

Date of Hearing: August 7, 2024

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

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

Policy Committee:	Accountability and Administrative Review	Vote:	(not relevant)
	Emergency Management		8 - 0

Urgency: No                      State Mandated Local Program: No                      Reimbursable: No

**SUMMARY:**

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

This bill also similarly extends operation of the Wildfire Technology Research and Development Review Advisory Board (Advisory Board) that reviews and advises the Office.

**FISCAL EFFECT:**

- 1) Cost pressures of \$1.7 million to CAL FIRE to continue the seven staff positions for the Office after January 1, 2029 (General Fund (GF)). Although the Budget Act of 2022 provided ongoing funding and positions for the Office, those GF resources could be re-appropriated to support other state priorities if the Office's authorizing statute is repealed.

Additionally, CAL FIRE estimates needing approximately \$850,000 annually, beginning January 1, 2029, for travel and external consulting costs to support the Office's study and testing of emerging technologies and tools (GF). Of those costs, \$800,000 would support external consulting and professional services to collaborate with technology companies, as CAL FIRE asserts the Office has previously been overlooked for collaboration opportunities because of this lack of funds. For example, CAL FIRE notes it is competing with the private sector for consulting contracts, as well as for aerial technologies that generally cost \$300,000 to \$500,000 per contract. Although CAL FIRE did not initially seek funding for the Office to enter into contracts, CAL FIRE now realizes after establishing the Office the necessity of additional funding for the industry to consider working with the Office on certain projects.

- 2) Likely minor and absorbable costs to the Natural Resources Agency and Office of Emergency Services to continue their role on the Advisory Board.

According to the Legislative Analyst's Office, the GF faces a structural deficit in the tens of billions of dollars over the next several fiscal years.

**COMMENTS:**

- 1) **Purpose.** According to the author, the Office should be made permanent because:

Since its creation in 2021, [the 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.

- 2) **The Office.** SB 109 (Dodd), Chapter 239, Statutes of 2021, established the Office to serve, until January 1, 2029, as the state's central organizing hub for identifying emerging wildfire technologies. Advanced technologies can improve state and local agencies' detection of and response to emergencies. For example, drones can help identify fires and determine best routes for firefighters and other first responders. SB 109 also established the nine-member Advisory Board to: (a) meet at least four times per year to review, analyze, and assess the Office's activities and progress, (b) consult with public and private entities regarding the entities' experience with the Office, and (c) annually report findings and recommendations to the Governor and Legislature. This bill repeals the sunset date for the Office and its Advisory Board.

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