

INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT AND JOBS ACT



IIJA – Federal Wildland Firefighter Salaries and Expenses – Informational Report 08801-0001-23 – February 2024

When signed into law on November 15, 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provided the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Forest Service (FS) with funding totaling \$480 million for FYs 2022 through 2026 for the salaries and expenses of Federal wildland firefighters.¹ As part of the Office of Inspector General’s (OIG) oversight responsibility, we are issuing this informational report to review and report information about FS’ Federal wildland firefighter salaries and expenses for transparency and disclosure.

The IIJA requirements represent a significant step forward to deliver a temporary pay raise to Federal wildland firefighters across the nation along with a support system that will address many challenges that have plagued the workforce. The reforms are intended to help prevent employee burnout and cumulative fatigue from the higher demands due to longer and more intense fire seasons. The IIJA funding was made available for the following requirements in Figure 1 below.

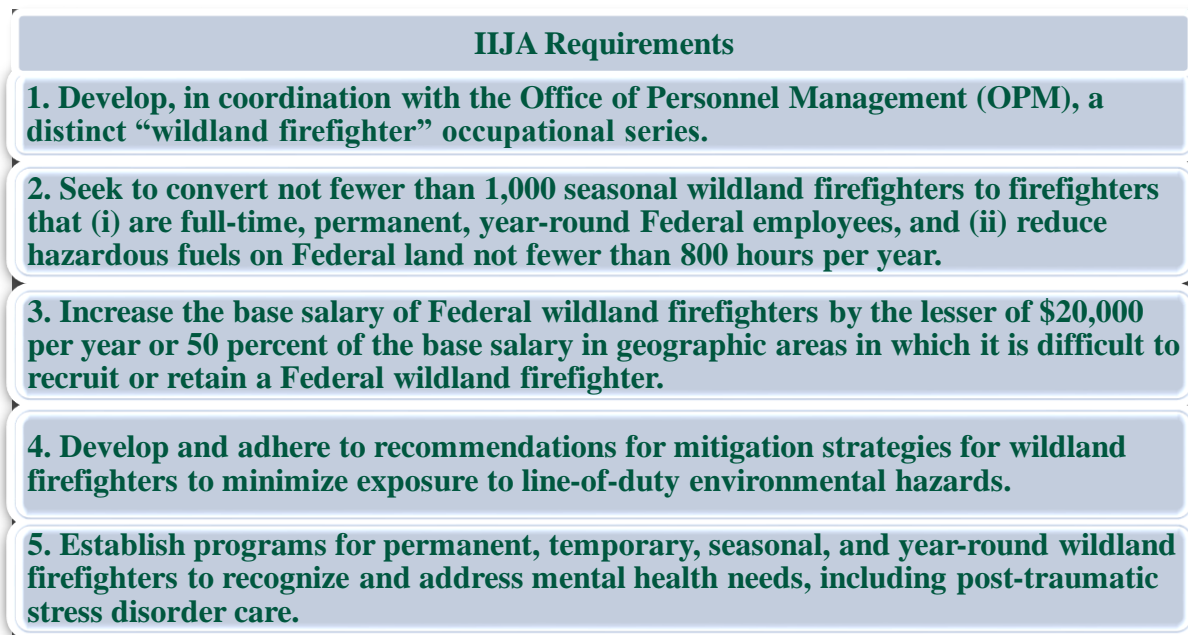


Figure 1: IIJA requirements.^{1,2}

¹ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(c)(2), 135 Stat. 1098 (2021).

² According to FS, the converted Federal wildland firefighters are required to reduce hazardous fuels on Federal land for at least 800 hours per year.

About FS' Federal Wildland Firefighters

FS is responsible for sustaining the health, diversity, and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. FS Wildland Fire Management protects life, property, and natural resources on National Forest System lands, other Federal lands, and an additional 20 million acres of non-Federal lands under protection agreements.

