

What is the US Forest Service "pack test"

If you fight wildfire in the USA under the supervision of a state or federal agency you should be familiar with the "pack test". All forest firefighters must meet minimum levels of fitness to fight fire depending on the type of duties they are assigned. Passing this test is one good indicator of minimum fitness.

Wildland firefighting means working in difficult environments that demand a high level of conditioning to safely perform physically demanding work. Taking a working capacity test like the "pack test" does several things. It better protects the firefighter's personal safety and health as well as the safety of co-workers. It also improves the fire fighting operation and function.

The "pack test" is intentionally stressful and is a good indicator of aerobic capacity, muscular strength and muscular endurance. The test rates workers according to the duties they perform.

There are the three variations on the test:

Arduous: involves field work calling for above-average endurance and superior conditioning. All firefighters are required to perform arduous duty. This test level is required by the U.S. Forest Service to fight fire in the Western United States.

Moderate: involves field work requiring complete control of physical faculties and may include considerable walking, standing, and lifting 25-50 lbs. Safety officers and fire behavior analysts are examples of moderate duty positions. This test level is accepted by most states and by the U.S. Forest Service under some cooperative agreements.

Light: involves mainly office-type work with occasional field activity. Examples include staging area and helibase managers.

The USFS warns that "before you begin to train for testing or substantially increase your level of activity, consult your physician. This is especially important if you are over 40 and have been inactive, have a history of a heart condition or chest pain or loss of balance, or have a joint or bone problem that could be made worse by a change in physical activity."

Training

The USFS suggests you begin training at least four to six weeks before you are scheduled to take the test. This means training in the footwear or boots you will wear during the test. Footwear should be ankle-high and protect the ankles.

Start out by walking and gradually build up to the required pace. Train for the test level you will need to pass for the duties you will be required to perform.

First train without a pack. Gradually increase distance and - for arduous and moderate duty - begin carrying appropriate weight. Increase the weight until you can meet the requirement for arduous or moderate duty.

Taking the "pack test"

Once you are cleared to begin training, here's what you'll need:

- Adequate footwear that will cover and protect feet and ankles while testing
- Comfortable clothing
- A pack. The type of pack is a personal choice, but it must weigh either 45 or 25 lbs., depending on whether you are testing for arduous or moderate duty
- An accurately measured, safe, and level course

Testing will be monitored and any problems should be brought to the attention of the test monitors.

- No jogging or running is permitted
- The test is Pass/Fail only
- Bring your own pack, or a standard firefighter backpack pump will be provided
- Packs will be weighed before and after testing

The chart below provides test criteria for arduous, moderate, and light duty performance:

Fitness Requirement	Test	Description
ARDUOUS	Pack Test	3-mile hike with 45-lb. pack in 45 min.
MODERATE	Field Test	2-mile hike with 25-lb. pack in 30 min.
LIGHT	Walk Test	1-mile hike with no pack in 16 min.