

Assessing Physical Fitness Standards for Alabama Forestry Commission Wildland Firefighters



Celebrating Alabama's Progress
Certified Public Manager® Program
CPM Solutions Alabama 2026



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The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager® Training Program.

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MISSION AND ROLE OF THE ALABAMA FORESTRY COMMISSION

The state of Alabama is home to about 23 million acres of forest land (Alabama Forest Inventory Leads the Way, 2019). The Alabama Forestry Commission has been tasked with protecting and managing this valuable resource since 1924.

Rangers and foresters across the state help educate the public and government officials on the importance of healthy land and fire prevention. They also work in coordination with other state agencies in times of natural disasters and emergencies to help ensure the well-being of human life and property.

The Commission reports that close to 93% of this vast forest land is privately owned (Alabama Forestry Commission, 2024). They play a vital role in helping these landowners ensure the property is preserved for future generations by eradicating pests and invasive species that can irreparably damage the land, while protecting our wildlife habitat and improving our air and water quality.

Arguably, the most critical responsibility of the Alabama Forestry Commission is wildfire prevention and suppression, both in Alabama and across the United States. Their wildfire dashboard indicates that for FY2025, there were 1,862 wildfires in Alabama, which burned almost 34,000 acres. In a \$36.3 billion forest industry providing \$8 billion in labor income to the state as of 2024 (Everett, 2024), these fires and the humans who fight them must matter to every Alabamian.

AFC WILDLAND FIREFIGHTERS JOB FUNCTIONS AND STANDARDS

Through our research, we learned that the Alabama Forestry Commission is governed by Title 9, Chapters 3 and 13 of the Alabama Code 1975, and that regulations for fire, land acquisition, and forest product programs, etc., are set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service and other related federal agencies. Forest rangers/technicians and foresters are the employees who fight these mighty fires and do so at great personal risk. They are exposed to extreme heat, smoke, dangerous surroundings, and rugged terrain.

Forest Rangers/Technicians are required to have a high school diploma or GED and have at least one of the following(State of Alabama Personnel Department, 2024):

- One year of forestry-related work experience or one year of firefighting experience.
- One year of experience in the operation and maintenance of equipment such as trucks, tractors, transports, crawlers, or bulldozers.
- Associate's degree in forestry, forest technology, or a closely related field.

Foresters must meet all of the following qualifications (Alabama State Board of Registration for Foresters, n.d.):

- US citizenship, or legally in the US.
- Bachelor's degree from a professional forester curriculum accredited by the Society of American Foresters, or equivalent.
- Pass the ASBRF Registered Forester Exam, or another acceptable state's exam.
- Two years of professional forestry experience after graduation.
- Professional and Registered Forester references.
- Accept the Rules of Conduct of a Registered Forester.

Employees must also have a valid driver's license, pass a Work Capacity Test (a basic fitness test), and obtain a commercial driver's license for specific positions. Overall, their jobs require heavy lifting and an increased level of physical fitness(Alabama Forestry Commission, 2024).

To better appreciate the significance of these responsibilities, consider the perspective of a homeowner facing an approaching wildfire. Imagine you have a home in the lush landscape of rural Alabama. A spark ignites the forest. Raging flames and smoke may threaten your home, pets, livestock, or even your family. In March 2026, this was a reality. The brave men and women of the Alabama Forestry Commission battled a 2,500-acre forest fire in Shelby County, Alabama. This was a massive feat that they were able to safely contain with no structure or personal property damaged.

Tyler Givens with the Alabama Forestry Commission indicated, “The terrain was very steep and rocky. There are two mountain ridges that run together to form a tight valley with a creek at the bottom. It takes quite a lot of time to travel from one side to the other, so it makes patrolling difficult”(ABC 33/40, 2025).

As their job duties involve such rigorous physical and mental demands, the Alabama Forestry Commission Physical Fitness Standards-CPM Solutions Alabama Team is seeking to assist the Alabama Forestry Commission by offering research driven recommendations to best support the physical well-being of their wildland firefighters to align with their job demands.

To do so, we have evaluated methods currently employed by the agency as well as comparable agencies and organizations to deduce best practices. We have also researched ways to encourage increased employee participation in physical activities in an effort to improve their overall health. Finally, we studied the positive effects of physical activity, its tie to a longer, healthier life, and how self and partner accountability can increase those benefits.

Work Capacity Test

To limit risk and ensure that employees can perform in these grueling conditions, the U.S. Forest Service created the Work Capacity Test. This test is a physical fitness evaluation of endurance, speed, and strength that is used as a predictive measure of the employee’s ability to perform certain job tasks. Alabama, as well as other states, adopted portions of this test for their own employees.

