
SENATE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY

Senator Jesse Arreguín, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: AB 1380 **Hearing Date:** July 15, 2025
Author: Elhawary
Version: May 23, 2025
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: SJ

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

HISTORY

Source: Michelson Center for Public Policy
Initiate Justice Action
Prosecutors Alliance

Prior Legislation: AB 2147 (Reyes), Ch. 60, Stats. of 2020
AB 278 (McCarty), Ch. 571, Stats. of 2019
AB 1668 (Carrillo), Ch. 587, Stats. of 2019

Support: ACLU California Action; California Black Power Network; California Forestry Association; California Public Defenders Association; Californians for Safety and Justice; Communities United for Restorative Youth Justice; Courage California; Debt Free Justice California; Drug Policy Alliance; Ella Baker Center for Human Rights; Friends Committee on Legislation of California; Grip Training Institute; Initiate Justice; Justice2Jobs Coalition; LA Defensa; Prosecutors Alliance of California; Roberts Enterprise Development Fund; Rubicon Programs; San Francisco Public Defender; Santa Clara County District Attorney's Office; Sister Warriors Freedom Coalition; Smart Justice California; The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program; The W. Haywood Burns Institute; Vera Institute of Justice

Opposition: None known

Assembly Floor Vote: 76 - 0

PURPOSE

The purpose of this bill is to require the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire) to partner with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the California Conservation Camp program to implement a standardized process so that fire camp participants who successfully complete Cal Fire's firefighting training program (FFT) receive an official certification prior to release; and to require Cal Fire to award hiring preference to formerly incarcerated individuals who have completed the FFT program, have a valid certification for positions, and apply for positions with the department on or before January 1, 2027.

Existing law establishes the Cal Fire to oversee and administer programs related to forest health and fire prevention and response. (Pub. Resources Code, § 701.)

Existing law establishes the California Conservation Corps (CCC) in the Natural Resources Agency and requires the CCC to implement and administer the conservation corps program. (Pub. Resources Code, § 14001.)

Existing law establishes the California Conservation Camp program to be operated by CDCR in conjunction with Cal Fire to provide for training and use of inmates assigned to the camps 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. (Pub. Resources Code, § 4951.)

Existing law defines “California Conservation Camps” as any camps established for the purpose of receiving wards or incarcerated individuals who are committed to the custody of CDCR, and in which the work projects performed by the wards or incarcerated individuals are supervised by CDCR employees. (Pub. Resources Code, § 4952.)

Existing law requires CDCR to utilize incarcerated individuals and wards assigned to conservation camps in performing fire prevention, fire control, and other work of the department. (Pub. Resources Code, § 4953, subd. (a).)

Existing law establishes the Education and Employment Reentry Program within the CCC and authorizes the director of CCC to enroll formerly incarcerated individuals who successfully served on a California Conservation Camp program crew for participation as a program member by the Director of Cal Fire and the Secretary of CDCR. (Pub. Res. Code, § 14415.1.)

Existing law authorizes any department, division, bureau, commission or other agency of the State of California or the Federal Government to use or cause to be used individuals confined in the state prisons to perform work necessary and proper to be done by them at permanent, temporary, and mobile camps to be established under this article. Authorizes the director to enter into contracts for the purposes of work, as specified. (Pen. Code, § 2780.)

This bill requires Cal Fire, in partnership with CDCR and the California Conservation Camp program, to implement a standardized process to ensure that all individuals who successfully complete Cal Fire’s FFT program while incarcerated receive official written certification before their release from prison. Specifies that Cal Fire implement this process within six months from the date the provisions of this bill become operative.

This bill requires the official written certification include the following certifications:

- CAL-FIRE Forestry Training.
- S-190 Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior.

This bill requires Cal Fire to award hiring preference under Category Placement 2 to qualified formerly incarcerated individuals who apply for positions with the department on or before January 1, 2027.

This bill defines “qualified formerly incarcerated individual” as any formerly incarcerated individual who completed the FFT program and has a valid certification.

This bill provides that nothing in its provisions precludes Cal Fire from placing a formerly incarcerated person in a higher category for hiring based on their level of training, certification, employment history, or other factors.

This bill requires Cal Fire, in partnership with CDCR, to track the number of incarcerated individuals who have completed the FFT program and are set to be released from prison within 90 days.

This bill specifies that nothing in its provisions precludes other state agencies with wildland management responsibilities from establishing similar pathways to support wildfire prevention, mitigation, and response efforts with priority hiring reserved for formerly incarcerated individuals who completed the FFT program.

This bill requires Cal Fire to develop and implement policies and procedures to track and report outcomes, including, but not limited to, the number of participants hired, retention rates, and career advancement opportunities.

This bill requires Cal Fire to submit an annual report to the Legislature on the bill's implementation, including recommendations for improvement, for three years following its operative date.

