

Date of Hearing: June 29, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Rhodesia Ransom, Chair

SB 1079 (Stern) – As Amended April 28, 2026

SENATE VOTE: 33-0

SUBJECT: Department of Forestry and Fire Protection: Fire Innovation Unit

SUMMARY: This bill establishes the Fire Innovation Unit (FIU) within the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) to serve as the Department's innovation arm and the state's principal hub for wildfire technology research, coordination, procurement, and deployment for technologies that, among other things, improve ecosystem and landscape scale resilience. Specifically, **this bill:**

1. Establishes within CAL FIRE a FIU to serve as CAL FIRE's innovation arm and as the state's principal hub for wildfire technology research, coordination, procurement, and deployment for technologies that improve ecosystem and landscape scale resilience, community risk reduction, ignition reduction, early detection, fast fire suppression, and decision support tools.
2. Requires the FIU to consist of the existing Office, two new programs created by the bill: the Innovation, Outreach, and Coordination Program (IOCP) and the Rapid Acquisition and Deployment Program (RADP).
3. Requires the Office to do all of the following:
 - a. Perform scientific and technical evaluations of emerging wildfire technologies;
 - b. Conduct and participate in laboratory and field tests of wildfire technologies within CAL FIRE and in partnership with local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies;
 - c. Document operational and technical results of laboratory, field, and operational evaluations of wildfire technologies; and,
 - d. Issue recommendations on wildfire technologies regarding adoption and performance standards.
4. Requires the IOCP to do all of the following:
 - a. Coordinate with end users across local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies;
 - b. Identify innovation gaps;
 - c. Serve as a liaison between technologists and frontline personnel;
 - d. Oversee collaborative development efforts between CAL FIRE and technology developers;

- e. Implement the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program established by this bill;
 - f. Collaborate with public and private educational and research institutions;
 - g. Coordinate demonstration events in established testbeds;
 - h. Provide the requisite firefighting expertise necessary for field trials in operational environments; and,
 - i. Facilitate information sharing with local fire agencies and relevant state agencies, including CalOES, regarding wildfire technologies evaluated, piloted, or deployed through the FIU.
5. Authorizes the RADP to do all of the following:
- a. Pilot and scale wildfire technologies through use of flexible contracting authorities pursuant to this bill;
 - b. Manage the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program;
 - c. Enter into agreements with local governments, state and federal agencies, tribes, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, utilities, public and private educational institutions, and private companies; and,
 - d. Ensure that all projects carried out include clear objectives, performance metrics, and audit provisions.
6. Authorizes the FIU to enter into memoranda of understanding, cooperative research and development agreements, contracts, and grant agreements with public agencies, private sector entities, nonprofit organizations, educational and research institutions, tribal governments, and philanthropic partners.
7. Authorizes the FIU to consult with and invite participation from relevant state agencies, including CalOES, for technologies under evaluation that may support the state agencies' operational missions or impact cross-agency technology integration.
8. Authorizes the FIU to establish and administer a Wildfire Innovation Grant Program and authorizes the FIU to issue solicitations, conduct a merit-based award process, and oversee grant performance. Requires the grant program to fund early-stage, mature, or dual-use technology projects that enhance wildfire readiness, mitigation, or response.
9. Provides that eligible entities include, but are not limited to, local, state, and federal agencies, tribal entities, nonprofit organizations, public and private academic and research institutions, and private sector technology developers.
10. Requires the FIU, to the extent practicable, encourage projects that evaluate technologies across diverse operational environments and geographical conditions within the state to assess performance under varying terrain, fuel types, and weather conditions.

