
SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Monique Limón, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No:	AB 1380	Hearing Date:	June 24, 2025
Author:	Elhawary		
Version:	May 23, 2025 Amended		
Urgency:	No	Fiscal:	Yes
Consultant:	Edith Hannigan		

Subject: Wildland firefighters: Formerly Incarcerated Firefighter Certification and Employment Program

SUMMARY

This bill would direct the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Department) to implement a standardized process to ensure that all individuals who complete the department's firefighting training program while incarcerated receive official written certification before their release; require the Department to award hiring preference to qualified formerly incarcerated individuals; and track incarcerated individuals who have completed the firefighting training program and report to the Legislature the effectiveness of the program.

BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). CDCR is established in Chapter 1, Title 7, Part 3, of the Penal Code (PEN). The objective of adult incarceration in CDCR is to facilitate the successful reintegration of individuals in CDCR's care back to their communities equipped with the tools to be drug-free, healthy, and employable members of society by providing education, treatment, and rehabilitative and restorative justice programs, all in a safe and humane environment (PEN § 5000).

Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. The Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Department) is established within the Natural Resources Agency (Public Resources Code (PRC) § 701). The Department is responsible for the fire protection, fire prevention, maintenance, and enhancement of the state's forest, range, and brushland resources, contract fire protection, associated emergency services, and assistance in civil disasters and other nonfire emergencies (PRC § 713).

California Conservation Camp Program. The Legislature created the California Conservation Camp program to provide for the training and use of inmates and wards assigned thereto to perform public conservation projects, including, but not limited to, forest fire prevention and control, forest and watershed management, recreation, fish and game management, soil conservation, and forest and watershed revegetation (PRC § 4951). Conservation Camps receive prisoners committed to the custody of CDCR and are supervised by employees of the Department (PRC § 4952).

January 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires. Fourteen wildfires burned across Southern California in January. The two most notable – the Palisades and the Eaton fires – began burning on the same day, scorching over 37,000 acres, destroying over 18,000 structures, and tragically claiming the lives of 30 people. At one point, over 1,100

incarcerated hand crew members were in Southern California supporting the wildfire response – nearly the entire program.¹ The incarcerated crew members were praised while the program received some scrutiny over the crews' pay. The Pine Grove Youth Conservation Camp was recently honored on the Senate Floor for their work protecting communities during the Southern California Wildfires.²

Ventura Training Center. The Department received an appropriation of \$18.8 million in the Budget Act of 2018 to renovate the Ventura Training Center (VTC) and open an enhanced firefighter training and certification program. Developed by the Department, CDCR, the California Conservation Corps (CCC), and in partnership with the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, VTC provides formerly-incarcerated hand crew members an opportunity to continue using the skills and knowledge they worked to achieve while participating in the Conservation Camp Program.

Existing law:

- 1) Establishes the Conservation Camp Program (PRC) §§ 4951, 4952).
 - a) The inmates and wards assigned to the Conservation Camp program may perform fire prevention, fire control, and other work of the Department, or under an agreement, with a local, state, or federal agency or qualified nonprofit organization (PRC § 4953).
 - b) Conservation Camp inmates and wards may be utilized in the rescue of lost or injured persons, the saving of life, and the protection of property, watershed revegetation, and work necessary to prevent flood damage to land after a fire (PRC § 4957).
 - c) Conservation Camp inmates and wards may be perform work to prevent flood damage to land resulting from levee breaks or overflows (PRC § 4958).
- 2) Establishes the Division of Apprenticeship Standards within the California Apprenticeship Council (Division) (Labor Code (LAB) § 3070). The Division shall issue rules and regulations which establish standards for firefighter occupations, as those occupations are submitted by the California Firefighter Joint Apprenticeship Committee (CAL-JAC) (PRC § 3071).
- 3) Establishes a statewide firefighter preapprenticeship program designed to recruit candidates from underrepresented groups (Health and Safety Code (HSC) § 13159.15).

PROPOSED LAW

This bill would:

- 1) Require the Department, within six months of the operative date of this bill, and in partnership with CDCR, to implement a standardized process to ensure incarcerated

¹ "Running to Danger and Saving Lives." Sam Levin, in *The Guardian*. January 15, 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/15/california-fire-incarcerated-firefighters-prisons>. Accessed April 26, 2025.

