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OPM Announces Rule Change to Allow Federal Firefighters Access to Health Insurance

Washington, DC – Today, responding to a direction from President Obama, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) published an interim final regulation that immediately extends eligibility for health insurance coverage under the Federal Employee Health Benefits (FEHB) program to temporary firefighters and fire protection personnel working on wildland fires across the country. This announcement ensures that federal firefighters and their families have access to the same health insurance afforded to full time federal employees.

“Issuing this interim final regulation meets President Obama’s direction to ensure that the brave men and women who compose our nation's federal firefighter ranks, and who are currently fighting dangerous wildfires in states across the country, are eligible for the same health insurance available to other federal employees, retirees and their families,” said OPM Director John Berry.

OPM worked closely with the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of the Interior (DOI) - the two agencies that employ our nation's wildland federal firefighting force - to provide thousands of temporary federal firefighters and their families with a simple, expedited process to gain access to the coverage they deserve. Many federal firefighters are temporary employees because of the seasonal nature of their work. Under previous regulations, they were not eligible for health insurance coverage under the FEHB program, which provides insurance to other federal employees, retirees, and their families. Under the rule change, the FEHB program will officially be extended to federal firefighters and fire protection personnel temporarily employed to respond to the wildland fires. As a result, the men and women of the wildland firefighting force will have the option to purchase FEHB coverage for themselves and their families - providing health care coverage while they fight fires, with the option to continue their coverage at their own expense when they return home.

“Ever since I served as mayor of Mount Pleasant, Iowa, I’ve had a deep respect for our firefighters – and I know that when a federal firefighter is heading out to the line to defend Americans’ lives and property from dangerous, destructive wildfire, it doesn’t matter whether they’re a “temporary” firefighter or not. Today’s announcement means that every one of our federal firefighters will have the health coverage he or she deserves – and that’s something we can be proud of,” said U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack.

“The men and women who join the battle against devastating wildfires across the nation each summer take on the same risks as their full-time colleagues, and they deserve the same health benefits for their courageous work,” said U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar. “The President asked us to work together to close this gap on behalf of federal firefighters and their families who make sacrifices to protect the lives and property of all Americans.”

There is a 60 day comment period for the public to provide additional feedback on the new regulations. OPM plans to issue additional guidance on enrollment and administration of this regulation to agencies through the Chief Human Capital Officers Council and to agency Benefits Officers through a Benefits Administration Letter. OPM is also notifying FEHB insurance carriers about the change to expedite access to health care under their health plan enrollment. Each agency then is responsible for outreach, education, and enrollment processing of eligible employees.

The regulation can be found here: http://www.ofr.gov/OFRUpload/OFRData/2012-17623_PI.pdf

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