

Date of Hearing: April 22, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT AND RETIREMENT

Tina S. McKinnor, Chair

AB 2483 (Elhawary) – As Amended April 8, 2026

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

*The committee is informed that this bill was also heard and passed by the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources (14-0) on March 23, 2026. Among other things discussed in that committee's analysis, this writing discusses matters that are germane to the jurisdiction of this committee.*

**SUMMARY:** Requires, on and after July 1, 2027, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), in partnership with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the California Conservation Camp (CC 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. Specifically, **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 reflective of training completed before their release from prison, and the official written certification to include certification commensurate with the individual's training towards meeting relevant minimum requirements or Fire Fighter 1 (FF1), or Forestry Technical classification.
- 2) Requires, on and after January 1, 2028, if a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for a FF1 classification position with the CAL FIRE and has the required training and meets the minimum qualifications for the position, the CAL FIRE to award hiring preference to the qualified formerly incarcerated individual under Category Placement 2.
- 3) Requires, on and after January 1, 2028, if a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for a Forestry Technician Classification position with the CAL FIRE, the CAL FIRE must 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.
- 4) Stipulates that nothing in this bill precludes the 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.
- 5) Stipulates 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.

- 6) Defines “qualified formerly incarcerated individual” to mean any formerly incarcerated individual who completed training in a department firefighting training camp, has a valid certification, as specified, and has successfully participated as an incarcerated hand crew member in the CC Camp program, as provided.
- 7) Authorizes the CAL FIRE, if it establishes new entry level classifications or positions, including, but not limited to, successor classifications of those mentioned in this bill, and the training in “1),” above, 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.

**EXISTING LAW:**

- 1) Establishes the CC Camps for the purpose of having incarcerated persons work on projects supervised by the CAL FIRE, and that 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. (Section 4951, Pub. Resources Code.)
- 2) Requires the CAL FIRE to utilize inmates and wards assigned to CC Camps in performing fire prevention, fire control, and other work of CAL FIRE. (Section 4953, Pub. Resources Code.)
- 3) Establishes the Education and Employment Reentry Program within the California Conservation Corps (CCC) and authorizes the CCC director to enroll formerly incarcerated individuals who successfully served on a CC Camp program crew and were recommended for participation as a program member by the CAL FIRE director and CDCR Secretary. (Section 14415.1, Pub. Resources Code.)
- 4) Authorizes an incarcerated individual who has successfully participated in either a CC 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. (Section 1203.4(b), Penal Code.)
- 5) Authorizes the CalHR to designate an appointing power to design, announce, or administer examinations for the establishment of employment lists as specified. Existing law also permits a designated appointing power to contract with the CalHR or another designated appointing power for the purpose of designing, publicizing, or administering an examination. (Section 18930.5, Gov. Code.)
- 6) Permits an appointing power, or its authorized representative, to take adverse action against an employee for one or more of causes for discipline, as specified, and permits an appointing power, or its authorized representative, to take adverse action against an employee for one or more of causes for discipline, as specified. (Section 19574, Gov. Code.) Further, defines “adverse action” to mean dismissal, demotion, suspension, or other disciplinary action, but excludes such action from affecting managerial employees, as specified. (Section 19570,

Gov. Code.) Authorizes action to be taken against any employee or person whose name appears on any employment list for any cause of action in conformity with existing law and SPB rule. (Section 19571, Gov. Code.)

- 7) Expressly enumerates what constitutes a cause for discipline of an employee or a person whose name appears on an employment list (Section 19572, Gov. Code), including, but not limited to conviction of a felony or misdemeanor involving moral turpitude where a plea or guilty verdict, or a conviction following a plea of no contest, to a felony charge or offense involving moral turpitude is deemed to be a conviction within the meaning of existing law, as specified. (Subdiv. (k), *ibid.*)
- 8) Authorizes the CalHR to establish disciplinary criteria applicable to adverse actions taken by appointing bodies pursuant to the above-described causes. (Section 19573, Gov. Code.) Further, authorizes the appointing authority or authorized representative to take adverse action against an employee for one or more of the causes for discipline, which is valid only if a written notice is served on the employee prior to the effective date of the action, among other provisions relating to procedural due process. (Section 19574, Gov. Code.)
- 9) Provides for additional procedural due process rights and obligations of an employee. (Sections 19574.1 et seq., Gov. Code.)

