Date of Hearing: March 23, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
Rhodesia Ransom, Chair
AB 1873 (Bennett) – As Introduced February 12, 2026

SUBJECT: County of Ventura: fire suppression: backup energy source

SUMMARY: This bill extends current requirements for a Ventura County water supplier to provide backup power during an emergency, required Ventura County water suppliers to notify the Ventura County Office of Emergency Services if backup power is not available within 90 minutes, sets a deadline for when the water supplier emergency plans must be completed, adds a new assessment requirement to existing reporting requirements, and makes other clarifying changes. Specifically, **this bill**:

1. Extends the current requirement for a Ventura County water supplier to provide backup power within 60 minutes of a loss of power, as specified, to within 90 minutes or as soon as practically possible after deenergization.

2. Requires a Ventura County water supplier to notify the Ventura County Office of Emergency Services (VCOES), as specified, if the backup energy source does not provide power within 90 minutes of a loss of power.

3. Requires the Ventura County water supplier emergency preparedness plan for response to major power outages or emergencies that pose a potential threat to providing water service, already required under statute, to be completed by July 1, 2027.

4. Clarifies that a Ventura County water supplier is required to initiate action under the emergency preparedness plan if the National Weather Service issues a red flag warning specifically for Ventura County.

5. Requires, in addition to the existing assessment requirements of VCFD's report to the Ventura County Board of Supervisors of any fire damages that made more than 10 residential dwellings within the service area of a water supplier uninhabitable, the report to also assess whether a water supplier that used a backup energy source made a notification to VCOES due to a loss of power and the amount of time critical infrastructure for that water supplier experienced a loss of power, if applicable.

6. Declares that a special statute is necessary, as specified.

EXISTING LAW:

1) Requires, commencing July 1, 2030, a Ventura County water supplier, as specified, to have access to sufficient backup energy sources to operate critical fire suppression infrastructure needed to supply water for at least 24 hours for fire suppression in high or very high fire hazard severity zones (HFHSZ or VHFHSZ) in Ventura County, as specified, or have access to alternative sources of water supplied by a different water supplier or agency, as specified. (Water Code § 7080)

2) Authorizes a Ventura County water supplier, in order to meet the above requirements, to use mobile backup energy sources or procure an energy source via an established mutual aid agreement provided the backup energy source can provide power within 12 hours of the National Weather Service alerting the region of a red flag warning and provide power for at least 24 hours after a loss of power and within 60 minutes of a loss of power. (Water Code § 7080)

3) Requires the water supplier to identify, and provide to the Ventura County Office of Emergency Services (VC OES) no later than May 1, 2026, all critical fire suppression infrastructure or alternative sources of water. (Water Code § 7080)

4) Requires, by January 1, 2027, the Ventura County Fire Department (VCFD), in consultation with water suppliers and local fire departments, to develop minimum fire safety standards for the purpose of fire hardening critical fire suppression infrastructure and backup energy sources located in the HFHSZ or VHFHSZ. (Water Code § 7080)

5) Requires VCFD to annually inspect critical fire suppression infrastructure and backup energy sources in the HFHSZ or VHFHSZ to ensure critical fire suppression infrastructure and backup energy sources located in those zones meet the fire safety standards developed by VCFD, as specified, and requires the water supplier to annually inspect critical fire suppression infrastructure and backup energy sources serving those zones, but are not located within the zone, to ensure functionality. (Water Code § 7080)

6) Requires a water supplier to establish, in coordination with VC OES and VCFD, an emergency preparedness plan, as specified, for response to major power outages or emergencies that pose a potential threat to providing water service. (Water Code § 7080)

7) Requires a water supplier to initiate action under the emergency preparedness plan if the National Weather Service alerts the region of a red flag warning. (Water Code § 7080)

8) Requires a water supplier to notify VC OES within 3 business days, or as soon as it becomes aware, during a fire event, of any reduction in its water delivery capacity that could substantially hinder firefighting operations or significantly delay the replenishment of reservoirs. (Water Code § 7080)

9) Requires VCFD to present a report, as specified, to the Ventura County Board of Supervisors of any fire damages that made more than 10 residential dwellings within the service area of a water supplier uninhabitable. (Water Code § 7080)

10) Authorizes the Governor to proclaim a state of emergency and local officials and local governments to proclaim a local emergency, when specified conditions of disaster or extreme peril to the safety of persons and property exist, and authorizes the Governor or the appropriate local government to exercise certain powers in response to that emergency. (Government Code § 8558)

