



Federal Wildland Firefighter Request for Presumptive Health Coverage for Exposure to Environmental Hazards

Issue:

Federal wildland firefighters (WFFs) are a national shared resource, who regularly work for extended periods of time while exposed to extremely hazardous environmental conditions to support fire suppression and management activities. Federal wildland firefighters are regularly exposed to harmful environmental hazards, such as but not limited to; smoke, silicates, and chemicals that are known to cause serious acute and chronic health issues. It is estimated WFFs with five to 25 years in service who have spent 49 - 98 days (annually) exposed to environmental hazards are at:

16-30% increased risk of mortality from cardiovascular disease for WFFs (1)

8-43% increased risk of mortality from lung cancer for WFFs(1)

Unlike structural firefighters, WFFs do not use self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) or wear non-porous personal protective equipment (“turnouts”) while engaged in wildland fire suppression or prescribed burning.

Multiple State and local fire departments have presumptive healthcare coverage for Firefighters who have been exposed to environmental hazards that occur on the job (OTJ) from known environmental hazards.

49/50 states offer Firefighters presumptive coverage for OTJ related cancers (2)

42/50 states offer Firefighters presumptive coverage for OTJ related cardiovascular disease (2)

Given the average annual duration of exposure to environmental hazards federal WFFs encounter, federal WFFs are requesting presumptive health coverage through legislative efforts.

Background:

Federal Wildland Firefighters are regularly exposed to environmental hazards while on the job and during off-hours while sleeping outdoors at incident command posts and at fire camps. Some of these hazards include but are not limited to; smoke and silicate inhalation, off-gassing from burning structures/vehicles, and chemicals used during the suppression of wildland fires and during the management of prescribed fires. Given the continued increase in intensity and duration of wildfires and the increased proximity to the urban interface and communities, federal wildland firefighters and incident management teams are more regularly exposed to environmental hazards and harmful chemicals. There is currently no presumptive healthcare coverage in place to protect federal wildland firefighters from higher risk of mortality from on-the-job exposure to environmental hazards.

Recommendations:

- Grant presumptive health coverage to permanent and temporary federal wildland firefighters for acute and chronic illness due to environmental job-related exposure including but not limited to smoke and silicate inhalation and firefighting chemical exposure.
- Establish wildland firefighter time-in-service exposure time frames for coverage (for example 12 months time-in-service to receive coverage)
- Create National Federal Wildland Firefighter Cancer and Cardiovascular Disease Database
- Develop and adhere to recommendations and mitigation strategies to minimize exposure to environmental hazards (ie. smoke, silicates, and hazardous chemicals regularly used in suppression and management activities)

(1)-<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30981117/>

(2)-https://www.iaff.org/wp-content/uploads/Presumptive_Disability_Chart_as_of_4-12-2021.pdf