11. Requires all grants awarded pursuant to the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program to align with statewide wildfire resilience goals and include clear metrics for success that are informed by end-user input.
12. Authorizes the FIU to administer or monitor pilot, prototype, or demonstration projects involving public agencies, private technology companies, nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, tribal governments, and philanthropic partners to evaluate, mature, and validate wildfire-related technologies.
13. Requires the FIU, if it administers or monitors a pilot, prototype, or demonstration project, to consider if the wildfire-related technology meets the criteria for formal validation.
14. Authorizes the FIU to award a technology vendor that completes an FIU-administered or FIU-monitored pilot, prototype, or demonstration project and receives a formal validation a follow-on contract for operational fielding without a separate competitive solicitation process, if the scope of the follow-on contract is substantially similar to the wildfire-related technology that received a formal validation.
15. Defines “substantially similar” to mean that the follow-on award is limited to the same use case, operational context, and performance characteristics that were evaluated during the pilot, prototype, or demonstration project.
16. Authorizes the FIU to use flexible contracting authorities to acquire proven technologies for pilot, prototype, and demonstration projects and to award follow-on contracts to support pilot-to-scale transitions.
17. Authorizes the FIU to collaborate with public and private educational and research institutions on wildfire technology and innovation.
18. Authorizes the FIU to enter into partnerships, memoranda of understanding, or cooperative research agreements with the University of California, the California State University, community colleges, independent nonprofit institutions of higher education, and other accredited research centers to support wildfire technology and innovation.
19. Authorizes the FIU to provide technical expertise, operational data, field testing environments, and appropriate funding to ensure the technologies developed in the collaborations are transitioned into wildfire operations.
20. Authorizes the FIU to establish testbeds to test or evaluate emerging technologies. Requires the FIU to establish or designate testbeds where technologies can be safely deployed and evaluated under real-world conditions.
21. Authorizes the FIU to provide technical assistance to local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies to facilitate deployment of wildfire-related technologies.
22. Authorizes the FIU to maintain a publicly available resource, including, but not limited to, an information bulletin, to provide visibility into technologies evaluated, piloted, or deployed.
23. Authorizes the FIU to provide opportunities to participate in demonstrations, pilot programs, and field testing.

24. Requires the FIU, if it provides opportunities for participation, to seek operational feedback from participating local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies, and where appropriate, state agencies.
25. Provides that participation by a private entity in any FIU-authorized pilot, prototype, testing, demonstration, or research activity does not by itself constitute a conflict of interest, create an unfair competitive advantage, be considered a gift of public funds, or disqualify the private entity from any simultaneous or subsequent procurement, solicitation, or contracting opportunity with the state or a local agency.
26. Requires information, data, or predecisional materials exchanged during activities conducted to be treated as nonprocurement sensitive and not to be used as a basis to exclude or disadvantage any participant in future competitive procurement.
27. Requires, on or before January 1, 2028, and annually thereafter, CAL FIRE to submit to the Governor and the appropriate fiscal and policy committees of the Legislature a report summarizing all of the following information:
 - a. Technologies and projects evaluated, tested, or deployed under the FIU;
 - b. Results and findings regarding cost-effectiveness and operational performance of the FIU; and,
 - c. Partnerships and funding sources leveraged to support innovation activities.
28. Requires the director to implement this bill only upon an appropriation by the Legislature for its purposes in the annual Budget Act or another statute.
29. Authorizes CAL FIRE to reorganize existing positions and resources to fulfill the purposes of this bill.
30. Sunsets the provisions of this bill on January 1, 2033.

EXISTING LAW:

1. Requires the Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) and CAL FIRE to jointly establish the Wildfire Forecast and Threat Intelligence Integration Center to collect, assess, and analyze threat indicators that could lead to catastrophic wildfires, reduce the likelihood and severity of wildfire incidents, and develop and share intelligence products related to wildfires. (Government Code (GC) 8586.7)
2. Establishes the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development (Office) within CAL FIRE to study, test, and advise regarding procurement of emerging technologies and tools in order to more effectively prevent and suppress wildfires within the state. The office shall serve as the central organizing hub for the state government's identification of emerging wildfire technologies. Sunsets the Office on January 1, 2029. (GC 8586.8)

FISCAL EFFECT:

According to the Senate Appropriations Committee:

While the bill's provisions would be contingent upon an appropriation, it could result in General Fund cost pressures in the hundreds of thousands of dollars each year for Cal Fire to administer the FIU. There could be additional costs that are likely to be significant, to the extent that the FIU elects to implement a Wildfire Innovation Grant Program as authorized by the bill. It specifies that the program shall fund early-stage, mature, or dual-use technology projects that enhance wildfire readiness, mitigation, or response. However, the bill does not specify the number or size of the grants to be awarded.

COMMENTS:

Author's Statement: "Last year, Angelenos experienced firsthand that California wildfires are becoming more destructive and deadlier with increasingly extreme weather. It is critical we prioritize programs with innovative technology and research to properly equip our emergency management personnel who keep our communities safer in the face of disaster. SB 1079 creates the Fire Innovation Unit (FIU) under CAL FIRE, giving California a formal mechanism to identify firefighter needs, source technologies, prototype solutions, and move successful technologies from pilot to scale. By establishing a robust and permanent unit to test and deploy new firefighting technology, protecting Californians from future megafire disasters becomes not just an aspiration, but a coordinated priority for the state."

