

Date of Hearing: June 24, 2024

**ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

Freddie Rodriguez, Chair

SB 74 (Dodd) – As Amended June 13, 2024

**SENATE VOTE:** 40-0

**SUBJECT:** Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development

**SUMMARY:** Eliminates the January 1, 2029 sunset date for the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development within the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal FIRE). Specifically, **this bill:**

1. Eliminates the January 1, 2029 sunset date for the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development within the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal FIRE).

**EXISTING LAW:**

1. Establishes Cal FIRE within the California Natural Resources Agency, and establishes various programs for the prevention and suppression of wildfires at Cal FIRE, as provided. (Public Resources Code 701)
2. Establishes the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development within Cal FIRE. (Government Code Section 8586.8)
3. Provides the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development shall serve as the central organizing hub for the state government's identification of emerging wildfire technologies and is under the direct control of the Director of Forestry and Fire Protection. (Government Code Section 8586.8)
4. Provides the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development shall undertake, but is not limited to, the following activities:
  - (a) Develop a balanced, multimodal research and development program designed to identify, research, test, and evaluate emerging technologies and tools designed to improve the state's preparation for, and response to, wildfires in the state, including, but not limited to, fire retardants and ground, aerial, mobile, portable, communication, predictive modeling, software, or stationary equipment used for California's wildfire preparedness and by first responders.
  - (b) Consult with public, private, and nonprofit entities in identifying new technologies tools, software, and other advances in wildfire preparedness and response.
  - (c) Make recommendations to state and local agencies on the most effective and useful technologies and tools for procurement. (Government Code Section 8586.8)

**FISCAL EFFECT:** Unknown. A fiscal committee has not analyzed the current version of this bill.

**COMMENTS:**

Purpose of the bill: According to the author, “Since its creation in 2021, Cal FIRE’s Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development (Office) has already contributed to helping reduce the frequency and severity of catastrophic wildfires in California. For instance, TIME Magazine’s “Best Inventions of 2023” recently recognized Cal FIRE, working with the University of San Diego’s public safety program AlertCalifornia, for training artificial intelligence to detect smoke and other early indications of fire on a feed from a network of more than 1,000 cameras placed in forests across the state. This bill repeals the 2029 sunset on both the Office, and the corresponding Advisory Review Board, thereby ensuring that both state entities are made permanent while maintaining existing annual reporting requirements aligning with California’s proactive stance on disaster preparedness. This ensures continuous innovation in wildfire management, enhances safety for vulnerable communities and first responders, and supports ongoing collaboration with public, private, and nonprofit entities.”

Equity impact: By making the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development permanent, this bill aims to address and mitigate existing inequities in wildfire preparedness, response, and recovery. The bill seeks to ensure that vulnerable and marginalized communities have improved access to advanced wildfire technologies and resources, fostering a more equitable and resilient approach to wildfire management in California.

Background: The Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development (OWTRD) was established within the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) by Senate Bill 109 (Dodd, Ch. 239, Stats. 2021) to serve as California’s central organizing hub for identifying emerging wildfire technologies. The OWTRD has developed a balanced multimodal research and development program designed to identify, research, test, and evaluate emerging technologies and tools designed to improve the State’s preparation for, and response to, wildfires within the State. Senate Bill 109 also established the Wildfire Technology Research and Development Advisory Review Board (Advisory Board). The Advisory Board is required to submit its findings annually to the Governor and Legislature beginning in January 2024 and every year thereafter until the scheduled date of repeal, January 1, 2029.

**Advisory Board Members:**

- Secretary of the Natural Resources Agency, or their designee.
- The Director of the Office of Emergency Services, or their designee.
- The Director of the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or their designee.
- One representative from academia involved in the field of wildfire research and technology development (Appointed by the Governor).
- One representative from the private wildfire response science, engineering, and technology industry (Appointed by the Governor).
- One representative from local government (Appointed by the Governor).
- One member of the public employed as a first responder (Appointed by the Governor).
- One member who is appointed by the Senate for a term of four years who is involved in victim services.

- One member who is appointed by the Assembly for a term of four years who is involved in the protection of privacy and civil liberties.

Annual Report: According to Cal FIRE, “In 2023, the Office prioritized recruitment, hiring, and training of personnel, and created a bespoke database and management system to support its work. The Office conducted internal outreach within CAL FIRE and external outreach with federal and local agencies, private vendors, academic institutions, and other relevant entities to raise awareness of its mission and identify priority areas of focus related to emerging technologies. Current focus areas include last-mile connectivity, dismounted firefighter location, enhanced situational awareness, firefighter health and safety, and data availability and integration. The Office conducted evaluations and field tests in these areas, including in Jackson Demonstration State Forest in Mendocino County, and expects to work with the Advisory Board to fine-tune these focus areas in the coming year.”

Additionally the office developed business processes for capturing, screening, and evaluating prospective emerging technologies which will inform product development and innovation by communicating the specific needs of the wildfire industry to entities developing emerging technologies.

Related/Prior legislation: SB 896 (Dodd, 2024) the Generative Artificial Intelligence Accountability Act establishes guidelines for the use of generative AI within state government operations, as specified. (Assembly Committee on Privacy)

AB 609 (Papan, 2023) would have required Cal FIRE to submit a report to the Legislature that assesses the feasibility to conduct an evaluation of innovative new aerial firefighting technologies. (That bill was held on the Senate Appropriations Committee Suspense File)

SB 109 (Dodd, Chapter 239, Statutes of 2021) established, within Cal FIRE, the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development and the Advisory Review Board to conduct research and testing on emerging technologies to prevent, predict, and fight wildfires.

## **REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**

### **Support**

None on file.

### **Opposition**

None on file.

**Analysis Prepared by:** Mike Dayton / E.M. / (916) 319-3802