The Work Capacity Test is comprised of three levels: Light, Moderate, and Arduous (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 2002).

The light test is intended for those employees whose typical job duties are office-related with occasional field activity. To proficiently complete the test, the employee must walk one mile in 16 minutes.

The moderate test is intended for those employees who regularly lift 25-50 pounds and may occasionally require moderately strenuous activity. The test requires the completion of a two-mile walk in 30 minutes while wearing a 25-pound weighted vest.

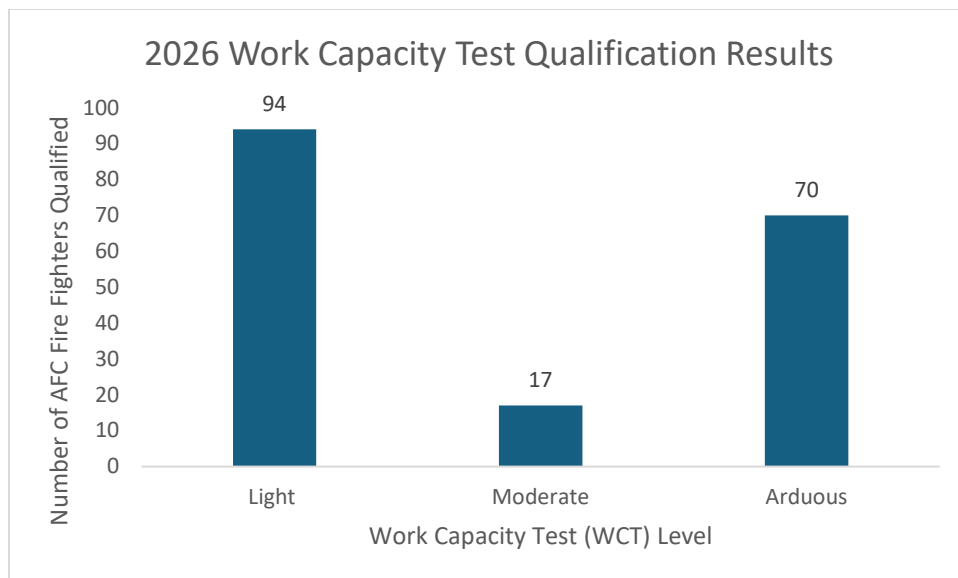
The arduous test is intended for those employees who exert above-average endurance, lift more than 50 pounds, and experience occasional demands of extraordinarily strenuous activities. This test requires a three-mile walk in 45 minutes while wearing a 45-pound weighted vest.

Increased exercise could promote additional participation in the more strenuous work capacity test, which would be valuable in ensuring the health and welfare of the employees. Additionally, being more active would help them fulfill long, healthy lives and perform their job duties to the best of their abilities. One reason for this necessary goal is an alarming statistic from the National Fire Protection Association, which reports that fatalities from sudden cardiac incidents, strokes, aneurysms, or medical conditions while the victim was on duty are the second leading cause of death among firefighters in the U.S. Only transportation accidents surpass them in numbers (Campbell and Petrillo, 2024).

Several long-term studies have shown that increased physical activity is associated with a reduction in all-cause mortality and may modestly increase life expectancy, an effect which is strongly linked to a decline in the risk of developing cardiovascular and respiratory diseases (Nystoriak & Bhatnagar, 2018).

Greg Brewer, Training and Safety Director with the Alabama Forestry Commission, indicates that all employees who fight fires must successfully complete the light test as a requirement of their job. The arduous test is required for employees who seek to fight fires both in and out of state, although the moderate and arduous tests are encouraged for their employees. He further indicates that the Deputy State Forester completes the arduous test annually to inspire and encourage employees to complete it as well. Additionally, he purchases a lunch for employees who beat his time as an incentive! (G. Brewer, Personal Communication, February 5, 2026).

He was able to provide data indicating that of the 181 employees who took the Work Capacity Test in 2026, 94 finished the light test, 17 finished the moderate test, and 70 finished the arduous test. It should also be noted that the number of employees finishing the arduous test rose in 2026 by a healthy 13% (G. Brewer, Personal Communication, May 18, 2026).



In order to prepare for the Work Capacity Test and encourage physical activity, the Alabama Forestry Commission allows its employees to exercise three hours per week during their working hours as approved by their supervisor. Currently, they do not have records of employees who participate or the effect on the Work Capacity Test.

