

SENATE BILL 494

Study of Classification, Compensation, Workforce Structure,
and Organizational Alignment for Forestry and Wildland Fire
Positions

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Chief Human Resources Office



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Accessibility Statement

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Executive Summary

Senate Bill 494 (2025) directs the Chief Human Resources Office (CHRO) to conduct a comprehensive review of classification, compensation, supervisory structure, and staffing needs for forestry and wildland fire positions within the Oregon Department of Forestry (the department). CHRO completed this review and identified that outdated classification structures, seasonal-dependent staffing models, limited supervisory depth, and constrained funding structures limit the department's ability to meet modern wildfire response demands.

To address these issues, CHRO recommends modernizing job classifications, improving pay alignment, expanding supervisory capacity, stabilizing both seasonal and permanent staffing levels, and supporting a workforce model capable of year-round wildfire mitigation, response, and preparedness.

Legislative Background

Testimony presented during the 2025 legislative hearings described persistent challenges recruiting and retaining qualified firefighters, noting increasing competition from federal agencies that offer more permanent positions, longer seasonal appointments, and higher wages for firefighting personnel. They also described barriers to preventing seasonal firefighters from transitioning into fuels reduction work, the need for clearer career pathways, and structural issues such as outdated job classifications and supervisory burdens during peak fire activity. These concerns shaped how CHRO conducted this review and informed the focus areas of the analysis.

Oregon's Changing Wildfire Environment

Oregon's 2026 wildfire season has been one of the most severe on record. By August 1, fire agencies across the state had responded to roughly 1,350 fires, which together burned more than two million acres. Oregon's 10-year average for the year is approximately 2,000 fires at 660,000 acres. More than 12,000 emergency personnel from local, state, tribal, and federal partners were assigned to active fires, emphasizing the scale of the response effort. The fires triggered evacuation notices for over 20,000 homes, and at least 40 homes and 126 outbuildings were lost across 13 communities.

This changing fire environment shows the need for a modern workforce structure that supports continuous fuels reduction, restoration, and risk mitigation to improve long-term wildfire resilience. With fewer people entering natural resource protection and management careers, it is becoming harder to recruit and retain qualified staff to meet

these needs. [Learn more in this Oregon Forest Operations and Management Workforce Study.](#)

Analysis and Findings

The CHRO reviewed the department's workforce structure using multiple sources, including Workday data, interviews with forestry leadership, managers, and field staff, and comparisons with other states and federal standards. The review included:

- Current positions across wildfire, forestry, aviation, field operations, and supervisory roles.
- Compensation structures, salary relationships, differential pay access, and compression.
- Seasonal and permanent staffing patterns.
- Span-of-control and supervisory capacity.
- Career progression, qualification development, and workforce readiness.
- Comparison to federal wildfire compensation systems.

Outdated Classification Structure

Our research shows the department relies on supervisory and managerial classifications that no longer match the technical and operational responsibilities these roles now carry. Many of these jobs were developed before today's wildfire complexity, dual-season workload, and technology-driven field operations, and classifications no longer reflect current needs.

We found several technical roles demonstrate how far the work has evolved beyond existing classifications. For example, geographic information system and drone specialists are assigned to natural resource specialist classifications even though these are different jobs that require advanced geospatial and unmanned aircraft system expertise not well captured in existing classifications. Aviation roles show similar gaps. Aviation staff perform highly specialized and regulated work without aviation-specific classifications. Instead, they are being placed in natural resource specialist or wildland fire suppression specialist classifications that do not align with aviation coordination or wildfire aviation leadership duties.

These occupational misalignments directly affect supervisors and managers. The research shows that supervisors, such as those in wildland fire supervisor, forest officer, and district-level wildfire leadership positions, are overseeing complex technical operations without the corresponding classification or pay structure, demonstrating that managerial responsibilities have outgrown the classifications designed to support them. Managers are expected to lead teams performing advanced aviation, geospatial, and technology-based

work, but their own classifications do not provide the authority levels, technical pathways, or compensation structures needed to oversee these functions.

These findings show that supervisory, managerial, and technical classified jobs all require modernization. The research highlighted the need for a holistic study of classified, supervisory, and managerial classifications to ensure they accurately reflect modern duties, technical requirements, and career pathways across forestry and wildfire programs.

Workforce Structure Gaps

Our research found that the department depends on more than 200 seasonal and temporary employees, many of whom serve in front-line wildfire roles. However, seasonal employees cannot meet National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) supervisory qualifications because seasonal work does not provide the duration, continuity, or multi-year experience needed to advance, making it an unreliable career-building pathway.

These qualification limits become more visible when paired with workforce data. Although supervisor-to-employee ratios appear acceptable when averaged across all divisions, these averages hide sharp seasonal spikes. During peak wildfire months, wildfire and field operations divisions reach ratios of 1:16 to 1:27, far above the department's internal standard of 1:7 and the statewide baseline of 1:11. These high ratios occur because the department adds hundreds of seasonal staff for incident response while relying on a much smaller number of permanent supervisors who carry year-round responsibilities.

