

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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<https://oversight.house.gov>

August 14, 2025

The Honorable Brooke Rollins  
Secretary  
Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Rollins:

The Trump Administration's unprecedented gutting of the federal workforce has disrupted the work of firefighters at the U.S. Forest Service as they work tirelessly to save lives and protect communities during wildfire season.<sup>1</sup> Forest Service firefighters' work is essential, especially as wildfire season has gotten longer and the annual number of large fires and areas burned has significantly increased in recent years.<sup>2</sup> The loss of firefighters and support personnel from the Forest Service and its parent agency, the Department of Agriculture (USDA), hurts preparedness and puts lives in danger and we urge you to take immediate action to ensure they have the staffing and resources they need to protect our communities.<sup>3</sup> USDA has also been inconsistent in its reporting on staffing, leading Americans to wonder if the Forest Service is actually prepared to keep them safe. To understand the extent to which the Trump Administration's policies have affected the ability of firefighters to protect the American public, we request information and documents regarding staffing and other changes at USDA and the Forest Service.

The Forest Service plays a vital role in fighting wildfires, with seasonal and permanent firefighters working alongside state and local first responders, as well as firefighters from other agencies, to respond to worsening wildfires across the country.<sup>4</sup> Forest Service firefighters were

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<sup>1</sup> *The US is Woefully Underprepared for Wildfire Season, Say Insiders: 'The States are Life and Death'*, The Guardian (June 19, 2025) (online at [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/19/summer-wildfire-preparedness](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/19/summer-wildfire-preparedness)).

<sup>2</sup> Wildfire, Climate Hubs, U.S. Department of Agriculture (accessed Aug. 4, 2025) (online at [www.climatehubs.usda.gov/taxonomy/term/398](http://www.climatehubs.usda.gov/taxonomy/term/398)); People Working in Fire, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (online at [www.fs.usda.gov/science-technology/fire/people](http://www.fs.usda.gov/science-technology/fire/people)) (accessed Aug. 4, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> *Forest Chief Says Losing 5,000 Employees Won't Impact Fire Season Response. Many Federal Firefighters Disagree*, Government Executive (June 11, 2025) (online at [www.govexec.com/management/2025/06/forest-chief-says-losing-5000-employees-wont-impact-fire-season-response-many-federal-firefighters-disagree/406010/](http://www.govexec.com/management/2025/06/forest-chief-says-losing-5000-employees-wont-impact-fire-season-response-many-federal-firefighters-disagree/406010/)).

<sup>4</sup> Wildland Fire Leadership Council, Forests and Rangelands, U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Interior (online at [www.forestsandrangelands.gov/leadership/index.shtml](http://www.forestsandrangelands.gov/leadership/index.shtml)) (accessed Aug. 4, 2025).

essential in responding to the devastating fires in California in January, with hundreds on the frontlines in Altadena and Pasadena.<sup>5</sup> The Trump Administration's staffing decisions are exacerbating an already dire situation: The Forest Service's firefighting capacity has been dangerously hampered by Department of Government Efficiency and Trump Administration layoffs, deferred resignations, and other early retirements and resignations just as climate change is extending the fire season.<sup>6</sup>

Extensive vacancies hinder overall community preparedness as firefighters are forced to go without the resources they need, including proper access to food and other critical supplies.<sup>7</sup> One crew leader in Oregon told Reuters that their team of firefighters suffered, including going hungry for days, not having adequate medical supplies, and even having to "scrounge for chainsaw fuel" to do their jobs after the loss of support staff.<sup>8</sup> Lost staff include administrative and human resources personnel, food service and sanitation workers, scientists, foresters, meteorologists, and others with deep institutional knowledge that help firefighters do their jobs.<sup>9</sup> These staffing cuts and vacancies have firefighters covering tasks, such as answering phones and cleaning toilets, rather than fighting fires.<sup>10</sup>

Ensuring adequate staffing for wildfire operations has been a challenge across administrations, but the ongoing and excessive efforts by the Trump Administration to arbitrarily reduce the size of the federal workforce has exacerbated the issue this year. The staffing issues are particularly glaring in an industry that requires specialized training and certifications, commonly known as "red cards," which allow employees to work on fire crews.<sup>11</sup> The Forest Service terminated approximately 700 employees with red cards in February, with some later rehired. In addition, the Forest Service has now lost approximately 1,400 staff with red cards to

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<sup>5</sup> *Federal Agencies Respond to LA Fires Amid Budget Crunch*, Government Executive (Jan. 9, 2025) (online at [www.govexec.com/workforce/2025/01/federal-agencies-respond-la-fires-amid-budget-crunch/402075/](http://www.govexec.com/workforce/2025/01/federal-agencies-respond-la-fires-amid-budget-crunch/402075/)).

