

April 7, 2022

Letter of resignation

To whom it may concern,

My name is Chris Mariano and I am resigning from the position of Forestry Technician with the USDA Forest Service, Truckee Hotshots, effective April 7th, 2022. I am a Squad Boss, UAS Pilot (carded for Aerial Ignition), UAS Module Leader, UAS Inspector Pilot, UAS Test and Evaluation Pilot and a cadre member for UAS incident operations (S-373) and UAS Aerial Ignition Academy.

This letter is preceded by many well-written letters and articles that courageously articulate the grave state of federal wildland firefighting. I applaud those with the commitment to Duty, Respect and Integrity and a willingness to articulate issues and propose solutions. I didn't intend to recreate those letters, yet I could not in good conscience walk away without doing my part for the boots still on the ground.

To say writing this letter was difficult would be a massive understatement. The best part of my life has been working as a Hotshot on the Tahoe NF. If you are a Firefighter or have read any of the aforementioned letters, you know that this job is not done for the paycheck alone. A true commitment to being a Hotshot is born out of love for the job and service to our landscapes and communities. The sense of purpose is unrivaled by anything else I know. The required physical and mental fortitude are extreme, but the bonds created within a Hotshot crew are unparalleled. Many of the best moments of my life came when I was completely depleted; hungry, tired, beyond mental and physical exhaustion and yet I was completely fulfilled. Heart, grit, camaraderie, sense of duty and purpose is what sustains individuals through a season which is punctuated by hardship and tragedy.

Looking back at my experience as a Hotshot, I was completely insulated from the politics and woes of the agency by my leaders. We were not kept in the dark, we were however protected from the struggles outside the crew environment. And I prospered - I was all in. I wanted nothing more than to be a hotshot, to be a leader, to care for the land and to be of service. While the sense of purpose and camaraderie remain, I now feel hypocritical to recruit or encourage crew members to work for an Agency that is failing to support its fire management programs and thus the public.

I have put my heart and soul into this job. It is too difficult and requires too much sacrifice to not give it everything you have. It requires 100% dedication and investment. This comes at a sacrifice to everything that is not the crew and fire. Sacrifice of your body, spirit and time. And it asks your loved ones to make similar sacrifices in your perpetual absence. Being a Wildland Firefighter requires us to be problem solvers, constantly doing more with less. This attitude and resilience have resulted in unimaginable suppression success, but it is also a major factor in where we are today.

The Agency is failing its firefighters on so many levels. Classification, pay, work life balance, mental health, presumptive disease coverage and injury/ fatality support. There are efforts to correct some of these issues but for many it is too little too late. Unfortunately, communities and landscapes will bear the effects. Federal Firefighters have been fighting these battles for decades. Much of it is not new but the environment we work in is new. The wildfire environment has changed and Agency leadership has failed to acknowledge these new risks, responsibilities, liabilities, and the burdens placed on their employees. As a result, we are experiencing a dire retention issue. We now have fewer and fewer competent, capable, and motivated resources to aid in the fight.

Last October, a local Tahoe "newspaper" published a grossly mischaracterizing and often false OP-ED piece about Federal Firefighters. The Truckee District Ranger called a meeting with the District Fire Program to address the issue. He spoke to a room of 30 plus men and women who just spent the last 115 days committed to these record-breaking fires. 'Forestry Technicians' who gave everything including sweat and blood. Humans who were holding onto pride from the successes and battling with defeats from yet another unprecedented wildfire season. His statement was essentially, 'don't stoop to the level of the newspaper and post comments. The region will release a statement to address the article'. There was no condemnation of the ridiculous libel. There was no, "we know how hard and how much you worked, we've got your back." Instead, the room was deflated, as these 'forestry technicians' were silenced in an attempt to keep a potential loose cannon employee from making a public statement that could reflect poorly on the Agency. As if public perception could be worse than identifying our Firefighters as "arsonists"?

