



OREGON STATE FIRE FIGHTERS COUNCIL

International Association of Fire Fighters
AFL-CIO CLC

Chair Manning, Vice Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Alan Ferschweiler, and I am testifying on behalf of the Oregon State Fire Fighters Council in support of HRC-2.

The presence of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in firefighting turnout gear poses significant health risks to firefighters, despite their intended purpose of providing enhanced protection. PFAS, often referred to as “forever chemicals,” are synthetic compounds known for their durability, resistance to heat, and water-repellent properties. While these qualities make them useful in protective gear, the inherent dangers of PFAS exposure can outweigh their benefits. Firefighters, who rely on their gear daily, are at heightened risk of absorbing and accumulating these chemicals in their bodies, leading to serious health consequences.

PFAS are associated with a wide range of adverse health effects, including cancer, immune system suppression, hormonal disruption, and developmental issues. Studies have shown that prolonged exposure to PFAS increases the likelihood of developing cancers such as kidney, testicular, and prostate cancer—ailments that disproportionately affect firefighters. The problem lies in the fact that turnout gear, designed to protect firefighters, may instead serve as a source of toxic exposure. PFAS can leach from the fabric of the gear over time, contaminating the firefighter’s skin, clothing, and environment.

One of the primary ways PFAS enter the body is through dermal absorption. During firefighting operations, elevated temperatures and heavy perspiration can enhance the absorption of these chemicals through the skin. Additionally, PFAS can degrade into fine particles or dust that firefighters unknowingly inhale or ingest. This exposure is not limited to the fireground; PFAS contamination can occur during routine use, handling, or storage of turnout gear, creating a constant risk to firefighters’ health.

Another critical concern is the long-term persistence of PFAS in the body. Once absorbed, PFAS accumulate and remain in the bloodstream for years, as the



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body has limited mechanisms to eliminate them. This bioaccumulation amplifies the risk of chronic health issues, even after a firefighter has retired. Studies of firefighter blood samples often reveal elevated levels of PFAS compared to the general population, highlighting the occupational hazards they face. Efforts to address these dangers are underway, with some manufacturers exploring alternatives to PFAS in turnout gear. However, the transition has been slow due to the complexity of developing equally effective materials. In the meantime, firefighters are left with limited options for safer gear, forcing them to choose between immediate protection from fire hazards and long-term health risks posed by their equipment.

In conclusion, while PFAS have contributed to the durability and functionality of firefighting turnout gear, their toxic effects pose an undeniable threat to firefighter health. The accumulation of PFAS in the body, combined with their long-term persistence and links to severe diseases, demands urgent action. Transitioning to PFAS-free materials and implementing stricter safety protocols are essential steps toward protecting firefighters from the hidden dangers of their protective gear.

We ask that you support HRC-2.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Alan Ferschweiler
Legislative Director
Oregon State Fire Fighters Council