<sup>6</sup> *The Forest Service Claims It's Fully Staffed for a Worsening Fire Season. Data Shows Thousands of Unfilled Jobs.*, ProPublica (July 22, 2025) (online at [www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season](http://www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season)); Climate Change Indicators: Wildfires, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (online at [www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-wildfires](http://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-wildfires)) (accessed Aug. 4, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> *US Faces Alarming Firefighter Shortage During Peak Wildfire Season, Data Reveals*, The Guardian (July 22, 2025) (online at [www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/22/us-firefighter-shortage-wildfires](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/22/us-firefighter-shortage-wildfires)); *As US Wildfires Rage, Trump Staff Cuts Force Firefighters to Clean Toilets, Critics Say*, Reuters (July 21, 2025) (online at [www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/](http://www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/)).

<sup>8</sup> *As US Wildfires Rage, Trump Staff Cuts Force Firefighters to Clean Toilets, Critics Say*, Reuters (July 21, 2025) (online at [www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/](http://www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/)).

<sup>9</sup> *The US is Woefully Underprepared for Wildfire Season, Say Insiders: 'The States are Life and Death'*, The Guardian (June 19, 2025) (online at [www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/19/summer-wildfire-preparedness](http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jun/19/summer-wildfire-preparedness)).

<sup>10</sup> *As US Wildfires Rage, Trump Staff Cuts Force Firefighters to Clean Toilets, Critics Say*, Reuters (July 21, 2025) (online at [www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/](http://www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/)).

<sup>11</sup> *The Forest Service Claims It's Fully Staffed for a Worsening Fire Season. Data Shows Thousands of Unfilled Jobs.*, ProPublica (July 22, 2025) (online at [www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season](http://www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season)).

the deferred resignation program.<sup>12</sup> Fewer staff with red cards means the Forest Service has had to deprioritize preventative work such as prescribed burns, which reduce flammable vegetation and prevent bigger fires in the future.<sup>13</sup>

The Forest Service has internally acknowledged the dire need for qualified personnel. In July, Forest Service Chief Tom Schultz sent an internal agency letter writing, “We know the demand for resources outpaces their availability.”<sup>14</sup> The Forest Service has worked to find additional capacity, including attempting to temporarily hire back employees who had taken the deferred resignation program to assist with wildfire operations.<sup>15</sup> While this may help address some of the shortfall for part of this year, it is a temporary solution as these employees leave federal service this September.<sup>16</sup>

The Forest Service’s internal posture stands in contrast to public comments that USDA was outpacing hiring needs.<sup>17</sup> It is also inconsistent with the Forest Service Chief’s testimony before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, where he claimed that the Forest Service was at 99% staffing for firefighters and there had not been changes to resource availability.<sup>18</sup> According to internal data, firefighting vacancies are not at 1%, but rather, at approximately 27% as of mid-July.<sup>19</sup> The shortages are worst in the Pacific Northwest, a region at high fire risk this year and with a vacancy rate closer to 39%.<sup>20</sup> As one fire chief reported,

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<sup>12</sup> *The Forest Service Claims It’s Fully Staffed for a Worsening Fire Season. Data Shows Thousands of Unfilled Jobs.*, ProPublica (July 22, 2025) (online at [www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season](http://www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season)).

<sup>13</sup> *Trump Said Cuts Wouldn’t Affect Public Safety. Then He Fired Hundreds of Workers Who Help Fight Wildfires.*, ProPublica (April 7, 2025) (online at [www.propublica.org/article/trump-doge-cuts-forest-service-firefighting](http://www.propublica.org/article/trump-doge-cuts-forest-service-firefighting)); *How Trump’s Federal Funding and Hiring Freezes Are Leaving America Vulnerable to Catastrophic Wildfire*, ProPublica (February 14, 2025) (online at [www.propublica.org/article/trump-funding-freeze-wildfire-season](http://www.propublica.org/article/trump-funding-freeze-wildfire-season)).

<sup>14</sup> *The Forest Service Claims It’s Fully Staffed for a Worsening Fire Season. Data Shows Thousands of Unfilled Jobs.*, ProPublica (July 22, 2025) (online at [www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season](http://www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season)).

<sup>15</sup> *Responding to and Mitigating the Threats from Wildland Fire at the U.S. Department of Agriculture*, Secretary’s Memorandum 1078-011 (May 20, 2025) (online at [www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sm-1078-011.pdf](http://www.usda.gov/sites/default/files/documents/sm-1078-011.pdf)); *Guidance for Deferred Resignation Program (DRP) Employees Taking Fire Assignments*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Fire and Aviation Management) (online at [www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/FAM\\_2025/Time%20and%20Travel%20Guidance%20for%20DRP\\_FINAL\\_508\\_20250603.pdf](http://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/FAM_2025/Time%20and%20Travel%20Guidance%20for%20DRP_FINAL_508_20250603.pdf)).