Overall, Federal wildland firefighters are responsible to help save lives and protect communities, infrastructure, and private, public, and Tribal lands from wildfires. Specifically, Federal wildland firefighters may work in a variety of positions with job duties to fight wildfires. These include (1) hand crews, who construct fire lines; (2) helitack crews, who rapidly respond to wildfire situations or medical emergencies by helicopter; (3) hotshot crews, who are trained for demanding and hazardous tasks, such as the use of firelines to stop wildfire spread by removing vegetation that fuels them and various suppression tactics to control wildland fires; and (4) smokejumpers, who provide quick initial attacks on fires in remote areas. According to FS, as of July 1, 2023, the FS Federal wildland firefighter workforce was composed of more than 12,000 firefighters, including fire management and support staff.

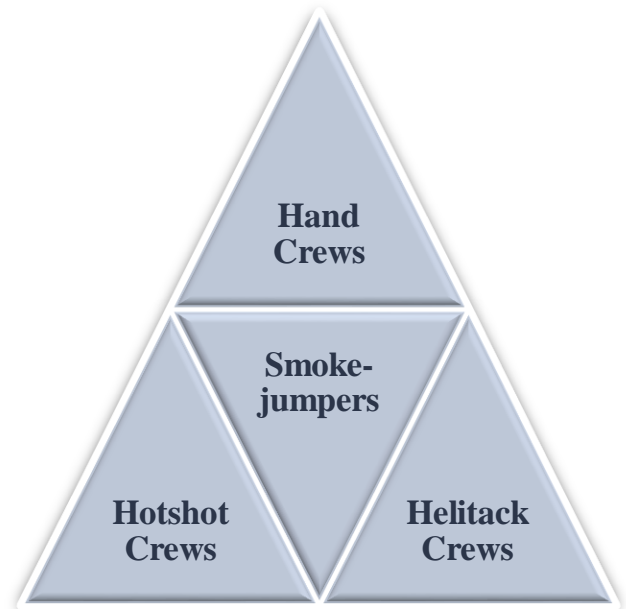


Figure 2: Federal wildland firefighter positions.



Figure 3: Federal wildland firefighters work in a variety of positions.³

³ From left to right: a sky crane with a tanker module stand tall and ready at a USDA FS Smokejumper Base/ Single Engine Air Tanker Base/ Helitack Base (photo by Lance Cheung from USDA's Flickr account); a Hot shot crew prepares to fight a fire (photo from USDA's Flickr account); Smokejumper training for a fire season (photo by Samsara Chapman Duffey from FS Northern Region's Flickr account); and firefighters heading off to fight a fire (photo from USDA's Flickr account). The photos do not depict any particular audit, inspection, or investigation.

IIJA Funding

IIJA provides \$480 million for fiscal year (FY) 2022 through 2026 for Federal wildland firefighters' salaries and expenses.^{4,5} FS allocated funding in its IIJA Spend Plan for a Federal wildland firefighter pay increase, mental health programs, FS operations for general program support, and OIG oversight.⁶ See Figure 4 below for a breakdown of the funding allocation.