CHALLENGES

Encouraging increased physical and health standards is beneficial in improving work efficiency, injury prevention, lowering cardiovascular health risks, and improving mental health.

However, raising standards without adequate support may create recruitment and retention challenges. Since adopting healthier habits and sustaining long-term lifestyle changes can be monumentally challenging, it will be vitally important to obtain employee buy-in by maintaining a culture that prioritizes health and safety. “Effective programs thrive in organizations that promote respect throughout the organization and encourage active worker participation, input, and involvement. Leaders at all levels of the organization can help set this tone, but all employees play an important role in contributing to this shared commitment to safety and health” (Lee et al., 2016).

Like most state agencies, the Alabama Forestry Commission operates under a limited budget. This project will focus on attainable physical and health goals that are fiscally responsible while also ensuring they can have a real impact on employees' lives and in their job duties.

FITNESS STANDARDS FOUND IN OTHER STATES

Florida and Georgia

Georgia and Florida require their wildland firefighters to pass the moderate Work Capacity Test at the time of employment. Each allows employees between 30 minutes and one hour, three times a week to exercise during their working hours. (S. Pierce, Personal Communication, May 20, 2026) (L. Grubbs, Personal Communication, June 17, 2026).

The Florida Forest Service also requires many of its employees to undergo physical examinations both as a pre-employment prerequisite and as a condition of their continued employment. Those requirements are as follows:

Applicants who receive a job offer must pass:

1. Pre-employment drug test in accordance with Section 112.0455, F.S.
2. Pre-employment comprehensive medical examination
3. Pre-employment physical fitness test

Post-employment – incumbents must pass:

1. Reasonable suspicion, post-accident, and random drug and alcohol testing provisions and the Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse query requirements of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration Regulation, Title 49, Part 382, CFR
2. Annual medical examination (pulmonary function and blood pressure)
3. Annual physical fitness test

(Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, n.d.)

Mississippi

Mississippi requires employees to take the Light Work Capacity Test. Unfortunately, this state experienced a challenge with retention that the Alabama Forestry Commission Physical Fitness

Standards-CPM Solutions Alabama Team would like to avoid with increasing physical standards. Rany Giachelli, Fire Chief from the Mississippi Forest Commission, indicated that while they did try to require the moderate Work Capacity Test, they lost experienced quality operators faster than they could replace them (R. Giachelli, Personal Communication, May 27, 2026).

Oregon

Although Oregon is not a southern state, it is important to understand the requirements of other states in the U.S. where Alabama firefighters may be deployed, and note what physical standards they implement, as it may be beneficial to Alabama. Our team decided to research Oregon as its forest fires are typically much more widespread than forest fires in Alabama. For that reason, it was important to view their physical standards and how they compare to our state.

As a comparison, in 2024 Oregon experienced 744 forest fires with 216,447 acres burned (Oregon Department of Forestry, 2024). During the same time period, Alabama experienced 1,728 forest fires, but luckily the acres burned were only 34,000 acres (Alabama Forestry Commission, n.d.)

The research findings showed that Oregon does have more rigorous standards for its employees compared to the southern states evaluated. Their Wildland Fire Suppression Specialists must be able to finish the arduous Work Capacity Test upon employment and must maintain that standard, while Wildland Fire Supervisors are required to pass the moderate-level Work Capacity Test (Oregon Department of Administrative Services, 2026). One way that the Oregon Department of Forestry may be ensuring employees are capable of meeting higher physical standards is through the implementation of the Peer Support Team that assists with stress management and the mental health of the wildland firefighters. All Peer Support Team members receive Critical Incident Stress Management training and training specifically tailored to ODF by Responder Life. The department also covers travel costs for team members to talk with employees about the help available and respond to any area of the state after a critical incident. All team members are covered under Oregon statute to maintain confidentiality." (Oregon Department of Forestry, 2024).

