



Forest/Wildland Firefighters Fact Sheet

Myths and Realities

18 July 2024





The National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE) is a family of 13 Component unions. Taken together, we are one of the largest unions in Canada. Most of our 425,000 members work to deliver public services of every kind to the citizens of their home provinces. We also have a large and growing number of members who work for private businesses.

The office of the National Union of Public and General Employees is on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

We recognize the crimes that have been committed and the harm that has been done and dedicate ourselves as a union to moving forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and striving for justice.

Bert Blundon, President

Jason MacLean, Secretary-Treasurer



Issue no. 1

Forest firefighter = public safety occupation, or public safety profession.

Myth

One argument raised to justify the exclusion of wildland/forest firefighters from the *firefighters* category in the National Occupational Classification (NOC), is that the firefighters who work in forests are natural resources workers, not public safety personnel.

People who hold this view say these workers should not be classified as firefighters but as silviculture workers whose primary work is not to fight fires, but to undertake duties as response crews, conservation officers, maintenance workers, forest rangers, forest technicians, resource technicians, and seasonal workers - Their work is not public safety; they "[perform duties related to reforestation and to the management, improvement and conservation of forest lands.](#)"

Reality

It is factually incorrect to say that wildland/forest firefighters belong to the natural resources category and not in the category of public safety occupations. Saying this misrepresents the work wildland/forest fighters are actually doing as public safety personnel who protect communities, and assume significant health and safety responsibilities.

The term [public safety personnel \(PSP\) is defined as](#) someone with specialized training employed in a professional capacity to ensure public safety and security. This includes border services officers, Canadian Armed Forces members in service and Veterans, correctional and parole officers, firefighters (career and volunteer), Indigenous emergency managers, operational intelligence personnel, paramedics, police officers, 911 dispatchers, and search and rescue personnel.

The reality of present-day wildland/forest firefighters is that they are hired specifically to fight fires. Forest firefighters are no longer workers who might occasionally fight brush fires in addition to their forest management responsibilities. Their primary occupational responsibility is specifically to fight fires. This is especially true with the increasing severity and duration of fires, which often encroach on rural communities and urban areas. These workers not only fight fires in the woods, they also work side by side with structural firefighters to ensure public safety.

Issue no. 2

Training, education, and experience.

Myth

Another reason given for excluding wildland/forest firefighters from the *firefighter* category is that there are different competencies and skills required, and these differences are presumed to matter.

Reality

It is not true that the training, education, and responsibilities of wildland/forest firefighters are significantly different from those of other firefighters. Whatever differences exist (for example, in educational requirements) are minor.

Like firefighters working in urban settings, on ships, and in airports, wildland/forest firefighters require some degree of compulsory certification in addition to completion of formal secondary or post-secondary education. Both types of firefighters usually require a period of supervised training that is highly specialized, practical, and specific to their occupation. Also required is recurring on-the-job training, including first aid and emergency medical care.

The standards for training, knowledge, and experience needed to become a certified forest/wildland firefighter are set by each provincial, territorial, or federal wildland fire agency.

The Canadian wildland fire-training model relies on experiential learning and demonstrated performance achieved through on-the-job coaching, mentoring, and continuous learning. This approach is significantly different than that of some other industries that may rely on training to qualify or certify a worker.

To fight wildland fires safely and effectively, and to avoid injuries and recover rapidly, wildland/forest firefighters must maintain high levels of physical fitness (aerobic fitness, muscular strength, and muscular endurance).

All firefighters—structural and wildland/forest—are required to successfully complete a physical agility, strength, and fitness test, and to meet vision requirements. To prove their fitness, wildland/forest firefighters must pass the WFX-FIT: a standardized physical performance test that determines the physical capabilities necessary to meet the rigorous demands encountered while fighting wildland fires.

Of course, there are different skills and competencies required for different kinds of firefighting due to different locations. For example, structural firefighters must learn to drive a fire truck, or fire ambulance. On the other hand, forest firefighters must learn to drive motorized off-highway vehicles, and some receive specialized training to operate aircraft in low-level flight operations (for example as an **air attack officer**, the person directing all aerial operations during a wildfire).

Structural firefighters must have competency assisting with accidents involving automobiles, ships, airports, and industries, and must know how to rescue victims from burning buildings. Wildland/forest firefighters must have competency evacuating citizens threatened by wildfires, responding to various emergency calls related to wildfires, floods, landslides, and other natural disasters. They must be able to assist the public, the police, and emergency organizations during times of major disaster. Wildfire agencies are often relied upon to provide Incident Command to manage large-scale emergencies.

Wildland/forest firefighters must be trained in helicopter safety—for example, how to exit aviation hovercraft. They must be trained in how to use highly specialized and dangerous firefighting equipment, working independently in remote locations, and on extreme slopes.

In brief, these wildland/forest firefighters are trained in the above skill sets and competencies because they need and use them. These are not skills needed to plant trees, or “[perform duties related to reforestation and to the management, improvement and conservation of forest lands.](#)” They are skills and competencies needed to fight fires.

Issue no. 3

Main duties and responsibilities.

Myth

Some might argue that the duties required to fight fires in forests are significantly different than those needed to fight fires in other locations.

Reality

The main duties and responsibilities of wildland/forest firefighters are almost identical to those of structural firefighters. These duties are related to their role as public safety personnel: control and extinguish fires using both manual and power equipment, such as axes, water hoses, aerial ladders, and hydraulic equipment, and various firefighting chemicals; administer first aid and other assistance; ensure proper operation and maintenance of firefighting equipment; prepare written reports on fire incidents, inform and educate the public on fire prevention; assist the public, the police, and emergency organizations during major disasters.

Issue no. 4

Statistical significance.

Myth

Another argument raised to justify the exclusion of wildland/forest firefighters from the *firefighter* category in the National Occupational Classification (NOC) is that there must be a minimum of 5,000 paid workers whose main job is in that classification. Some might claim from a statistical perspective that the numbers do not warrant reclassification: the statistics do not support wildland/forest firefighters as a category of firefighters, but as a category of natural resource workers.

Reality

According to the [Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre \(CIFFC\)](#), as of July 2023, Canada employed 5,185 forest firefighters. CIFFC is the federally incorporated not-for-profit corporation operated by the federal, provincial, and territorial agencies responsible for wildland fire management in Canada.

Likewise, a [Reuters survey](#) conducted in June 2023 of all 10 provinces and 3 territories showed Canada employs around 5,500 forest/wildland firefighters. This number does not include Yukon territory, which did not respond to requests for information.

As demand for these workers intensifies, resolving this fairness issue will support improvements in recognition and working conditions, and help with recruitment efforts.

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