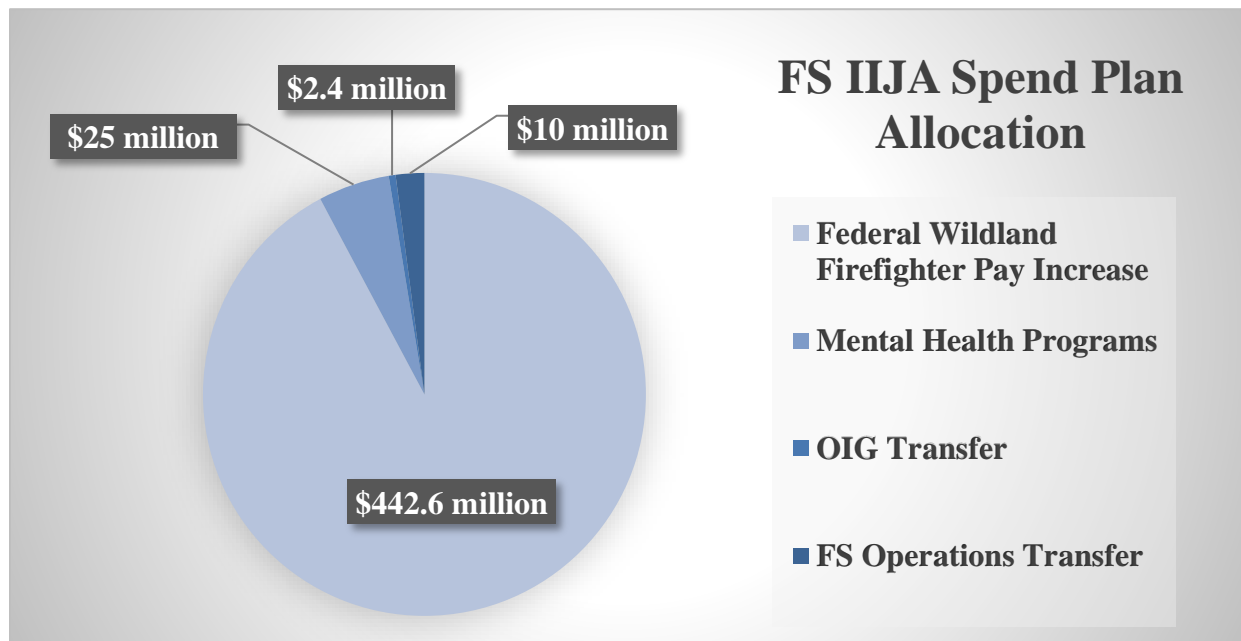


Figure 4: FS IIJA spend plan allocation.

⁴ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(c)(2), 135 Stat. 1098 (2021).

⁵ IIJA allotted one-half of 1 percent of the funds to OIG for oversight.

⁶ USDA FS, "Spend Plan for Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act" (2022).

Develop a “Wildland Firefighter” Occupational Series

Federal wildland firefighters lacked an official, uniform occupational series within the Federal Government that recognized the unique, dangerous, and highly skilled work performed to suppress wildfires.⁷ During FY 2022, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) worked with FS and the Department of Interior to develop the Wildland Fire Management Series. The series was released in June 2022, and it was to be implemented within 12 months. However, FS requested an extension to implement the new series due to the logistical challenges⁸ faced by the large number of parties involved in the development process and the complexities of the reclassification of position descriptions. OPM granted FS the extension, which moved the implementation deadline to December 31, 2023. According to FS, as of January 23, 2024, the new “wildland firefighter” occupational series has not been fully implemented.⁹

Seek to Convert Seasonal Wildland Firefighters to Full-Time, Permanent, Year-Round Federal Employees

With the wildfire activity now continuing year-round, having a permanent, professional firefighting workforce is essential to addressing this threat.¹⁰ IJA requires FS to seek to convert not fewer than 1,000 seasonal¹¹ wildland firefighters to full-time,¹² permanent, year-round Federal employees from FYs 2022 through 2026.¹³ According to FS, as of November 2023, there have been no temporary firefighters “converted” to permanent full-time firefighters that will conduct at least 800 hours of prescribed burn activity. In FY 2022 through August 2023, FS hired over 500 employees into full-time year-round wildland firefighter positions that were previously seasonal wildland firefighter positions. FS explained, due to OPM guidance, that instead of a conversion, seasonal wildland firefighter employees were hired back as full-time, permanent, year-round Federal employees. FS plans to continue hiring additional wildland firefighters in the upcoming FY to strengthen its overall workforce.

⁷ USDA, *Fact Sheet: Supporting the Wildland Firefighting Workforce*.

⁸ According to FS, existing position descriptions did not always reflect the complex technical skills needed for wildland firefighting and incident qualifications. In addition, some firefighting positions (e.g., heavy equipment operators) were not listed in the new “wildland firefighter” occupational series.

⁹ According to FS, the agency is currently pending union review and input on a majority of the position descriptions. The implementation of the new series will continue throughout FY 2024.