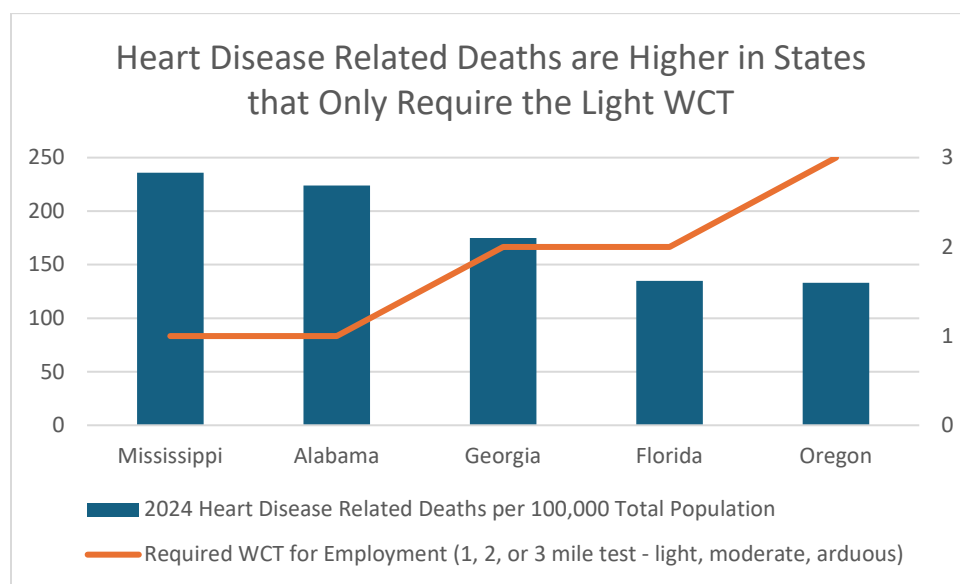
Key Findings From Other States

Although Mississippi did experience a retention problem with increasing the physical standards for their wildland firefighters, all other states have been successful in implementing increased

physical standards, with Florida making great strides toward ensuring the overall physical health of their wildland firefighters.

While Oregon does require more stringent physical standards to align with their more rigorous job duties, they also work to ensure their wildland firefighters receive the mental support that they need, which is a valuable component of overall health.

It can also be surmised that encouraging a healthier lifestyle at work may have overarching consequences for the state as a whole. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the number of deaths per 100,000 total population due to heart disease in 2024 was as follows: Mississippi 236, Alabama 224, Georgia 175, Florida 135, and Oregon 133. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). These numbers appear to coincide with the information found in our research concerning the physical abilities of wildland firefighters in those states.



ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

As we researched ways to encourage increased employee participation in physical activities, it was important to discover ways that employees could track their progress and celebrate milestones. The U.S. military has access to personnel, funding, and training resources that may not be available to many state and local organizations. We were fortunate enough to interact with William Demarco, Chief Academic Officer with Air University at Maxwell Air Force Base, through the Certified

Manager Program. He was able to provide valuable insights and share key findings through his personal communication on May 1, 2026, by sharing the Atlas Project Paper (Dauti et al., 2026). This project paper offered meaningful research on different tracking mechanisms of military service members tied to their health and fitness. The primary concern of the service members was the misuse of any data collected from personal devices if employers were able to download the information themselves for self-serving or ulterior motives. A portion of their conclusions included “The technology to continuously monitor and optimize human performance already exists in the commercial sector. The true challenge and the primary achievement of ATLAS—is demonstrating how to harness these capabilities while fiercely protecting service members' privacy and preventing administrative misuse.” (Dauti et al., 2026, p.8). It is also the focus of the Alabama Forestry Commission Physical Fitness Standards-CPM Solutions Alabama Team as well as the Alabama Forestry Commission to assist employees while preserving their personal data at all costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations by the Alabama Forestry Commission Physical Fitness-CPM Solutions Alabama Team revolve around accountability, awareness, encouragement, and the power of a team. Through the implementation of physical fitness tracking mechanisms, enhanced health requirements, team-building activities during district meetings, the use of insurance benefits, and annual performance reviews tied to Work Capacity Test scores, our wildland firefighters can live longer, healthier, more fulfilled lives.

Track Employee Fitness through Technology

Currently, employees are entitled to three one-hour sessions per week during their work hours for exercise. There are an unknown number of employees who take advantage of this wonderful opportunity. However, there is no accountability tracking mechanism in place to ensure that employees are using that time efficiently to reach their goals.

We recommend that accountability be harnessed through the use of department-provided iPhones that are already in use by the employees. iPhones come equipped with a health application that counts steps, tracks average calories burned each day, and much more. This feature will not require any additional funding sources for the department or the individual. It only requires that the

employee carry their phone. After a workout or walk, the employee can simply screenshot or choose the “share with someone” feature within the application. That information can be sent to their direct supervisor for documentation purposes only. If an employee chooses to use their personal electronic devices or phones for tracking physical activity, such as phones with Android rather than iOS capability, smartwatches or rings, free applications are available for download that will allow the employee to capture that information and submit it without sacrificing privacy.

