

Frequently Asked Questions:

U.S. Department of the Interior Wildland Fire Program Unification within a Single U.S. Wildland Fire Service and Impact to Tribes

November 2025

1. **Question:** Will Tribal Fire Program funding be affected under the Interior Department's unified fire service model?

Answer: Secretary's Order 3443 calls for modernization of grants and agreements to reduce delays and simplify administration. While it does not specifically address funding amounts or changes, it directs Interior to streamline reimbursement and improve access to funding mechanisms. Tribal programs should expect more consistent and timely payment processes and funding with the proposed establishment of a centralized budget office and fire payment center.

2. **Question:** How will Tribal sovereignty and self-determination be protected under the U.S. Wildland Fire Service (USWFS)?

Answer: The Interior Department proposes establishing an Office of Tribal Trust (OTT) that will report directly to the USWFS Director. Within the USWFS, the OTT would be designed to uphold the federal government's trust responsibility to Tribal Nations in the context of wildland fire management. If established, the OTT would ensure that Tribal sovereignty, treaty rights, and Indigenous stewardship are respected and meaningfully integrated into national fire policy, operations, and strategic initiatives. The office would be responsible for facilitating government-to-government consultation, managing formal Tribal correspondence, and fostering ongoing engagement with federally-recognized Tribes. It would also support co-stewardship and co-management agreements, oversee Tribal assumption or retrocession of federal programs under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (PL 93-638), and engage in legal matters with respect to wildland fire management and Tribal sovereignty. Through these functions, the proposed OTT aims to ensure that Tribal fire programs are fully recognized, empowered, and supported as integral components of the USWFS, advancing equity, self-determination, and Indigenous knowledge in fire stewardship.

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3. **Question:** What will happen with current and future contracts and agreements under Indian Self Determination and Education Assistant Act (ISDEAA)? Will funding flow through the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), or directly from USWFS?

Answer: Secretary's Order 3443 directs the consolidation of wildland fire functions under USWFS, while emphasizing continued collaboration with BIA and respect for existing authorities. Current agreements under ISDEAA will continue to be honored and administered with support from BIA during a transition period. This approach allows time for the USWFS to build internal capacity, including hiring staff with ISDEAA expertise, developing new policies tailored to Tribal wildland fire management programs, and establishing direct ISDEAA agreements under the USWFS in the future.

4. **Question:** How will Tribal fire and camp crews be affected by establishment of the new USWFS?

Answer: After establishing the USWFS, the Interior Departments intends to continue hiring casuals, or emergency firefighters, under the provisions of the Administratively Determined (AD) Pay Plan for Emergency Workers (43 U.S.C. 1469). The Department also plans to establish a joint AD hiring program and pay plan with the U.S. Forest Service. Tribal fire and camp crews will continue to be mobilized under this authority as long as they meet minimum physical fitness, security, and qualification requirements as established by the USWFS.

5. **Question:** How will Tribal fire programs be elevated within the new unified structure?

Answer: BIA and Tribal fire programs will be included in this unification, meaning Tribal fire programs will have greater visibility and potentially benefit from streamlined resources, policies, and support. Secretary's Order 3443 clarifies that unification is not consolidation. Tribal programs will retain their distinct roles and identity but align under a unified strategy to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness. Under the proposal, Tribal priorities and perspectives will be integrated into national wildfire strategy. Tribes will also have access to improved

funding mechanisms, technology, and training and have a stronger voice in shaping wildfire policy through mandated consultation.

6. **Question:** What are the Geographic Areas (GAs) and have the boundaries been determined? What effect will this have at the field level and for Tribes under direct service with BIA?

Answer: There are nine GAs proposed for the USWFS. They include Alaska, Great Basin, Northeast, Northern Rockies, Pacific Northwest, Pacific Southwest, Rocky Mountain, Southern, and Southwest. The boundaries for each GA are under review and have not been finalized. Impacts at the field and direct service levels are expected to be minimal.

7. **Question:** Will Tribal firefighters be aligned under the new federal firefighter pay scale? Will Tribal fire management programs have the ability to adopt the new wage rates and benefit standards available to federal employees?

Answer: Yes. Tribal wildland firefighter pay reform is already being implemented, as outlined in the September 25, 2025, memorandum from the BIA. Funding is available to eligible Tribes to support pay parity for their wildland fire personnel. Ultimately, it is the decision of each Tribe whether to implement these pay reform adjustments, which may involve changes to internal pay structures and employment policies. This will remain the same after implementation of the USWFS.