¹⁰ Fact Sheet, *The Biden-Harris Administration Continues Efforts to Address Growing Wildfire Threat*

¹¹ According to OPM, a seasonal schedule requires an employee to work full-time for less than 12 months each year on an annually recurring basis. OPM, <https://dw.opm.gov/datastandards/referenceData> (last visited Nov. 14, 2023).

¹² According to OPM, a full-time schedule requires an employee to work 40 hours as prescribed by the administrative work week for that particular employment group or class. OPM, <https://dw.opm.gov/datastandard/referenceData> (last visited Nov. 14, 2023).

¹³ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(d), 135 Stat. 1100 (2021).



Figure 5: Firefighter at work on a fire in a national forest on July 18, 2016. Photo from USDA’s Flickr account. It does not depict any particular audit, inspection, or investigation.

IIJA requires the new full-time, permanent, year-round wildland firefighters to reduce hazardous fuels on Federal land not fewer than 800 hours per year.¹⁴ While Federal wildland firefighters assist with reducing hazardous fuels on Federal land, FS stated that it foresees potential challenges with ensuring each Federal wildland firefighter performs not fewer than 800 hours annually due to the time demands spent on suppressing wildfires, particularly during high fire years. In addition, FS stated there is currently no way to track whether a specific person/position is able to conduct 800 hours of prescribed burn activity in a given year, and the dedicated hours cannot be guaranteed as the obligation to respond to unprescribed wildland fires is paramount.¹⁵

Increase the Base Salary of Federal Wildland Firefighters

According to FS, Federal wildland firefighters have faced the challenges of longer, more severe fire years, with pay that lags behind other counterparts in the private sector and State and local governments. The supplemental salary increase authorized by IIJA is payable upon a determination by the Secretary of Agriculture, in coordination with the OPM, that the wildland firefighter is located in a specified geographic area where it is difficult to recruit or retain wildland firefighters.¹⁶ Based on this determination, IIJA requires FS to increase the base salary of Federal wildland firefighters by the lesser of \$20,000 per year or 50 percent of the base salary in those geographic areas.¹⁷

¹⁴ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(d)(4), 135 Stat. 1101 (2021).

¹⁵ We plan to follow up with FS on implementation of this requirement for hours spent reducing hazardous fuels on Federal land in the next phase of our review.

¹⁶ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(d)(4), 135 Stat. 1101 (2021).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Determination of “specific geographic areas in which it is difficult to recruit or retain” included meeting at least one of the following criteria (see Figure 6 below):