This lack of support is permeating to all levels of the job. It is becoming harder to ensure crew safety, productivity and to remain effective on the Fireline. The USFS has the most elite and effective wildfire suppression resources in the world. And it was built on the shoulders of men and women's sacrifices, passion, and dedication. Unfortunately, these attributes are not shared by all Agency leadership. Political success seems to be the driving motivator - not *caring for the land and serving the people*.

There has been a marked effort to suppress pay and recognition of firefighters. We need leadership who have fought fire and have a true understanding of the challenges of the task of wildfire suppression in 2022. We are losing people at a terrifying rate at a time when wildfires burn longer, hotter, more frequent and with devastating severity.

In 2017, a knee injury forced my departure from the Tahoe Hotshots. I was lacking in physical ability, but wholeheartedly committed to providing suppression solutions. I identified Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) as a technology to reduce risk to both boots on the ground and in the air, while improving the information available for Fireline operations. While recovering from surgery, I sought business education and avenues to bring this technology to the Fireline. I began flying UAS and became a certified FAA Commercial UAS Operator. As my injuries healed and roadblocks developed in privately bringing UAS to wildfires, I returned to being a Hotshot in 2018. The following year, I attended agency UAS training. I became the first agency UAS pilot in Region 5 and have since become aerial ignition carded, a UASL (module leader), test and evaluation pilot, inspector pilot and national S-373 and UAS aerial ignition cadre. I have also participated in the rewriting of the UASP incident position descriptions. I have done this as a GS-5 and now a GS-6, all while maintaining my primary duties of being a Hotshot squad leader. In an effort of stubborn commitment to the mission, I performed both roles simultaneously for over two years.

I have had many conversations with management inquiring about a dedicated UAS job. The Regional Aviation Officer did not support the creation of dedicated UAS positions in which I would be eligible for. This is hard to process with the proven risk reduction and increased suppression efficiency UAS can provide. Additionally, my knowledge, operational experience and training have equipped me to train others to ensure successional planning and future development of the UAS program. Leadership cannot continue to ask Firefighters to do more with less, for less. Personal pride, commitment and sense of accomplishment are our best compensation package. But it is not enough. I worked myself to burnout with no option to progress and be of greater service.

Despite the egregious deficiencies, working as a Hotshot has given me some of the best and most memorable moments of my life. I cannot begin to describe what it has meant to me to be a Hotshot and assist in the ground zero development of the UAS program. The feelings of pride, fulfillment, exhaustion and making a difference kept me pushing forward. Being a leader on a Hotshot crew is hands down one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. It has taught me so much; about the natural world, people and myself. I am proud of the work I have accomplished, the landscapes I treated, the green I kept green, the homes and communities saved and the fireline victories I have shared in. I will take the lessons learned from the best leaders and humans I could ever have hoped to work with, and I will continue to support the mission.

I am resigning from my position as I have exhausted all avenues to work in a non-collateral duty UAS position for the forest, region or agency. I surpass all qualification requirements, but I do not qualify for UAS jobs that have been posted because I am a GS-6. I am no longer willing to perform and dedicate myself 100% to two job responsibilities. I will always remain passionate about the mission. I plan to move into the private sector to continue training men and women to operate UAS and assist in the development of unmanned technologies to assist in wildfire suppression and prevention. It is simply not enough for me to "get paid in sunrises and sunsets" and watch the West burn while coworkers and my personal life disintegrate. Pay aside, you cannot keep asking more of people and offer no support or recognition. Collateral duties must be minimized or mitigated and Firefighters need to be adequately compensated for their training, experience and qualifications. Technologies must be developed and supported at a greater pace. R5 is the most challenging and complex arena to suppress wildfire, and it is clear we are not winning the fight. You have a dedicated, resilient, and professional workforce, however, you are failing to support them. Federal wildland firefighters should not be on the "Threatened and Endangered species list" with wildfire season coming our way. I extend my utmost gratitude and respect to the men and women who remain in the fight. Always defer to boots on the ground, as Grassroots Wildland Firefighters state, "Nothing About Us, Without Us".



Chris Mariano