
THIRD READING

Bill No: AB 1749
Author: Dixon (R)
Amended: 6/17/26 in Senate
Vote: 21

SENATE EMERGENCY MGT. COMMITTEE: 9-0, 6/23/26

AYES: Stern, Seyarto, Allen, Ashby, Blakespear, Dahle, Grayson, Pérez, Rubio

SENATE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE: 13-0, 6/30/26

AYES: Umberg, Niello, Allen, Ashby, Caballero, Durazo, Laird, Reyes, Stern,
Valladares, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

SENATE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE: 7-0, 8/13/26

AYES: Cervantes, Seyarto, Cabaldon, Dahle, Grayson, Richardson, Wahab

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 77-0, 5/27/26 - See last page for vote

SUBJECT: Interfering with wildfire suppression and emergency responses with drone

SOURCE: Author

DIGEST: This bill makes it unlawful to operate or use an unmanned aerial vehicle, remote piloted aircraft, or drone to knowingly or recklessly interfere with wildfire suppression efforts or incidents involving a temporary flight restriction (TFR) issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and authorizes related civil enforcement action, as specified.

ANALYSIS:

Existing federal law establishes that an individual who operates an unmanned aircraft and knowingly or recklessly interferes with wildfire suppression, or law enforcement or emergency response efforts related to a wildfire suppression, subject to a fine or imprisonment, or both.

Existing state law:

- 1) Defines “unmanned aircraft” and “unmanned aircraft systems” as follows:
 - a) “Unmanned aircraft” means an aircraft that is operated without the possibility of direct human intervention from within or on the aircraft;
 - b) “Unmanned aircraft system” means an unmanned aircraft and associated elements, including, but not limited to, communication links and the components that control the unmanned aircraft that are required for the pilot in command to operate safely and efficiently in the national airspace system.
- 2) Exempts a local public entity, local public employees, and emergency responders from liability for damage caused to an unmanned aircraft if the damage was caused while providing emergency services and the unmanned aircraft interfered, as specified.
- 3) Makes a person at the scene of an emergency with the intention to view the emergency that impedes the emergency response personnel in responding to the emergency, as specified, including the operation of an unmanned aerial vehicle or drone, guilty of a misdemeanor.

This bill:

- 1) Prohibits a person from operating or using an unmanned aerial vehicle, remote piloted aircraft, or drone to knowingly or recklessly interfere with either of the following:
 - a) A wildfire suppression, or law enforcement or emergency response efforts related to a wildfire suppression.
 - b) An emergency response related to an incident for which a TFR has been issued by the FAA.
- 2) Allows the Attorney General (AG), county counsel, or city attorney to bring a civil action to enforce 1) above and authorizes the following for each violation:
 - a) a civil penalty not exceeding \$75,000 for each violation;
 - b) injunctive relief; and
 - c) reasonable attorney’s fees and costs.

Background

The use of drones in firefighting and emergency response. Unmanned aircraft systems, commonly known as drones, are tools that aid in wildfire management,

search and rescue, crowd management and risk reduction for first responders. Drones used by the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) are equipped with high-zoom and wide-angle cameras, thermal imaging, aerial ignition capabilities and heavy cargo capacity and serve several functions when fighting fires. Pilots monitor thermal cameras to help crews battle wildfires through real-time fire hot spot detection. High-resolution aerial mapping can identify areas of highly flammable material and complete pre- and post-fire surveys of land to inform future fire prevention efforts.

Drones are also critical for search and rescue. Thermal cameras enhance the search capabilities for missing people, particularly in areas with low visibility or rugged terrain. Drones can also drop a series of glow sticks to create a visual path for rescuers to follow or deliver essential supplies to the scene. The drones are used to assess potential emergencies and reduce future risk to rescue personnel or other emergency responders.

Drone incursion warnings and consequences. In recent years, CAL FIRE has warned the public about the incursion of drones and other unmanned aerial systems into firefighting airspace. These incursions raise serious concern as they force the temporary suspension of critical aerial firefighting operations, as required by TFRs issued by the FAA. The FAA regularly implements TFRs around wildfire areas to protect the safety of aircraft participating in firefighting operations. All aircraft, including drones, are explicitly prohibited from entering these restricted areas unless they are operated by an agency directly involved in wildfire suppression efforts. Even when a TFR is not in effect, drone pilots are strongly urged to avoid flying near wildfires as it is a crime to interfere with the air attack operations.

