

Mike West

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To whom it may concern,

I'm resigning after seventeen years with The Forest Service. I am not disgruntled with any individuals but I do feel like The Forest Service has some systemic problems. The purpose of this letter is to identify the issues with the hope they can be remedied. My intent is not to place blame on any individuals or vent out a bitter manifesto. The agency-related issues that contributed to my resignation are job titles for wildland firefighters, pay, and healthcare for mental health issues.

I was reluctant to write one of these complaint letters because I knew what I was getting into by working in this field. Working as a Forest Service Firefighter and complaining about wages and working conditions is a lot like a person eating Taco Bell for breakfast every day and complaining that their stomach hurts. I didn't write this letter to sound like a victim of the Taco Bell breakfast. I wrote it with the hope that it can contribute to positive change for my friends who are finishing their careers with The Forest Service.

Before I get to the issues with the agency I want to make it clear that the main reason I'm leaving is I've always wanted to be a teacher. It's the reason I spent a lot of my time and money at The California State University System. I recently applied for a teaching job and I was fortunate enough to be hired. So that's the end of my fire career. Another reason I'm leaving is that I'm married with two small children and a fire career isn't conducive to family life. It's understood that wildland fire jobs have unpredictable schedules with long hours and time away from home. That was great when I was single, but I want to be present both physically and mentally as my children grow up. I also want to be on a consistent schedule so my wife and I can work as a team raising kids and running a home.

When I was applying for The Forest Service in 2003 I was told it was for a wildland firefighter position. The work I did after I was hired was most definitely wildland firefighting. However, my job title was Forestry Technician.

According to the Meriam-Webster Dictionary; forestry is defined as, “the science of developing, caring for, or cultivating forests.” A technician is, “a specialist in the technical details of a subject or occupation.” So by these definitions, my career in the field consisted of being a specialist in the details of scientifically developing, caring for, and cultivating forests. I can see how the forestry technician title works based on the fuels and prescribed burning projects that are a big part of our work year. Meriam-Webster defines a firefighter as “a person who fights fires”. I feel like this definition more accurately describes my time in the field. When I was constructing fireline, mopping up, cutting down burning snags, or firing out several miles of line, I wasn’t acting as a specialist in the details of scientifically developing, caring for, and cultivating forests. I’m aware the United States Government doesn’t title its staff based on dictionary definitions, but if they’re going to give us a make-believe title so they don’t have to pay us as firefighters they should come up with something that accurately depicts what we do.

When you Google, “Wildland Fire Jobs Forest Service”, it will take you to this link: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/fire/careers>¹. There isn’t anything on the opening page about becoming a Forestry Technician. It’s all about becoming a Forest Service Wildland Firefighter. I reckon I’m confused because those who get hired will have an SF-50 that states they’re a Forestry Technician. Now let’s say there is an unfortunate accident and they lose their life performing their Forestry Technician duties. The Forest Service will send out an official press release stating a Firefighter died. So, you’re a Firefighter if you’re thinking about applying, a Forestry Technician while you’re fighting fires, and if you die you’re a Firefighter again?

I left the field to become a dispatcher after the 2017 fire season for several reasons. One of those reasons is I didn’t want to risk my children growing up without a dad because I died fighting fire for an agency that didn’t even consider

¹ “Wildland Fire Careers,” USDA U.S. Forest Service. <https://www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/fire/careers> (accessed July 20th, 2020).

me a Firefighter. The Forest Service press release would say I was a Firefighter, The California Firefighter's Memorial in Sacramento would say I was a Firefighter, but my SF-50 and last paycheck amount would still say Forestry Technician.

I'm writing this in The [REDACTED] Interagency Fire Center at midnight as The Hog Fire is burning actively just a few miles away from my work and my house. I have numerous close friends on The Hog Fire right now. Quite a few of these friends are Hotshot Captains and Superintendents. I promise you they are fighting fire, not providing technician services. The fire they're fighting is ripping and the work they are doing is all kinds of dangerous. They're not Forestry Technicians. Regardless of agency, be it state, federal, contract, or local government, if you go out in the woods to fight fires, you're a firefighter. The signs the community posts when there's a fire don't say, "Thanks Forestry Technicians." When a citizen sees a fire on the hillside they don't they say, "I'm calling the Forestry Technician Department." Go ask [REDACTED] of The Beckwourth Hotshots all about the "forestry tech-ing" his crew has been doing the last few days and nights on The Hog Fire. He's a pleasant guy, but I'm sure he'd tell you the same thing I just did. Even my four-year-old son and two-year-old daughter understand this simple concept. This evening a Forest Service engine and the Lassen Hotshot buggies drove by our house and honked. My kids didn't say, "Hey! Forestry Technician trucks!" They said, "Look daddy green fire trucks!"