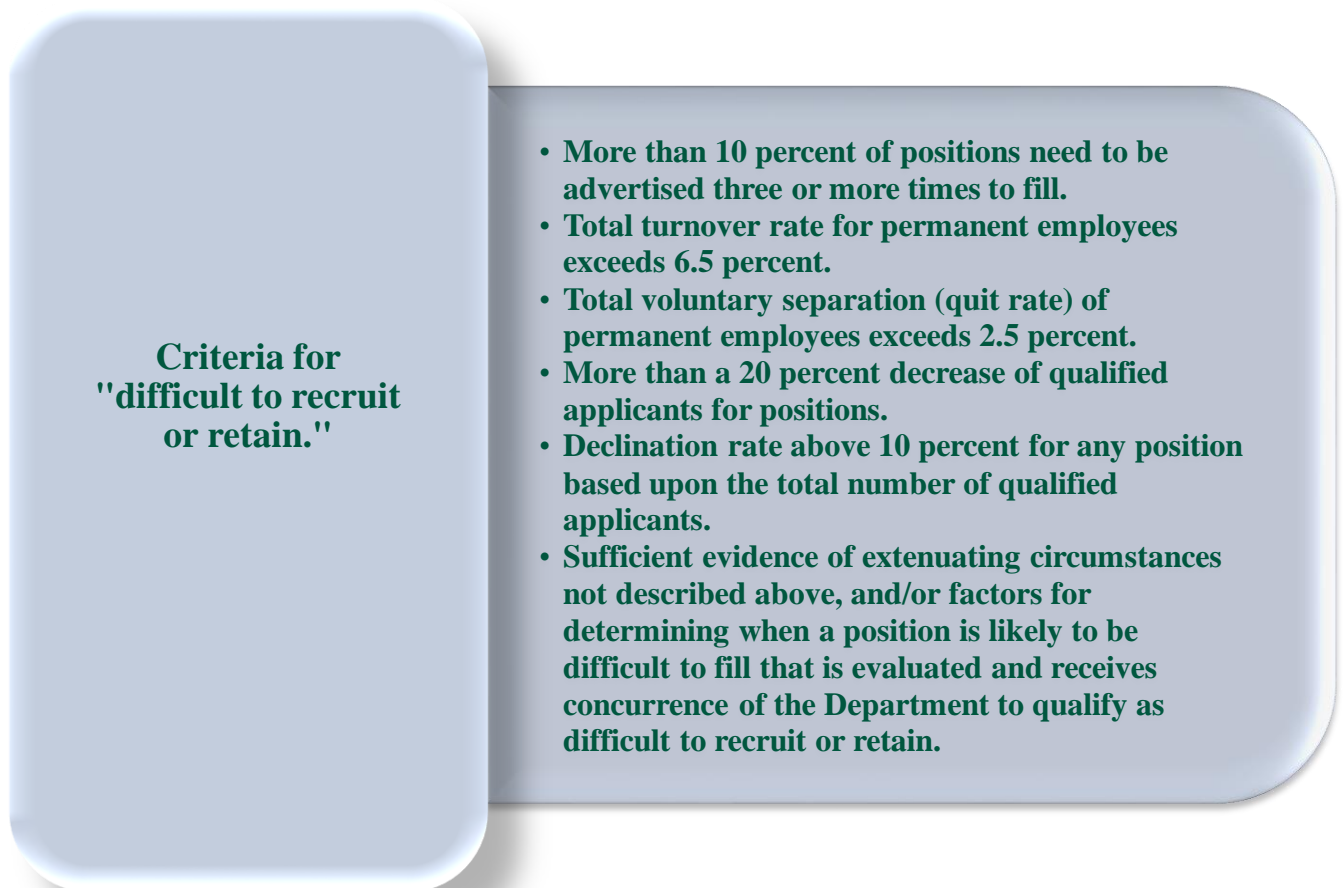
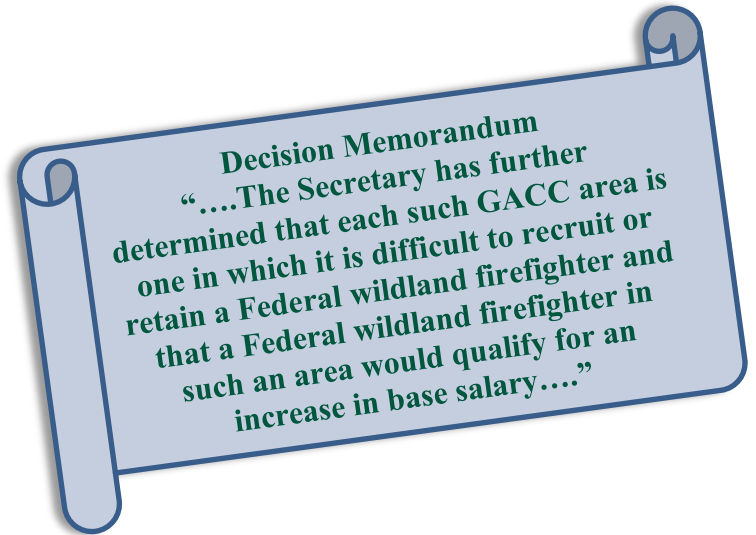


Figure 6: Criteria for “difficult to recruit or retain.”