11) Establishes DWR within the Natural Resources Agency and sets forth its powers and duties relating to water resources (Water Code § 120)

12) Requires the State Fire Marshal to classify lands within state responsibility areas into fire hazard severity zones and requires that local agencies also designate fire hazard severity

zones in their jurisdiction after receiving recommendations from the State Fire Marshal. These classifications shall be based on fuel loading, slope, fire weather, and other relevant factors (Public Resource Code § 4202-4204, Government Code § 51178)

13) Directs a city or county, upon the next revision of the housing element of a general plan on or after January 1, 2014, to include a set of feasible implementation measures designed to carry out specified goals, policies, and objectives, including designing adequate infrastructure if a new development is located in a state responsibility area or in a very high fire hazard severity zone, including water supplies for structural fire suppression (Government Code § 65302).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. A fiscal committee has not yet heard this bill.

COMMENTS:

Author Statement: "Ventura County has experienced its three most destructive fires in the last 8 years - Thomas (2017), Woosley (2018), and Mountain (2024). Last year, I authored AB 367 to ensure that Ventura County will be able to use its resources to their maximum effectiveness. As that bill moved through the process I committed to working with cities in my district to address potential implementation concerns. This bill, AB 1873, reflects the collaborative discussion we had with our local water suppliers about their implementation issues. It makes sensible changes that preserve the integrity of last year's bill while creating more efficient paths towards effective implementation."

Equity Impact: According to the author's staff, "California fires disproportionately put at risk vulnerable communities, especially given the lack of insurance coverage in many parts of the state. Of particular concern is when conflagrations destroy major parts of communities. Ventura County has a number of cities impacted by fires, and those within high and very fire severity zones are either home to vulnerable communities, have poverty rates above the national average, or both. Ventura is also home to a number farmworkers, who would be particularly disadvantaged during a fire. Ventura has an estimated 25,000 farmworkers according to a County Report. According to that same report many of these farmworkers lack affordable housing, 86% did not complete high school, and the single most common area of residence for farmworkers is the City of Oxnard. These challenges make farmworkers particularly exposed during a wildfire since any damage to housing only creates more constraints on the housing market, and any damage to agricultural land would risk the jobs of farmworkers. AB 1837 would allow for smoother implementation of AB 367 of 2024, which would maximize existing resources to minimize the spread of fire, reducing the risk to vulnerable communities in Ventura County."

Background: Throughout California's history the state has contended with destructive wildfires impacting communities that were constructed amongst or adjacent to timber and chaparral forests. These areas, commonly referred to as the "wildland urban interface," have long been considered some of the most fire-prone areas in the state. In the last decade, unprecedented wildfires led to the deadliest wildfire in California's history. The impacts of these wildfires cannot be understated, many lives were lost, thousands of homes were destroyed, and residents, in some cases entire communities, have been forced to relocate. Billions of dollars in damage was caused to homes, businesses, and infrastructure throughout the state.

In recent years, an increasing number of wildfires have burned outside of wildland areas and into more urban settings. While persons living in forested areas and those in the wildland urban

interface, have long faced significant risks from wildfires, as a result of climate change, more Californians face wildfire risks than ever before.

Many of these areas have been classified by the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection as belonging to "very high fire hazard severity zones." As a result of this designation, the properties within a very high fire hazard zone are subject to the strictest requirements from the building codes, "Fire Safe" regulations, and defensible space requirements. Properties not immediately in the wildland urban interface but subject to fire risks are now characterized as being in "high fire hazard severity zones."

Wildfires across California have repeatedly exposed vulnerabilities in public water systems, especially in high and very high severity zones. During the 2025 Palisades Fire, extreme demand caused by firefighting overwhelmed the system, leaving some hydrants dry. In Ventura County's 2024 Mountain Fire, power outages delayed pump operations and disrupted hillside water supply, echoing similar failures during the 2017 Thomas Fire and leaving high-elevation hydrants without water. Likewise, during the 2017 Tubbs Fire, firefighters in Santa Rosa's Fountaingrove neighborhood lost access to water due to low pressure and had to travel long distances to refill, delaying response efforts. It is important to note that even when operating at their maximum efficiency, public water systems are currently not designed for catastrophic wildfires.