Along with the inaccurate title, Forestry Technicians are underpaid for the risks they take and the sacrifices they make. If you're a wildland firefighter with a family it's very difficult to be simultaneously successful in your career and your family life. If you devote the necessary amount of time to your career, your family suffers, and vice versa. If you're putting an incredible strain on your family and risking your life, you deserve to be able to support your family without relying on insane amounts of overtime. If you ask a federal wildland firefighter with a family if she or he could support their home with their base pay, they would most likely say no. I live modestly and there is no way I could pay my bills without overtime.

We are taught to believe that 1,000 hours of overtime is normal. It turns out a lot of my friends outside of fire can pay their bills working forty-hour weeks instead of 112 hour weeks. My non-fire friends aren't making these kinds of paychecks with PHDs. They have job titles like Cal Trans Sign Holder Guy and

HVAC Technician. Apparently, if you're going to be a Technician, HVAC is better than forestry. I understand that working overtime goes with the territory in the fire service. However, it shouldn't be necessary to pay our bills. Overtime should be a bonus on top of a livable base salary.

I think better pay would help retain a lot of federal fire folks. However, it wouldn't retain me. I could work for Cal Fire for much more money than my Forest Service or teaching job will pay. However, because of the negative impact on my mental health, a fire service career is no longer worth it. I began to develop PTSD symptoms after a near miss on my first off-forest assignment. I had no idea what was happening and I tried to tough it out silently for over a decade. In 2013, after the death of my childhood friend, Smokejumper Luke Sheehy, I called EAP for help. When it comes to mental health, it's difficult for any person to ask for help; in the wildland fire service, it's even harder. So when I finally did ask for help I thought I would get it. We're told, "If you have a problem, just speak up. There's help available." The EAP counselor I saw had no experience with PTSD or trauma. It wasn't his fault. His specialty was fixing marriages not broken firefighter's brains. In 2018 the symptoms got worse and once again I tried EAP. Once again I was sent to the same guy. Once again the same results. I've also tried a few of the recommended hotlines and didn't get anywhere. I think EAP is a good program and offers help for a lot of common issues. However, I would not recommend it for PTSD treatment. It's a crapshoot for counselors and six sessions aren't enough. The Forest Service needs to recognize that PTSD is a serious problem and provide us with immediate access to professionals specifically designed to treat it.

In my career, I was almost burned over four times. I came within a few feet of being killed by a falling tree on two occasions. (The incidents with the trees took place on consecutive night shifts). I've had a few close calls with vehicles, helicopters, large rolling objects, and a large angry bear. That being said nothing has been more of a threat to my life than the symptoms of PTSD. Without going into the dark details, I think you can figure out the point I'm making.

If I suffered a life-threatening physical injury on the fireline, there would be an immediate response to get me extracted and treated. So if I'm seeking help for a life-threatening mental health injury, there needs to be a similar response. The failure of EAP lies in the fact that they send you to a local contracted counselor.

Rural areas typically lack mental health providers, especially providers who specialize in PTSD. Most wildland firefighters live in rural areas. I wound up leaving EAP and commuting 180 miles once a week to go see somebody who knew how to treat PTSD. I know a lot of other folks like me who've done the same thing. This shouldn't be the case. When The Forest Service says help is available, it needs to be like this:

-“Oh dang, I might have PTSD. I better call The Forest Service Firefighter Mental Health Hotline.”

-“Ring ring. Hello, this is Dr. Soandso and I specialize in PTSD. Let's meet up ASAP.”

A Forest Service PTSD hotline with easy access to doctors is necessary. Chiefs at the district and forest level are far too busy to be assisting with this type of thing. They also aren't trained professionals. If we can afford VLATs and staffing large fires that go on for months, then we can afford a PTSD program. We fork out a lot of money for fires where we pay Cal Fire and structure folks portal to portal. We pay insane amounts for contract fire camp amenities. I don't think some effective mental health help for a common issue is too much to ask.