On June 17, 2022, the Secretary of Agriculture, in coordination with the Director of OPM, determined in a decision memorandum that each geographic area would qualify for an increase in base salary. This memorandum further states this determination is effective until the funding authorized by IIJA is exhausted or until this determination is modified based on evidence that it is no longer difficult to recruit or retain a Federal wildland firefighter in a particular area.

According to FS, as of June 30, 2023, there were more than 14,000 Federal wildland firefighters that received the supplemental salary increase. FS is still working to process supplemental pay increases for unresolved employee cases with a target of resolving in later FY 2024. According to FS, as of September 6, 2023, FS expended over \$350 million of \$442 million on Federal wildland firefighter pay increases.



FS published on its website a [series of stories](#) of how the temporary pay supplements have impacted firefighters' lives.¹⁸

¹⁸ USDA Forest Service, Affording the Fight – Finances Frequent Foe for Firefighters. Last accessed on Nov. 13, 2023.

Develop Mitigation Strategies to Minimize Exposure to Line-of-Duty Environmental Hazards



Figure 8: On August 6, 2013, engine crews pre-positioned fire hoses to run sprinklers that spray water on structures and surrounding areas or provide initial attack on small fires that may start up in a national forest. Photo by Lance Cheung from USDA's Flickr account. It does not depict any particular audit, inspection, or investigation.

According to FS, Federal wildland firefighters work in a dynamic environment and are often faced with exposure to potential harmful levels of contaminants in wildland smoke. IJJA requires FS to develop and adhere to recommendations for mitigation strategies for wildland firefighters to minimize exposure due to line-of-duty environmental hazards.¹⁹ FS has started the process of developing these recommendations.

FS, in coordination with the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG),²⁰ defined an *environmental hazard* as a threat to wildland fire personnel in the wildland fire environment that has the potential to cause a physical harm, injury, or damage health. FS and NWCG drafted a list of physical, chemical, biological, and workplace environmental hazards.²¹ However, FS is in the

¹⁹ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(d)(4), 135 Stat. 1101 (2021).

²⁰ The NWCG provides national leadership to enable interoperable wildland fire operations among Federal, State, local, Tribal, and territorial partners. Additionally, the NWCG ensures that activities contribute to safe, effective, and coordinated national interagency wildland fire operations.

²¹ The definition and list of hazards are newly developed and are currently in draft status.

process of reviewing its policies, NWCG standards, and other interagency guidance to identify mitigations and recommendations that already exist for the environmental hazards identified. Further, FS stated it will develop future research priority areas to evaluate these hazards and develop new recommendations. Timeframes for those developments are anticipated by the start of the 2024 primary fire season.²²

Establish Mental Health Programs

According to FS, Federal wildland firefighters struggle with housing, cost of living, and mental health issues. IJJA requires FS to establish programs to recognize and address mental health needs, including post-traumatic stress disorder care for permanent, temporary, seasonal, and year-round wildland firefighters.²³ As of September 6, 2023, FS expended over \$1.2 million on mental health programs. FS is continuing its efforts to expand existing capabilities to address and mitigate the significant mental health challenges faced by Federal wildland firefighters. FS has the following mental health programs; see Figure 9 below.^{24, 25, 26, 27}

²² According to FS, the 2024 primary fire season nationally starts in June. However, the activity increases at different times in different places. For example, the fire season for the Southwest picks up in April/May, whereas the Northwest fire season begins in summer.

²³ Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Pub. L. No. 117-58, § 40803(d)(5), 135 Stat. 1101 (2021).

²⁴ The Employee Assistance Program offers professional guidance for personal or work-related problems and free assessments, short-term counseling, and referral information.

²⁵ The Casualty Assistance Program takes a coordinated approach to assist employees, their families, and the larger interagency community following a casualty to ensure support is available after an accident or injury. The Critical Incident Stress Management Program provides crisis intervention techniques and trained peer support to assist employees after a critical injury or fatality. This program also assists with preparing agency personnel about traumatic stress with training and education.

²⁶ The Fire and Aviation Management-Holistic Firefighter Work Program includes a 3-day course covering all elements of human performance through a variety of methods (e.g., lectures, interactive workshops, exercise and relaxation demonstrations, small and large group activities, experiential exercises, and question-and-answer sessions).

