's payroll. Emergency Firefighters were hired as temporary federal employees. This meant giving up overtime pay just to receive the federal base pay, which is still nearly \$3 an hour higher than Kentucky's state overtime rate.

That's the reality many of us face. When the only opportunity to earn a living wage is to leave the state — or take on the most grueling assignments — it puts enormous pressure on firefighters and their families. These are public servants who should be supported, not put in impossible positions.

Meanwhile, our neighboring states have stepped up. Many have increased pay and opportunities for their firefighters in recent years. This investment has put Kentucky's support for its first responders at the bottom of the list compared to partner agencies.

In the last state budget session, while most state employees received raises, Emergency Firefighters were left out—again. This ongoing neglect causes our pay to fall further and further behind.

Kentucky	Tennessee	North Carolina	Virginia
\$12.60	\$15.00	\$15.60	\$20.60

And some other states with similar or lower cost of living also pay significantly more:

Michigan	Montana	New Mexico	North Dakota
\$18.00	\$19.05	\$19.24	\$21.53

Based on these comparisons and my own experience, I strongly recommend the Kentucky legislature set a base pay of \$17 an hour for Emergency Firefighters in the upcoming budget session. It's a meaningful increase from where we are now, but a necessary investment in public safety and the future of disaster response in Kentucky.

That August trip to Louisiana really highlighted the challenges firefighters face— what leads to high turnover and loss of crucial experience—but also the tremendous opportunity before us. Our crew didn't just complete our assignments; fire leadership often asked us to follow other crews and bring their work up to the standard set by Kentucky's team. It was hard work, but it was a proud moment. Word is spreading: if you want a crew who shows up and gets the job done right, call the Kentucky Crew.

Our state's firefighting force is ready to answer the call. We are underutilized and overlooked, but with proper investment, we could be a major force in addressing the growing disaster threats Kentucky faces.

Wildland Firefighters are qualified to respond to all types of emergencies. There were wildland firefighters at Ground Zero after 9/11 and leading recovery efforts after Hurricane Katrina. Every year, crews like ours are deployed nationwide for floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes.



Kentucky has faced four federally declared disasters this year alone. Yet, after recent major flooding in Eastern Kentucky, volunteers did most of the recovery work while our firefighters were never called in. That's a missed opportunity. We already have a precedent for interagency support— full-time wildland firefighters from Western Kentucky did some assistance with tornado cleanup using their chainsaw skills. With a better-staffed, better-trained workforce, Kentucky could leverage its firefighting force's manpower for disaster response and recovery on a much larger scale.

Beyond emergency response, wildland firefighters could also help with important resiliency-building projects like fuel reduction, hazard mitigation, trail and road maintenance, resource restoration, and community outreach. Many states use their fire crews during off-incident periods for these valuable efforts. It makes sense for Kentucky to do the same—to build stronger, safer communities while providing steady work for our firefighters.

Increasing investment in training and retaining firefighters won't just improve public safety at home—it could also boost revenue by enabling Kentucky crews to take on more out-of-state deployments. These deployments require highly certified leadership, which we currently lack due to limited training and high turnover. Investing now in our workforce will pay off in stronger, more skilled crews who can earn revenue while protecting Kentuckians.

This kind of investment will allow wildland firefighters to build real careers here in Kentucky, particularly for young people in Eastern Kentucky where we need them most. It will lead to faster, more effective wildfire response and open new opportunities for our state's firefighting force to be a key player in disaster preparedness and recovery.

I want to close by thanking you all for your time here today and urging this Task Force and the legislature as a whole to invest in our public safety and disaster response by investing in our state's wildland firefighters.

Thank you.