Equity Statement: "SB 1079 has the potential to provide significant benefits for vulnerable communities who are disproportionately affected by wildfire, including rural communities, low-income households, tribal communities, seniors, individuals with disabilities, agricultural workers, and residents of high fire hazard severity zones. These populations often face greater challenges evacuating during emergencies, recovering from wildfire losses, obtaining insurance coverage, and accessing resources for wildfire preparedness... • Overall, the bill is expected to have a positive equity impact by improving wildfire preparedness, mitigation, and response capabilities that benefit communities most vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire, while implementation should continue to prioritize equitable access and representation across California's diverse regions."

CAL FIRE Innovation Programs: The CAL FIRE Fire Innovation Unit (FIU), established in partnership with FireWERX, serves as the Department's innovation accelerator by connecting firefighters, technology developers, researchers, and industry partners to identify and evaluate emerging technologies that address operational challenges. Through this partnership, CAL FIRE can rapidly test and assess new capabilities, helping ensure that technologies are informed by frontline operational needs before broader adoption. While CAL FIRE already operates a Fire Innovation Unit administratively through its partnership with FireWERX, this bill would primarily codify and formalize these existing efforts in statute. The bill also expands the unit's statutory authorities by establishing a structured innovation framework, authorizing a wildfire innovation grant program, creating the Rapid Acquisition and Deployment Program, requiring annual legislative reporting, and providing explicit authority to evaluate, pilot, and deploy emerging wildfire technologies.

Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development (OWTRD): OWTRD serves as the central organizing hub for the state government's identification of emerging wildfire

technologies, with the goal being to drive meaningful advancements in fire technology.¹ Subject to review by the Wildfire Technology Research and Development Review Advisory Board, OWTRD drives innovation through awareness of technology that are effective in the ongoing battle against wildfire. OWTRD also gathers information from technology developers, publishes annual reports to the Legislature, and promotes collaboration among state agencies, researchers, and industry partners to improve California's wildfire response capabilities.² By providing a centralized process for evaluating emerging technologies, OWTRD helps ensure that new tools are assessed consistently before they are considered for broader implementation by CAL FIRE.

Arguments in Support: The California Fire Chiefs Association and Fire Districts Association of California write in support of SB 1079, stating that the "current version appropriately emphasizes coordination with local fire agencies, information sharing regarding emerging technologies, opportunities for participation in pilot programs and demonstrations, and technical assistance to support deployment throughout the state. These additions help ensure that innovation efforts are informed by operational experience and accessible to agencies of all sizes. As California continues to face increasingly complex wildfire threats, the ability to evaluate, test, and deploy new technologies in a coordinated manner will be critical to improving wildfire prevention, mitigation, and response efforts. SB 1079 creates a structure that will help accelerate innovation while ensuring that frontline agencies remain engaged in the process."

Related Legislation:

SB 109 (Dodd), Chapters 239, Statutes of 2021. This bill established the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development (OWTRD) within CALFIRE to serve as the central organizing hub for the State government's identification of emerging wildfire technologies. This bill also established the Wildfire Technology Research and Development Advisory Review Board.

AB 441 (Hadwick) of this Session. This bill would extend the sunset on the OWTRD to January 1, 2031. Pending in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

SB 973 (Becker) of this Session. This bill would direct CAL FIRE to implement specified wildfire risk and resilience related activities and formalizes CAL FIRE's partnership with the California Fire Safe Council to administer and deliver the Wildfire County Coordinator Program. Pending in the Assembly Natural Resources Committee.

SB 326 (Becker, 2025) requires the deputy director of Community Wildfire Preparedness within CAL FIRE to prepare a Wildfire Risk Mitigation Planning Framework, a Wildfire Risk Baseline and Forecast (Forecast), and a Wildfire Mitigation Scenarios Report. Requires, contingent upon an appropriation, CAL FIRE to provide local assistance to local governments to achieve wildfire risk reduction consistent with the aforementioned plans, for defensible space inspections, and to facilitate compliance with forthcoming ember-resistant zone (known as zone o) regulations. Vetoed.

¹ The Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development, <https://www.fire.ca.gov/what-we-do/wildfire-technology>

²OWTRD 2025 Report calfire-website/about/resources/legislatively-mandated-reports/owtrd-2025-report.pdf

HR 6094/S 3190 – Fire Innovation Unit Act (Rep. Kim, R-CA) (Sen. Curtis, R-UT): 11/18/2025
Read twice and referred to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

HR 836 – Emergency Wildfire Fighting Technology Act of 2025 (Rep. Valadao, R CA-22):
Senate - 02/06/2025 Received in the Senate and Read twice and referred to the Committee on
Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry.

Double Referral: This bill is double referred. The Assembly Committee on Natural Resources
approved this bill on June 22, 2026, on a 14-0-0 vote.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

California Fire Chiefs Association
Fire Districts Association of California
Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District
Support if Amended: Privacy Defense Alliance

Opposition

None on file.

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