Utilize District Meetings to Encourage Physical Fitness

We also recommend physical activity during quarterly district meetings led by the supervisor. This will encourage employee participation, team building, and enjoyment. It does not simply have to be a walk. It can be a coordinated activity for the group. Doing this may increase employee morale and assist employees with overcoming barriers to physical activity. It may also be beneficial to set quarterly activity goals or a friendly competition between districts for increased employee participation.

Regular participation in weekly physical training and team fitness activities can increase their physical fitness by improving strength and endurance. These improvements may translate into better performance on the Work Capacity Test.

Incorporate Physical Readiness into Annual Performance Reviews

All state employees receive annual performance reviews based on work-related responsibilities. The State of Alabama Personnel Department has created standardized forms for these reviews. These forms indicate that each responsibility should be rated on a scale from zero to four. Zero indicates that the employee does not meet standards, and four indicates that they consistently exceed standards. It is the team's understanding that the Work Capacity Test is not currently listed as one of the responsibilities, although they are required to complete the light test annually as a condition of their continued eligibility for employment. Adding this to the list of responsibilities in their annual review would allow employees to help control the outcome of the overall score. As the light test is the standard, it would be rated as a two, indicating the employee meets standards. The moderate test exceeds standards and would be rated as a three. Employees completing the arduous test would be rated with a four, as they have significantly exceeded the basic standard. This may encourage employees to challenge themselves to a higher physical standard without

limiting their ability for a raise or promotion, as it would be one of many responsibilities of the employee.

Implement Enhanced Health Requirements

The implementation of enhanced physical requirements, such as those implemented in the state of Florida, would help ensure that all employees are healthy enough to safely perform their demanding job duties. We recommend the following:

Applicants who receive a job offer must pass:

1. Pre-employment drug test in accordance with Section 112.0455, F.S.
2. Pre-employment comprehensive medical examination
3. Pre-employment physical fitness test

Post-employment – incumbents must pass:

1. Reasonable suspicion, post-accident, and random drug and alcohol testing provisions and the Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse query requirements of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration Regulation, Title 49, Part 382, CFR
2. Annual medical examination (pulmonary function and blood pressure)
3. Annual physical fitness test

Initiate State Benefit Awareness Campaign for Employees

Finally, it is our recommendation to ensure that all employees are aware of the vast benefits offered through the State Employee Insurance Board (SEIB). State employees are eligible for benefits through Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama, and as an employee, additional benefits are available through the insurance plan (State Employees' Insurance Board, n.d.)

Virta Health is an online nutrition program offered free of charge to employees with Type 2 diabetes, pre-diabetes, or those struggling with weight. Employees receive a free scale, recipes, and a blood glucose meter as well as personalized guidance and support from health professionals. (Virta Health, 2026). Blue365 offers discounts in a variety of different areas, including fitness and nutrition. (Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, 2026). Hinge is another offer that provides online physical therapy and wearable pain relief devices (Hinge Health, 2026).

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) managed by Behavior Health Systems (BHS) provides counseling and referral services to state employees to address work- and personal-related challenges (Alabama Department of Finance, Division of Risk Management, n.d.). Although this measure is not as robust as the Peer Support Team provided by the Oregon Department of Forestry, which is tailored specifically to their needs, it would be a very beneficial start to ensure wildland firefighters have the resources that they need to mentally balance the stress and conditions of their workplace while also finding balance with their personal lives.

CONCLUSION

The Alabama Forestry Commission plays a vital role in the health and safety of our land in Alabama with impacts nationwide. The work that they perform is invaluable. Their strenuous job duties put them at the forefront of danger, requiring them to carry heavy packs and equipment, experience brutal heat and unpredictable terrain, all while making split-second decisions that depend entirely on a wildland firefighter's body holding up under pressure. The stakes of getting fitness and health standards right must be at the forefront of priorities, as cardiac events, strokes, and other medical emergencies are the second-leading cause of on-duty firefighter deaths nationally.

Encouraging increased physical and mental fitness cannot be about standards alone. It must include support. This can be done through tracking and celebrating fitness milestones through the phones wildland firefighters already carry. It should also include team-building movement built into district meetings, performance reviews that reward their extra physical effort, as well as promoting the improvement of their overall health through the use of state employee health resources.

None of the recommendations mentioned are about pushing people harder for its own sake. It's about protecting the men and women who walk into dense forests engulfed in flames in order to protect our wellbeing. It is making sure the same grit that contained a 2,500-acre blaze in Shelby County is matched by a state that's just as committed to bringing every one of them home and healthy, year after year.

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