<sup>16</sup> *Forest Chief Says Losing 5,000 Employees Won’t Impact Fire Season Response. Many Federal Firefighters Disagree*, Government Executive (June 11, 2025) (online at [www.govexec.com/management/2025/06/forest-chief-says-losing-5000-employees-wont-impact-fire-season-response-many-federal-firefighters-disagree/406010/](http://www.govexec.com/management/2025/06/forest-chief-says-losing-5000-employees-wont-impact-fire-season-response-many-federal-firefighters-disagree/406010/)).

<sup>17</sup> *The Forest Service Claims It’s Fully Staffed for a Worsening Fire Season. Data Shows Thousands of Unfilled Jobs.*, ProPublica (July 22, 2025) (online at [www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season](http://www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season)).

<sup>18</sup> Full Committee Hearing to Examine the President’s Budget Request for the U.S. Forest Service for Fiscal Year 2026, Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources (July 10, 2025) (online at [www.energy.senate.gov/hearings/2025/7/full-comm](http://www.energy.senate.gov/hearings/2025/7/full-comm)); *Wildland Firefighting Workforce*, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (accessed Aug. 1, 2025) (online at [www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/fire/workforce](http://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/fire/workforce)).

<sup>19</sup> *The Forest Service Claims It’s Fully Staffed for a Worsening Fire Season. Data Shows Thousands of Unfilled Jobs.*, ProPublica (July 22, 2025) (online at [www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season](http://www.propublica.org/article/forest-service-staff-fire-season)).

<sup>20</sup> *US Faces Alarming Firefighter Shortage During Peak Wildfire Season, Data Reveals*, The Guardian

"They can claim we get all the support we need, but in reality, it isn't even close."<sup>21</sup>

These cuts come at a time when the Trump Administration appears to be prioritizing costly reorganizations and relocations, with one USDA budget employee estimating that USDA's planned relocation would cost \$150,000 per employee.<sup>22</sup> The Trump Administration has also made plans to consolidate the federal government's wildland firefighters, who are currently split between the Forest Service and the Department of Interior, risking further disruption and confusion in the midst of fire season.<sup>23</sup>

These indiscriminate cuts and lack of transparency come at the expense of disaster preparedness and response across the federal government, putting the safety of millions of Americans in question. To ensure Congress can effectively perform its statutorily required oversight role and protect the American public, we request that you provide the following documents and information by August 28, 2025:

1. A detailed and comprehensive accounting of current staffing and staffing changes at the Forest Service, including firefighting jobs and individuals with red cards, as well as administrative personnel, support staff, and other positions which contribute to disaster preparedness and firefighting, organized by region, since January 20, 2025;
2. All documents and communications regarding disaster preparedness and response and firefighting, including all materials prepared in response to Memo 1078-11 such as the information and materials produced in response to Section 4B; and
3. All documents and communications regarding staffing, hiring, reductions in force, the Deferred Resignation Program, or the "Fork in the Road," and firefighting resources and capacity at the Forest Service.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee of the House of Representatives and has broad authority to investigate "any matter" at "any time" under House Rule X. If you have any questions about this request, please contact

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(July 22, 2025) (online at [www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/22/us-firefighter-shortage-wildfires](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/22/us-firefighter-shortage-wildfires)).

<sup>21</sup> *As US Wildfires Rage, Trump Staff Cuts Force Firefighters to Clean Toilets, Critics Say*, Reuters (July 21, 2025) (online at [www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/](http://www.reuters.com/business/environment/us-wildfires-rage-trump-staff-cuts-force-firefighters-clean-toilets-critics-say-2025-07-21/)).

<sup>22</sup> *USDA to Relocate Thousands of Staff Outside Washington, Consolidate Dozens of Offices*, Government Executive (July 24, 2025) (online at [www.govexec.com/management/2025/07/usda-relocate-thousands-staff-outside-washington-consolidate-dozens-offices/406960/](http://www.govexec.com/management/2025/07/usda-relocate-thousands-staff-outside-washington-consolidate-dozens-offices/406960/)).

<sup>23</sup> *Empowering Commonsense Wildfire Prevention and Response*, Executive Order (June 12, 2025) (online at [www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/empowering-commonsense-wildfire-prevention-and-response/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/06/empowering-commonsense-wildfire-prevention-and-response/)); *Trump Tells Forest Service, Interior to Merge Wildfire Management Programs*, Federal News Network (June 16, 2025) (online at [federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2025/06/trump-tells-forest-service-interior-to-merge-wildfire-management-programs/](http://federalnewsnetwork.com/management/2025/06/trump-tells-forest-service-interior-to-merge-wildfire-management-programs/)).

The Honorable Brooke Rollins

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Committee Democratic staff at (202) 225-5051. Thank you for your prompt attention to this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert Garcia", written over a horizontal line.

Robert Garcia  
Ranking Member

cc: The Honorable James Comer, Chairman

Tom Schultz, Chief, U.S. Forest Service