Beyond staffing volume alone, operational requirements also increase supervisory pressure. National crew-deployment standards and interstate mobilization expectations place additional demands on supervisors, while seasonal employees have limited time to build NWCG qualifications needed for advancement. This creates a persistent imbalance: rapid seasonal hiring paired with slow supervisory qualification development.

All of this considered, the department's seasonal staffing model no longer fits the scale or complexity of today's wildfire operations.

Compression Limited but Present

To check for pay compression, we compared the top pay step of each supervisor classification with the top pay step of the classification it supervises. Compression occurs when the supervisor's pay is less than seven percent higher than the employee's pay.

Most supervisor and manager pay levels are set high enough above the employees they oversee, with many showing more than a seven-percent difference. This indicates that pay compression is not a widespread problem across the department. When compression does happen, it is limited to a few situations where reporting relationships are misaligned

or where outdated job classifications leave too few options. In these cases, supervisors and non-supervisors may end up with similar pay. These issues come from structural misalignment, rather than a system-wide compensation problem, and can be fixed through organizational changes and modernizing job classifications.

Below are specific cases where compression was seen:

- Forest manager 1 compressed with natural resource specialist 3 by 4.38 percent.
- Forest manager 2 compressed with natural resource specialist 4 by 4.43 percent.
- Wildland fire supervisor compressed with forest officer by 4.80 percent.

Differential and Overtime Pay

Management employees have limited access to wildfire-related differential pay. Most of the extra pay available during wildfire operations is offered only to represented employees. Many of these differentials apply to duties managers also perform, but managers are either not eligible or face different rules that result in lower payouts. This creates pay differences between managers and represented staff doing similar work.

Overtime also plays a major role. Represented employees can earn significant overtime during long wildfire seasons, while managers are usually exempt from overtime. As a result, technical staff in lower salary ranges sometimes earn more overall income during fire season than managers. This makes management jobs less financially attractive and can discourage employees from pursuing supervisory roles.

The analysis also reviewed federal wildland fire pay practices, which include hazardous duty pay, environmental differential pay, incident response premium pay, and specialized firefighter pay tables. While federal pay systems operate under different laws, they show alternative ways to compensate hazardous, complex, and highly specialized wildfire work.

Federal Comparator Assessment

The CHRO reviewed federal wildland-fire pay and job structures after testimony showed that competition with federal agencies is a major reason Oregon struggles to recruit and keep wildfire staff. Federal wildland firefighters work in a national response system that is very different from Oregon's state-based mission. They mobilize nationwide, deploy to multiple states for long periods, and operate within large, federally funded incident-management organizations--all reflected in their federal grade structures and premium-pay rules. [Learn more in the OLRC USC Code for differential duty.](#)

In contrast, Oregon's wildfire workforce focuses on state responsibilities like initial attack, fuels-reduction work, forest-management duties, community mitigation, and Incident Command System support. Oregon personnel may deploy through the Northwest

Compact, but these deployments are supplemental and occur only when needed, not as a core mission requirement. Because Oregon’s mission is limited to state-level duties and intermittent mutual aid, its job structure does not match the national deployment model used for federal firefighters. [Learn more in Oregon Revised Statutes, Chapter 477.](#)

Federal compensation also reflects broader funding authorities. Federal wildland firefighters receive hazardous duty pay under 5 U.S.C. § 5545, environmental differential pay under 5 CFR § 532.511, and may earn incident response premium pay under 5 U.S.C. § 5545c. These premium-pay provisions are funded through federal appropriations and emergency supplemental wildfire budgets. By contrast, Oregon’s wildfire-funding capacity is limited by [ORS 477.230](#), which caps cost-recovery mechanisms and relies on revenue sources that fluctuate with assessments and district budgets, restricting the state’s ability to adopt federal-style premiums.

Given these differences in mission, deployment, statutory authority, and funding flexibility, federal wildland-fire pay cannot serve as a realistic benchmark for Oregon’s compensation system. However, federal pay practices help explain the recruitment and retention issues raised in testimony because federal agencies have broader authorities and resources than Oregon can currently access.

Recommendations

1. Stabilize Workforce Structure
 - a. Increase permanent, year-round positions so employees can train, build qualifications, and provide steady support throughout the year.
 - b. Conduct classification studies for supervisory, managerial, and technical jobs, so they match today’s wildfire and forestry work.
2. Improve Wage Alignment and Reduce Compression
 - a. Correct the specific situations where supervisors’ pay is too close to the pay of the employees they oversee by updating job classifications and adjusting organizational structures.
 - b. Review wildfire-related differential pay that managers may receive to make sure supervisors are fairly compensated for the work they perform. Appropriate manager differentials will help relieve pay disparity between supervisors and employees.
3. Strengthen Span of Control
 - a. Add more permanent supervisory positions to ensure safe and effective supervision during busy wildfire months.
 - b. Build clearer career pathways that allow employees to earn required NWCG qualifications over several years.

- c. Reduce strain on supervisors by increasing year-round staffing, improving qualification development, and matching staffing levels to seasonal wildfire risk.

Conclusion

CHRO's review confirms that the department's workforce model, supervisory capacity, and compensation alignment must evolve to meet the demands of modern wildfire operations. Stabilizing the workforce, addressing pay disparity issues, and strengthening span-of-control capacity are essential steps toward building a resilient, year-round wildfire workforce.