

Date of Hearing: March 23, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Isaac G. Bryan, Chair

AB 2483 (Elhawary) – As Introduced February 20, 2026

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

**SUMMARY:** Requires, on and after July 1, 2027, the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), in partnership with the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the California Conservation Camp program, to implement a standardized process to ensure that all individuals who successfully complete CAL FIRE's firefighting training program (FFT program) while incarcerated receive official written certification before their release from prison.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) Establishes the California Conservation Camps for the purpose of having incarcerated persons work on projects supervised by CAL FIRE. Establishes the policy of this state to require the inmates and wards assigned to such 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 conversion, and forest and watershed revegetation. (Public Resources Code (PRC) 4951)
- 2) Requires CAL FIRE to utilize inmates and wards assigned to California Conservation Camps in performing fire prevention, fire control, and other work of CAL FIRE. (PRC 4953)
- 3) Establishes the Education and Employment Reentry Program within the California Conservation Corps (CCC) and authorizes the director of CCC to enroll formerly incarcerated individuals who successfully served on a California Conservation Camp program crew and were recommended for participation as a program member by the Director of CAL FIRE and the Secretary of CDCR. (PRC 14415.1)
- 4) Authorizes an incarcerated individual who has successfully participated in either a California Conservation Camp program or a county program as an incarcerated individual hand crewmember, as determined by specified authorities, and has been released from custody, to file a petition for expungement relief. Incarcerated individuals who have been convicted of specified crimes are ineligible for this relief. (Penal Code 1203.4b)

**THIS BILL:**

- 1) Requires, on and after July 1, 2027, 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.
- 2) Requires the official written certification to include, but is not limited to, the following certifications:

- a) CAL FIRE Forestry Training, or its successor certification.
  - b) S-190 Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior, or its successor certification.
- 3) Requires, on and after January 1, 2028, if a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for a Fire Fighter 1 (FF1) Classification position with CAL FIRE, CAL FIRE to award hiring preference to the qualified formerly incarcerated individual under Category Placement 2.
  - 4) Requires, on and after January 1, 2028, if a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for a Forestry Technician Classification position with CAL FIRE, CAL FIRE to count the duration of training and field work as an incarcerated hand crew member towards the minimum qualifications for the Forestry Technician classification, and award hiring preference to the qualified formerly incarcerated individual under Rank 2 Placement. This requirement only applies to Forestry Technician 1 fuels mitigation assignments and does not apply to Forestry Technician 1 defensible space inspectors.
  - 5) Provides that nothing in this bill 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.
  - 6) Provides that nothing in this bill 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.
  - 7) Defines “qualified formerly incarcerated individual” as any formerly incarcerated individual who completed the FFT program, has a valid certification, and has successfully participated as an incarcerated hand crew member in the California Conservation Camp program.
  - 8) Authorizes CAL FIRE, if it establishes new entry level classifications or positions, including, but not limited to, the successor classifications of those mentioned in this bill, and the training matches the minimum qualifications for these new classifications or positions, to provide hiring preference analogous to that described in this bill to qualified formerly incarcerated individuals.

**FISCAL EFFECT:** Unknown

**COMMENTS:**

- 1) **Inmate fire fighters.** After inmates were dispatched to extinguish a 1944 fire in Southern California near a forestry camp, the state created the Rainbow Conservation Camp in 1946 near San Diego. It was administered through an agreement between the corrections and forestry departments, and established a model for the camps we have now. Today, inmate firefighters form handcrews, creating breaks in vegetation and carving out swaths of barren soil that deny flames fuel to go further. They manage these perimeters by hand, using chainsaws, shovels, and axes. Firefighting provides job skills training that can be employed post release and a sense of purpose during incarceration.

California’s inmate firefighter ranks have plummeted in recent years, due in part to measures to reduce the prison population under Governor Newsom and hastened by the early release of

non-violent offenders during the pandemic. In 2011, more than 4,000 incarcerated individuals were in a firefighting program; as of March 2026, there are 1,865 incarcerated individuals at conservation fire camps.

- 2) **Conservation Camp Program.** CDCR, in cooperation with CAL FIRE and the Los Angeles County Fire Department, jointly operates 35 conservation camps, commonly referred to as fire camps, across 25 counties. All camps are minimum-security facilities, staffed with correctional staff, and typically located within a few miles of a small population center.

Once volunteers pass the physical fitness test, they must complete CAL FIRE's FFT program, which consists of four days of classroom training and four days of field training, taught by CAL FIRE staff.

An inmate must volunteer for the fire camp program; no inmate is involuntarily assigned to work in a fire camp. Volunteers must have "minimum custody" status, or the lowest classification for inmates based on their sustained good behavior in prison, their conforming to rules within the prison and participation in rehabilitative programming. Some conviction offenses automatically make an inmate ineligible for conservation camp assignment, even if they have minimum custody status. Those convictions include sexual offenses, arson, and any history of escape with force or violence.

- 3) **Inmate firefighting certification.** According to CAL FIRE, incarcerated hand crew members are provided the minimum training necessary to meet National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards and are currently provided training equivalent to L180, S130, and S190, which are fundamental training courses for entry-level wildland firefighters. They are frequently taken together as a "basic red card" training package required to work on firelines.