² "Pine Grove youth honored by state legislature." April 15, 2025, CDCR. <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/insidecdcr/2025/04/15/pine-grove-youth-honored-by-state-legislature/>. Accessed April 26, 2025.

firefighters receive official written certification before their release from prison.

- 2) Require the Department, on or before January 1, 2027, to award hiring preference under Category Placement 2 to qualified formerly incarcerated firefighters who apply for positions with the Department.
- 3) Require the Department, in partnership with CDCR, to track the number of incarcerated individuals who have completed firefighting training program and are set to be released from prison within 90 days of completing the firefighting training program.
- 4) Require the Department to develop and implement policies and procedures to track and report the outcomes of this bill, including but not limited to:
 - a) The number of participants hired,
 - b) Retention rates, and
 - c) Career advancement opportunities.
- 5) Require the Department, for three years from the date this bill becomes operative, to submit an annual report to the Legislature on the implementation and effectiveness of this bill.
- 6) Establish that this bill shall only become operative upon an appropriation by the Legislature for its purpose.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT

According to the author, "AB 1380 is a restorative justice measure that creates a real path to employment for formerly incarcerated individuals who trained and served in California's fire camps. Despite gaining hands-on experience fighting wildfires alongside [the Department], these individuals are often released without certification and shut out of the very workforce they helped sustain.

"By requiring [the Department] and CDCR to issue formal certification and establishing a pathway to Firefighter I positions for qualified former fire camp participants, AB 1380 invests in rehabilitation, reduces recidivism, strengthens our firefighting workforce, and promotes equity by ensuring that those most impacted by the justice system have the opportunity to serve their communities with dignity."

ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION

None received.

COMMENTS

This bill is double-referred. This committee is the first committee of referral. Elements of this bill under the jurisdiction of the Senate Public Safety Committee are included here for context and completeness only.

On-the-job training for in-demand skills... To participate in the Conservation Camp program, incarcerated individuals must pass a physical fitness test and the

Department's Firefighter Training (FFT) program – four days of classroom training and four days of field training. Program participants become certified wildland firefighters. Some prisons have partnerships with community colleges, providing correspondence courses and other opportunities. Sonora County's Columbia College, for example, offers a fire science certification course. Fire crew members can earn a certificate that transfers their credits to a two- or four-year program after release.

...does not always transfer to callbacks. A 2003 study found that formerly incarcerated people are one-half to one-third as likely to receive callbacks from employers.³ In 2018, California made it illegal for employers with five or more employees to inquire about the conviction history of a job candidate until a conditional job offer has been made (AB 1008 (McCarty, Chapter 789, Statutes of 2017)). Other obstacles to transferring in-custody firefighting training to post-release careers is achieving postsecondary degrees, needing to duplicate training already achieved while incarcerated, and lack of access to reentry support services.

Appropriate categories for earned experience. Entry-level firefighters at the Department are granted the civil service classification of Fire Fighter I. Successful applicants to the Department's Fire Fighter I classification are placed into one of four categories depending on their experiences:

Category 0: The applicant has returnee rights to a Department Unit.

Category 1: The applicant is considered "fully trained" and has provided an acceptable document showing completion of ALL of the required training.

Category 2: The applicant is considered "partially trained" and has provided an acceptable document showing completion of at least one of the required trainings, or one of the desirable trainings.

Category 3: The applicant has not provided acceptable documentation for any of the required trainings, or desirable trainings.

After AB 1008 was enacted, formerly incarcerated hand crew members struggled to demonstrate their experience without pre-emptively disclosing their conviction history. By receiving a certification from the Department, they can be appropriately placed into the Category 2 placement as they were prior to AB 1008.

SUPPORT

Initiate Justice Action (co-sponsor)

Michelson Center for Public Policy (co-sponsor)

Prosecutors Alliance of California, a Project of Tides Advocacy (co-sponsor)

The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (co-sponsor)

ACLU California Action

California Black Power Network

California for Safety and Justice

Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice (CURYJ)

Courage California

Debt Free Justice California

Drug Policy Alliance 1

Friends Committee on Legislation of California

³ Pager, Devah. 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." American Journal of Sociology 108(5): 937–75.

Initiate Justice Action
Justice2jobs Coalition
La Defensa
Rubicon Programs
San Francisco Public Defender
Sister Warriors Freedom Coalition
Smart Justice California, a Project of Tides Advocacy
The W. Haywood Burns Institute
Vera Institute of Justice

OPPOSITION

None Received

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