AB 367: As mentioned in the author's statement, Assemblymember Bennett authored AB 367 which, among other things, requires Ventura County water suppliers to: have backup power, or access to alternative water sources, capable of supplying water for at least 24 hours for fire suppression in high or very high fire hazard severity zones; annually inspect critical fire suppression infrastructure and backup energy sources and notify significant water delivery reductions, as specified, to the County Office of Emergency Services. AB 367 was originated based on best practices stated by the deputy general manager at Calleguas Municipal Water District, a water supplier in Ventura County, to the Los Angeles Times: "It is best practices for water providers to top off their water tanks, stage backup generators and prepare crews for contingency work during a red flag event or possible fire weather."

This bill makes changes as requested by cities in Ventura County to better implement AB 367's provisions. For example, the City of Thousand Oaks states that this bill:

- "Clarifies that "red flag" warnings would be specific to Ventura County."
- "Offers critical operational flexibility by acknowledging the logistical realities of managing differences in service area."
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Wildfires: Wildfires are a severe and growing threat to lives, property, and infrastructure in California. The confluence of a changing climate, urbanization, and constraints on forest management has added urgency to the need to enhance our strategy to address this threat. California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment projects that by 2100, if climate change continues on this trajectory, the frequency of extreme wildfires would increase, and the average area burned statewide would increase by 77 percent.

Wildfires that threaten thousands of homes are now an annual occurrence, as autumn days with severe fire-weather prone weather have more than doubled in California since the 1980s. Over

the last four decades, the wildfires have increased in size and intensity with five of the eight largest fires in California history occurring in 2020 alone. Of the remaining three, two of the largest fires occurred since 2020. Additionally, 15 of California's 20 most destructive fires have occurred in the past decade. Collectively, these most recent fires have resulted in 180 deaths and the loss of 57,483 structures (homes, outbuildings, and commercial properties).

In Cal FIRE's 2020 Fire Siege Report, the Director states, "at the end of 2020, we closed the book on, arguably, the worst fire year ever experienced on the west coast, and specifically in California. Since 2015, the term "unprecedented" has been used year over year as conditions have worsened, and the operational reality of a changing climate sets in. In California, the 2020 Fire Siege claimed the lives of 28 civilians and three firefighters, destroyed 9,248 structures and consumed 4.2 million acres. While fewer wildfires threatened California in 2023 due to the increased number of weather events and atmospheric rivers, the vegetative growth from the significant rainfall contributed to devastating wildfires in 2024 and 2025. In 2024, the Park Fire became the fourth-largest fire in California's history. Despite aggressive initial attack suppression efforts, the fire rapidly expanded, ultimately consuming 429,603 acres across Butte and Tehama counties. The Park Fire led to the destruction of 709 structures and damage to 54 others, prompting widespread evacuations and the temporary closure of Lassen Volcanic National Park. In 2025, Los Angeles County experienced two of the most destructive wildfires in history (discussed below).

Public Water Access Overwhelmed in the Palisades Fire: In the early days of the 2025 catastrophic Palisades Fire, extreme winds made it impossible for aerial firefighting to continue, putting a significant strain on the public water system. According to Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, water use spiked to four times the normal level for over 15 hours, leaving some hydrants dry. While there was no overall water shortage, the sheer demand overwhelmed the system, preventing water tanks from refilling fast enough to maintain the pressure needed to reach higher-elevation areas in the Palisades.

Ventura County Water Access Issues: During the Mountain Fire in November 2024, some of Ventura County's water providers experienced a significant delay in restoring operations after losing power. According to Calleguas Municipal Water District, the utility pump was without electricity for several hours and did not receive a generator until late that evening, resulting in water supply challenges. The Mountain Fire also disrupted firefighting efforts in the Camarillo foothills, where two water pumps went offline during active fire suppression. This interruption delayed the refilling of hillside water tanks, which are critical for maintaining water pressure in high-elevation fire hydrants. This eventually led to the fire hydrants running dry. During the 2017 Thomas Fire, similar disruptions occurred when several water pumping stations lost power. In Ojai, the fire caused direct damage to the infrastructure, rendering the water system inoperable.

UCLA Report Recommendations: In a 2021 briefing report titled *Wildfire & Water Supply in California*, the authors recommend investing in remote-operable water infrastructure and backup power systems—such as solar panels and battery storage—to help maintain water service during wildfires while reducing risk to utility personnel. They also highlight the importance of fire-resistant building materials and site design to protect critical water system assets in high-risk areas. However, they caution that widespread adoption of these innovations may be limited by cost, access to technology, and the expertise required to implement them—particularly for smaller water systems.