CAL FIRE generates a certificate of completion when an incarcerated individual completes the required hand crew training, and CDCR maintains custody of the document until the individual paroles. The certificate can be used by formerly incarcerated individuals to apply for FFI positions at CAL FIRE. Upon hire and placement into a CAL FIRE Unit on a hand crew, the FFI hand crew member is trained by the hiring Unit, and provided the minimum training necessary for response capabilities and fuels mitigation.

- 4) **Fire fighter training confusion.** FFI is an entry-level position for seasonal firefighters, requiring basic training and skills for fire suppression, wildland firefighting, and hazardous materials response. This requires NFPA certifications 1010: Fire Fighter 1, 1140: Wildland Fire Fighter 1, and NFPA 470: Hazardous Material Awareness and Operations.

The CAL-FIRE Forestry Training and the S-190 Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior certifications required to be provided by this bill do not align with the certifications required for FF 1 eligibility.

Further, "firefighting training program" is not semantically interchangeable with CAL FIRE's Fire Fighting Training Centers. CAL FIRE operates four Fire Fighting Training Centers (Ione, Riverside, Redding, and Atwater) where CAL FIRE provides year-round training in fire prevention and protection, emergency response, law enforcement, and enhancement of natural resource systems. The training of a hired CAL FIRE firefighter is

different than the training for an incarcerated individual hand crew member. Achieving the FF1 certification can be a minimum qualification, but it doesn't serve to replace an academy when a firefighter is hired and then goes through a CAL FIRE Fire Fighter Training Center.

5) **Preferential hiring.** This bill requires, on and after January 1, 2028, if a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for a FF1 Classification position with CAL FIRE, CAL FIRE to award hiring preference to the qualified formerly incarcerated individual under Category Placement 2, and requires, if a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for a Forestry Technician Classification position with CAL FIRE, CAL FIRE to count the duration of training and field work as an incarcerated hand crew member towards the minimum qualifications for the Forestry Technician classification, and award hiring preference to the qualified formerly incarcerated individual under Rank 2 Placement. There are currently 4 categories for placement:

- **Category 0:** The applicant has returnee rights to a CAL FIRE Unit.
- **Category 1:** The applicant is considered "fully trained" and has provided an acceptable document showing completion of all of the required trainings.
- **Category 2:** The applicant is considered "partially trained" and has provided an acceptable document showing completion of at least one of the required trainings listed.
- **Category 3:** The applicant has not provided acceptable documentation for any of the required trainings.

The Firefighter Candidate Testing Center maintains a list of eligible candidates to be used by California fire departments during their hiring process. According to the California Professional Firefighters, there are currently more than 5,000 individuals on list that have completed the physical agility and written exams through the Firefighting Joint Apprenticeship Committee and are actively trying to get hired by CAL FIRE. It's hard to know exactly how many individuals are currently qualified in each specific category as applicants specify locations where they are willing to work. As such, the number of applicants can vary widely in different parts of the state. Additionally, hand crew firefighters with the California Military Department, CCC, and incarcerated hand crew members are all included in the same "category placement 2." If this is codified in statute, it could create future difficulties with how CAL FIRE categorizes applications for FFI positions, as the categories are determined internally and could require updates based on future training or hiring requirements.

Notably, Forestry Technician and FFI Hand Crew positions are separate classifications. A Forestry Technician is hired for wildfire resiliency efforts with a focus on fuel reduction disciplines. The FFI has the Forestry Technician component in addition to the fire suppression component on emergency incidents. Additionally, the Forestry Technician is a permanent civil service classification, which requires the merit-based hiring process. As such, there is no "Rank 2 Placement." Additionally, the California Constitution (Article VII, Sec. 6) provides the Legislature with the ability to provide an exclusive hiring preference to "veterans and their surviving spouses" for civil service classifications.

- 6) **Firefighting classifications.** This bill references specific classifications that should be prioritized for formerly incarcerated inmates. However, should any of the training nomenclature change at CAL FIRE, the course names being enshrined in statute would be problematic. The author may wish to work with CAL FIRE to determine the appropriate references in the bill for earned certifications and eligible classifications.
- 7) **Double referral.** This bill is also referred to the Assembly Public Safety Committee.
- 8) **Committee amendments.** The *committee may wish to consider* amending the bill to clarify that the certifications provided shall be commensurate with the training received and minimum qualifications met, clarify the training achieved, delete reference to Rank 2, and make a technical, nonsubstantive change.
- 9) **Author's statement:**

AB 2483 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 prioritizing the hiring of qualified former fire camp participants, AB 2483 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.

- 10) **Related legislation.** AB 1380 (Elhawary, 2025) Requires CAL FIRE, in partnership with the CDCR and the California Conservation Camp program, to implement a standardized process to ensure that all individuals who complete CAL FIRE's FFT program while incarcerated receive official written certification before their release, and requires this certification to be adequate for employment at CAL FIRE in the classification of FF1. This bill was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

## REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

### Support

California Forestry Association  
 Center for Employment Opportunities  
 Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program  
 Michelson Center for Public Policy  
 Prosecutors Alliance Action

### Opposition

None on file

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