²⁷ The Federal Wildland Firefighter Health and Wellbeing Program is in development.



Figure 9: Existing and developing mental health programs.

FS is working with the Department of the Interior to create the Federal Wildland Firefighter Behavioral Health Program. This program is being implemented in a multi-phase approach, as shown in Figure 10 below.

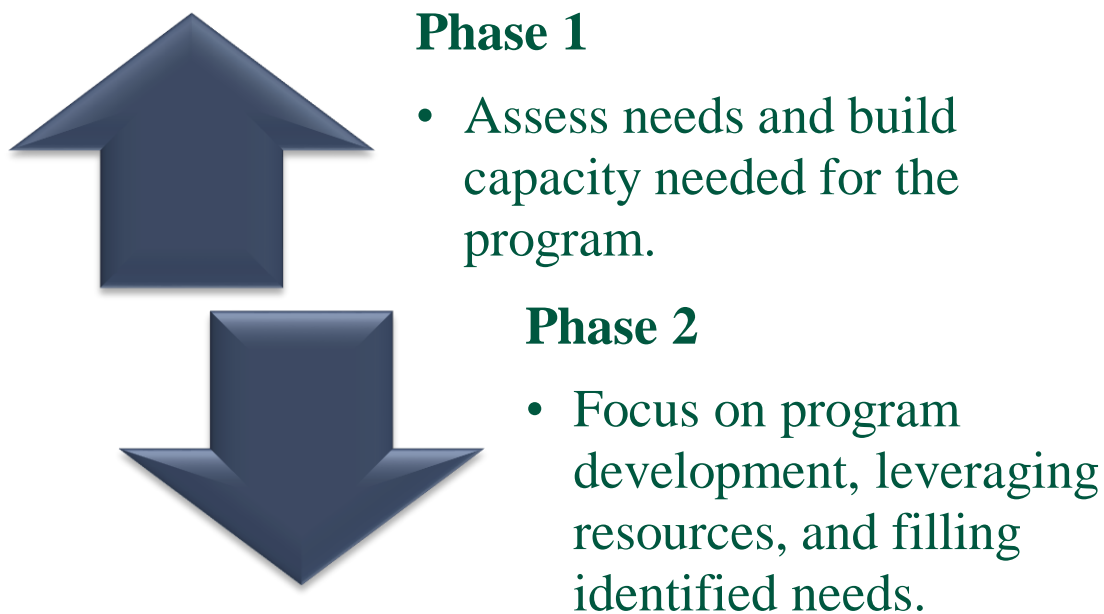


Figure 10: Federal Wildland Firefighter Health and Wellbeing Program implementation phases.

FS is working with mental health experts to ensure Federal wildland firefighters have the best support available. This includes hiring a new public health service officer and other mental health providers offering specialty services.

Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

We conducted this work as part of an ongoing inspection with the overall objective to conduct integrated oversight of the funding provided to FS' Federal wildland firefighter salaries and expenses from IIJA. In this phase, we reviewed and reported information about the Federal wildland firefighter salaries and expenses, for the purpose of transparency and disclosure.

To accomplish our objectives, we reviewed the implementation of IIJA requirements for FS' Federal wildland firefighter salaries and expenses. Specifically, we gained an understanding of FS activities for meeting such requirements through publicly available information, discussions with FS officials, and a review of documentation provided by FS. We provided a draft of this report to FS management for their review and technical comments. We incorporated their comments into our report, as appropriate. This report includes information about FS' Federal wildland firefighters' salaries and expenses through February 1, 2024.

We conducted our inspection in accordance with the Council of the Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency's *Quality Standards for Inspection and Evaluation*.

Banner photo: Hotshot firefighters dig a fireline on a steep-sloped mountain to suppress a fire in a national forest. Photo by Cecilio Ricardo from the USDA's Flickr account. It does not depict any particular audit, inspection, or investigation.

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