Small water suppliers and rural communities: Pursuant to AB 1668 (Friedman, Chapter 15, Statutes of 2018), DWR issued the Small Water Systems and Rural Communities Drought and Water Shortage Contingency Planning and Risk Assessment in 2021. This report, released in two parts, identified small water systems and rural communities at risk of drought and water shortage vulnerability (Part II) and made recommendations for improving drought contingency planning for those areas (Part I).

DWR examined the relative risk of drought and water shortage for 2,419 small water suppliers in the report. The results show that a vast majority of the state's counties (47 of the 58 counties) have small water suppliers in the top 10% of risk scores (240 suppliers) for water shortage. Of those in the top 10%, over half (61% or 149 suppliers) are located in high or very high fire hazard severity zones. In other words, there are many small and rural communities across the state that are at high risk of running out of water during a drought or other disaster. Also, many communities located in areas with a high risk for wildfire are at high risk of water shortage, which could impact their capacity to suppress fires when they occur.

The report recommended that the state support small community water systems to install additional infrastructure to improve drought and water shortage preparedness and response. The report noted that most water systems under 1,000 connections have difficulty ensuring water supplies during natural disaster events, regardless of the development of planning materials, due to their inherent lack of economies of scale to finance needed infrastructure improvements and the high cost of emergency response activities.

According to CAL FIRE, water delivery infrastructure does pose a challenge for some of the communities in CAL FIRE service areas, as some hydrant systems cannot support fire operations at the required flow rate and volume. In some cases, using an older hydrant has caused water pipes to collapse, which can cutoff water delivery to that specific neighborhood in the aftermath of an incident.

Proposition 4: In July 2024, the Legislature approved Chapter 83 (SB 867, Allen), authorizing a $10 billion bond measure entitled the "Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024." Largely designed to increase the state's resilience to the impacts of climate change, the measure was placed on the statewide ballot as Proposition 4 and subsequently approved by voters in November. This bond measure builds on significant funding for state funded climate-related programs. The bond measure includes a number of requirements to guide how funds are administered and overseen by about 30 different state agencies, departments, boards, commissions, conservancies, and offices. Much of the funding is to be provided as grants for eligible applicants including local agencies, nonprofit organizations, tribes, and utilities. Remaining funding will support state-led activities, such as addressing deferred maintenance and wildfire resilience activities at state parks and projects at the Salton Sea.

Double Referral: Should this bill be approved, it will be referred to the Assembly Committee on Utilities and Energy.

Arguments in Support: According to the City of Thousand Oaks, "This bill is an amendment to AB 367, which was signed into law in 2025, and addresses a vital gap in our public safety infrastructure by ensuring that water suppliers in high and very high fire hazard severity zones

within Ventura County maintain the power, water, and resources necessary to fight wildfires during emergencies."

Prior and Related Legislation:

AB 2013 (Bennett, 2026) would require a water supplier that services more than 100 customers that are located in a moderate, high, or very high fire hazard severity zone, as specified, to establish an emergency preparedness plan for response to red flag warnings, extreme weather events, and other major power outages or emergencies that pose a potential threat to providing adequate water service. (Pending in Assembly Committee on Emergency Management)

AB 367 (Bennett. Chapter 690, Statutes of 2025) requires Ventura County water suppliers to: have backup power, or access to alternative water sources, capable of supplying water for at least 24 hours for fire suppression in high or very high fire hazard severity zones; annually inspect critical fire suppression infrastructure and backup energy sources and notify significant water delivery reductions, as specified, to the County Office of Emergency Services. This bill also requires the Ventura County Fire Department, in cooperation with the water supplier, to issue a report, as specified, after significant fire damage within a service area, as specified

AB 372 (Bennett, 2025) would, contingent on funding being appropriated pursuant to a bond act, establish the Rural Water Infrastructure for Wildfire Resilience Program within the California Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) for the distribution of state matching funds to communities within the Wildland Urban Interface in designated high fire severity zones or very high fire hazard severity zones to improve water system infrastructure. (Inactive File on Senate Floor)

AB 2421 (Quirk. Chapter 225, Statutes of 2020) required, only until January 1, 2024, expedited permitting of emergency standby generators for macro cell towers. The provisions of the bill are no longer in effect.

SB 341 (McGuire. Chapter 425, Statutes of 2021), among other things, required the CPUC to adopt and implement backup power rules for providers of telecommunications service

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

City of Thousand Oaks

Opposition

None on file.

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