This bill provides that it becomes operative only upon an appropriation by the Legislature for its purposes in the annual Budget Act or any other statute.

COMMENTS

1. Need For This Bill

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 CAL FIRE, these individuals are often released without certification and shut out of the very workforce they helped sustain.

By requiring CAL FIRE 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.

2. Conservation (Fire) Camp

CDCR, in cooperation with Cal Fire and the Los Angeles County Fire Department, jointly operates 35 conservation camps, commonly referred to as fire camps, in 25 counties across the state. Conservation Camp Program participants support state, local and federal government agencies as they respond to emergencies such as fires, floods, and other natural or manmade disasters, and complete community service projects when not assigned to an emergency.

All fire camps are minimum-security facilities which are overseen by CDCR employees. Participants are supervised by Cal Fire staff when responding to a wildfire or working on a conservation project. (See <<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/faq-conservation-fire-camp-program/>>.)

Incarcerated individual participating in fire camps receive the same entry-level training as Cal Fire's seasonal firefighters as well as ongoing training from Cal Fire throughout their time in the program. An incarcerated person must volunteer for the fire camp program, and some individuals are ineligible for fire camp assignment based on their convictions, including convictions for sex offenses, arson, and escape with force or violence. (<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/faq-conservation-fire-camp-program/>.)

Individuals who volunteer for fire camp must complete Cal Fire's Firefighting Training Program, and program participants become certified wildland firefighters after completing this training. (<<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/faq-conservation-fire-camp-program/>>)

3. Ventura Training Center

In an effort to expand employment opportunities to formerly incarcerated firefighters who served in a fire camp, the Ventura Training Center (VTC) was established at the Ventura Conservation Camp. Cal Fire, CDCR, and CCC, in partnership with the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, developed an enhanced firefighter training and certification program. The VTC program runs for 18 months, divided into three phases of training. The program began operating in October 2018. (<<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/ventura/>>)

In order to be eligible for VTC, participants must have had minimum-custody status while incarcerated and were determined to be eligible after a review of their behavior in prison, medical and mental health issues, and time remaining to serve. Participants must also be recommended by Cal Fire, have no serious rules violations while serving at a fire camp or while on parole or probation; and have no conditions of parole or community supervision requirements that would restrict their participation in the program. (<<https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/ventura/>>)

In addition to the job training provided at VTC, participants receive life skills training and resources, including employment skill assessments, money management, technology education, tutoring, career planning, developing resumes and cover letters, and searching and applying for employment, from the Anti-Recidivism Coalition.

4. Employment Opportunities Following Release

Formerly incarcerated firefighters are eligible for employment with Cal Fire, the U.S. Forest Service, and interagency hot shot crews. Prior to the enactment of AB 2147 (Reyes), Chapter 60, Statutes of 2020, formerly incarcerated firefighters were often unable to seek additional firefighting employment opportunities due to their felony convictions because a felony conviction serves as a bar to obtaining an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certification which is required by many municipal fire departments.

AB 2147 enacted Penal Code section 1203.4b which allows a formerly incarcerated firefighter to petition the court to withdraw their guilty plea or nolo contendere, set aside their guilty verdict in a conviction, and/or terminate parole or post release community supervision. Because individuals who are eligible for an expungement under Penal Code section 1203.4b continue to face challenges, AB 245 (Reyes) was introduced this year to automate elements of the process.

5. Effect of This Bill

This bill expands upon prior efforts to increase post-release job opportunities for fire camp participants. Specifically, this bill requires Cal Fire to partner with CDCR and the fire camp program to implement a standardized process so that fire camp participants who successfully complete Cal Fire's FFT program receive an official certification prior to release. This bill also requires Cal Fire to award hiring preference to formerly incarcerated individuals who have completed the FFT program, have a valid certification, and apply for positions with the department on or before January 1, 2027.

6. Argument in Support

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights writes:

AB 1380 because it honors the labor and lived experience of incarcerated firefighters by providing official certifications for completed training and codifying hiring preference for qualified formerly incarcerated individuals. Too often, people who put their lives on the line while incarcerated are shut out of these same careers once released due to a lack of certification or institutional barriers. This bill creates a clear and just pathway into a stable career, supports successful reentry, and advances economic opportunity for people impacted by incarceration.

This bill would require the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, in partnership with the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, to implement a standardized process to certify the completion of wildland firefighting training for incarcerated individuals before release. These certifications, which include S-190, S-130, Human Factors, HazMat, and others, would meet the requirements for entry-level Firefighter positions. Specifically, AB 1380 would require CALFIRE to award hiring preference to formerly incarcerated firefighters who apply for Category 2 positions.

In addition, the bill directs the state to actively track individuals completing the FFT program, monitor outcomes, and report back to the Legislature on the program's effectiveness. This ensures transparency, accountability, and ongoing investment in successful reentry pathways.

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