From day one we are taught so much about the prevention of fireline fatalities. We look at case study after case study and staff ride after staff ride. We have specific rules in place to prevent fireline deaths. There should be some more information on how to recognize and prevent mental health causalities. A mental health causality isn't just suicide. There are many types of mental health causalities and the firefighter isn't the only one who suffers from it. The causalities can be things like drug and alcohol abuse, divorce, isolation from friends and family, physical side effects of stress, or just a firefighter and their family being miserable when they shouldn't have to be.

I don't believe brand new nineteen-year-old firefighters would pay much attention to this type of mental health training. I wouldn't have paid attention when I was nineteen. But maybe as the years went on and symptoms developed they would recognize the problem quicker than I did. If suicides are killing just as many if not more federal firefighters than the actual fires, we should be openly discussing it and trying to prevent it. Openly discussing it doesn't mean just saying, “Yeah suicide is a thing. Here's a number to call if you're having a bad

day.” There needs to be some real education from real experts just like our case studies and staff rides for fatality fires. Yeah, it’s super uncomfortable to talk about suicide. But you know what else is uncomfortable? Finding a loved one’s body after they committed suicide.

Throughout my career, I believe I could have told any of my coworkers and supervisors about my mental health issues and they would have been supportive. I never told a supervisor. Perhaps if I told a supervisor they would have been able to get me help. However, I wanted to go the anonymous EAP route because I was told it would work. The few coworkers I did tell were supportive. They tried their best to help me. However, they can only do so much. The problems I had needed medical doctors and trauma psychologists, not hotshot captains, battalion chiefs, smokejumpers, engine captains, or dozer operators. Luckily my wife found me the help I needed because I had given up on searching. Thanks to her I’m not going to be a firefighter mental health causality. I’m going to move on with my life and be happy and successful in my new career. I’m grateful for this, but it shouldn’t be my wife’s job to find me treatment for a job-related injury. If I broke my leg on a fire assignment my wife isn’t going to get me extracted, then find me the right hospital and trauma surgeon.

Even though I have PTSD I don’t think I’m dangerous or crazy. I think wildland firefighting is dangerous and crazy and PTSD is a normal reaction from the human brain. Hey, it turns out your amygdala might get a little riled up after you almost get killed a few times, experience several fatality fires, and witness communities get destroyed. If you’ve been in the fire service for a while and your amygdala starts getting agro with you, don’t be embarrassed about it. Even if you’re just a regular resident of Planet Earth in 2020 and you have a mental health issue, don't be embarrassed about it.

It’s becoming more acceptable for firefighters to be open about struggles with mental health. But for every firefighter who is open there a lot more staying quiet. I hate to say this but I’m more concerned I’ll lose a fire friend to a mental health issue than to another fireline fatality.

Even though I listed off a few very negative topics, my overall experience in the fire service was a pretty good time. I laughed pretty hard with my friends every day at work, which is more than most people can say about their job. I

became close with a bunch of great folks, I went to some cool places, I gained some physical and mental toughness, and I learned a lot about leadership. My time on the hotshots and hand crew has made regular daily struggles seem very easy. In my new career, I believe the leadership skills I learned as a firefighter will help make up for my lack of experience as a teacher.

Anyway, I hope this information can help you in your efforts to assist and retain employees. I have no hard feelings towards any individuals and I'm thankful for the opportunities I had in my fire career. The rant about mental health is only my opinion based on my personal experience. If ninety-nine percent of the people disagree with me that's fine. But if it resonates with one person who needs help and reading this makes them feel less alone then it was worth it. A stranger who spoke publicly about his PTSD in 2017 helped me. We happened to be on the same near miss on The Nuttall Fire in 2004. He admitted on a podcast that it freaked him out and caused him some serious problems. I thought, "Wow, after all these years I thought I was the only one." I appreciate that he did that. It was a turning point for me to truly admitting I had a problem. It didn't fix the problem right away but it put the mirror in front of my face.

Anyway, don't worry about me, I've got things figured out and I'm excited to move on with my new life. Thank you for reading this and please stay safe when you go into the field.

Sincerely,

Mike West