



NEWS

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Survey Says Fewer Wildland Firefighters To Be Available

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A survey of 3,362 firefighters conducted by the International Association of Wildland Fire (IAWF) showed that 36% of the full-time wildland firefighters surveyed will make themselves less available to be assigned to wildland fires as a direct result of manslaughter charges filed recently against a firefighter in Washington state. The Thirtymile fire, started by an escaped campfire near Winthrop, Washington, claimed the lives of four U.S. Forest Service firefighters on July 10, 2001.

On January 30, 2007 the U.S. Attorney in Spokane, Washington, charged the Incident Commander of the fire, Ellreese Daniels, with four counts of involuntary manslaughter and seven counts of making false statements.

The IAWF, a non-profit, professional association representing members of the global wildland fire community, initiated the survey after hearing speculation that some firefighters were no longer going to serve in certain key management positions on wildland fires due to the new threat of going to prison for making mistakes on fires. The objective was to collect data to determine the scope of the issue, and provide objective information to the wildland fire agencies.

Chuck Bushey, President of the IAWF, said “We conducted this survey to collect objective information about the impacts to wildland fire personnel and their organizations that are caused by the Thirtymile Fire legal proceedings. We are providing this data to the land management agencies and other fire organizations so that they can determine if they need to mitigate any adverse impacts that may be identified.”

The IAWF conducted the online survey between January 28 and February 15, 2007. Wildland firefighters were invited by email as well as postings on wildland fire forums to take the survey which could only be taken once from each computer.

Of the full-time survey respondents surveyed, 6% said that because of the possibility of criminal charges they will no longer accept any fire assignments, and 23% said they will not serve as an Incident Commander, the person in charge of all fire suppression activities on a fire.

Other survey results among employees whose primary duty is wildland firefighting:

- 93% said that firefighters being charged with involuntary manslaughter due to incidents on a wildland fire was either bad or very bad for wildland fire.

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- 8% said that because of this situation they would retire or find another job within a year.
- 23% said they would remove some positions for which they were qualified from their Incident Qualifications Card, or “red card”, which would prevent them from working on a fire serving in those positions.

The survey results were similar for agency employees and part time “AD” employees whose primary duty is not firefighting, but who regularly work on fires.

Personal comments, some of them lengthy, were left by 1,416 or 42% of the respondents in addition to answering the multiple choice survey questions.

85% of the survey respondents said they do not presently have personal liability insurance but 21% plan to purchase it this year.

The IAWF recommends:

1. Clarifying the intent of PL 107-203 to allow firefighters to benefit from lessons learned after a wildland fire tragedy. That law, requiring the Office of the Inspector General to investigate all wildland fire fatalities, disproportionately focuses those reviews on criminal fault finding.
2. Federal agencies should provide professional liability insurance at no cost for all wildland fire supervisory personnel.
3. Change the internal fire investigation protocols to be more like those of NASA and the military, implementing the concept of “privilege”. This would provide a “firewall” between our efforts to learn from serious accidents and our efforts to ascertain responsibility for those accidents. This is essential in order to learn from mistakes and implement new, safer procedures and tactics.

This is the first time a wildland firefighter has faced criminal charges after firefighters have been entrapped and killed on a wildland fire. As one of the survey respondents stated, these charges “...will have a chilling effect on the ability of agencies to recruit and retain qualified supervisors.”

Historically many lessons have been learned from fire fatality investigations. However, in light of this new development, one firefighter said: “I will not participate in any investigation without legal representation regardless of my involvement in any potential incident. If we are to be treated as criminals, I will demand my rights.”

Another firefighter stated on the survey, “I cannot risk the future well being of myself and family, it just isn’t worth it.”

Detailed survey results are available on the IAWF web site at www.iawfonline.org/documents

The International Association of Wildland Fire is a non-profit, professional association representing members of the global wildland fire community. The purpose of the association is to facilitate communication and provide leadership for the wildland fire community.

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