When drones are detected within firefighting airspace, fire response agencies must ground their aircraft to mitigate the risk of a midair collision. Aircraft not only drop water and fire retardant, but also serve as lookouts to support firefighters on the ground. This delay in airborne response can allow fires to continue spreading and poses a significant threat to the safety of firefighters on the ground, residents, and properties in nearby communities. Aircraft do not resume flying until the airspace is deemed clear.

According to CAL FIRE, the U.S. Forest Service reported more than 200 drone sightings over active wildfires in 2025. More than half of these incidents occurred during the Eaton and Palisades fires in Southern California. In one case, a drone struck a Canadian “Super Scooper,” punching a hole in the aircraft’s wing and grounding it for several days for repairs.

CAL FIRE reminds the public that individuals who operate drones without proper authorization over wildfire-affected areas can be found in violation of federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and ordinances. Those who are determined to have interfered with wildfire suppression efforts and/or endangered manned aircraft or people on the ground with a drone may face severe consequences. Under the FAA, operating a drone over active wildfires is a federal crime that can result in up to 12 months in prison and civil penalties of up to \$20,000.

FISCAL EFFECT: Appropriation: No Fiscal Com.: Yes Local: No

According to the Senate Appropriations Committee:

- Unknown, potentially significant workload cost pressures to the state funded trial court system to adjudicate any civil actions filed as a result of this bill (Trial Court Trust Fund, General Fund). The fiscal impact of this bill to the courts will depend on many unknowns, including the number of cases filed and the factors unique to each case. An eight-hour court day costs approximately \$8,000 in staff in workload. If court days exceed 10, costs to the trial courts could reach hundreds of thousands of dollars. While the courts are not funded on a workload basis, an increase in workload could result in delayed court services and would put pressure on the General Fund to fund additional staff and resources and to increase the amount appropriated to backfill for trial court operations.
- Unknown, potentially minor costs to the AG. The Department of Justice does not anticipate a significant fiscal impact, indicating that the AG may choose not to pursue enforcement actions under this bill.

SUPPORT: (Verified 8/13/26)

California Professional Firefighters
California Special Districts Association
California State Sheriffs' Association
Pacific Gas and Electric Company
Peace Officers Research Association of California

OPPOSITION: (Verified 8/13/26)

None received

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT: In support of this bill, the California Professional Firefighters writes that, "These devices are flown by hobbyists seeking dramatic

footage of an emergency incident and are simultaneously small enough to be difficult for pilots to see while flying and also capable of causing enough damage to ground the plane if the collision occurs in a sensitive area. AB 1749 will impose civil liability onto individuals who operate a drone in an emergency area and impede emergency response while....ensuring that firefighters are able to carry out their lifesaving, dangerous work without the inhibition of civilian unmanned aircraft interference. For these reasons, we are pleased to support this important measure.”

ASSEMBLY FLOOR: 77-0, 5/27/26

AYES: Addis, Aguiar-Curry, Ahrens, Alanis, Alvarez, Arambula, Ávila Farías, Bains, Bauer-Kahan, Bennett, Berman, Boerner, Bonta, Bryan, Calderon, Caloza, Carrillo, Castillo, Chen, Connolly, Davies, DeMaio, Dixon, Elhawary, Ellis, Flora, Fong, Gabriel, Gallagher, Garcia, Gipson, Jeff Gonzalez, Mark González, Hadwick, Haney, Harabedian, Hart, Hoover, Irwin, Johnson, Kalra, Krell, Lackey, Lowenthal, Macedo, McKinnor, Muratsuchi, Nguyen, Ortega, Pacheco, Papan, Patel, Patterson, Pellerin, Petrie-Norris, Quirk-Silva, Ramos, Ransom, Michelle Rodriguez, Rogers, Blanca Rubio, Sanchez, Schiavo, Schultz, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Soria, Stefani, Ta, Tangipa, Valencia, Wallis, Ward, Wicks, Wilson, Zbur, Rivas

NO VOTE RECORDED: Jackson, Lee, Celeste Rodriguez

Prepared by: Cassie Royce / E.M. /
8/14/26 15:38:37

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