**FISCAL EFFECT:** Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal by Legislative Counsel.

**COMMENTS:**

Among other things, information provided by the author states, “[w]ithout meaningful certification and employment opportunity, formerly incarcerated hand crew members and firefighters face steep barriers to employment post-release. Despite their real-world experience and critical skills, they are often deemed ineligible for jobs due to the lack of recognized credentials. This certification gap blocks access to stable, meaningful careers despite these individuals having demonstrated the discipline, skills, and commitment needed to protect California lives and property.”

**The State Civil Service Act and Civil Service Employment, In General**

The State Civil Service Act covers certain state employees, and establishes specific guidelines on the hire of, and adverse action against, employees covered by that act.

What is the “merit system” and the “merit principle?” To combat the “spoils system” that permeated most California civil service jobs prior to 1913 when most state jobs awarded were based on the applicant’s political allegiance or personal relationships, in 1913, the Legislature enacted the Civil Service Act to address this activity. However, that act was not operating as the Legislature intended, i.e., jobs were being filled based on factors other than the individual’s qualifications and, in 1934, voters approved the State Civil Service Act to replace the original 1913 version. The basic provisions of that initiative remain in effect today. In sum, the merit system and principle is essential for maintaining fair and effective civil service in California. It ensures that hiring and promotion decisions are based on merit, which enhances the integrity of the civil service, fosters trust in government operations, and effectively serves the public interest.

The CalHR administers the merit system for the state civil service and for state civil service employees, the merit system is established in the Cal. Const. and codified in the Gov. Code.<sup>1</sup> Existing law creates the state civil service that includes every officer and employee of the State except a limited number of specified, exempted officers and employees, and requires that the state make “permanent appointment and promotion in the civil service under a general system based on merit ascertained by competitive examination.” Case law and custom refer to this provision as the “merit principle” and it governs the administration of the state’s civil service system. (Sections 1 and 4, art. VII, Cal. Const.)

In addition, the State Civil Service Act exists to facilitate the operation of the Constitution’s merit principle for the state civil service; requires the State Personnel Board (SPB) to prescribe rules consistent with a merit based civil service system to govern appointments classifications, examinations, probationary periods, disciplinary actions, and other matters related to the SPB’s authority under Article VII, Cal. Const.; authorizes the SPB to conduct audits and investigations of the personnel practices of CalHR and appointing authorities to ensure compliance with civil service policies, procedures, and statutes, and permits the CalHR and the SPB to delegate, share, or transfer between them responsibilities for programs within their respective jurisdictions pursuant to an agreement. (Sections 18500 et seq., Gov. Code.)

Further, Sections 2 and 3, art. VII, Cal. Const., establishes the SPB which must enforce civil service statutes, and by majority vote of all its members, prescribe probationary periods and classifications, adopt other rules authorized by statute, and review disciplinary actions. In addition, the Executive Officer of the SPB is required to administer civil service statutes under the rules of the SPB, and the CalHR is vested with the powers, duties, and authorities necessary to operate the state civil service system pursuant to Article VII, Cal. Const., the Gov. Code, the merit principle, and applicable rules duly adopted by the SPB. (Sections 18500 et seq., Gov. Code.) Finally, the SPB is required to establish minimum qualifications for determining the fitness and qualifications of employees for each class of position, among other things, and authorizes the CalHR to require applicants for examination or appointment to provide documentation as it deems necessary to establish the applicants’ qualifications. (Section 18931(a), Gov. Code.)

### **History of Inmate Firefighters**

*(The following discussions under this heading are largely adopted from the analysis of this bill by the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources)*

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.

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<sup>1</sup> Art. VII, *ibid.*, and Sections 19570 et seq., Gov. Code.

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.

### *The CC Camp Program<sup>2</sup>*

The CDCR, in cooperation with the 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.

### *Inmate Firefighting Certification*

According to the 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 FF1 positions at CAL FIRE. Upon hire and placement into a CAL FIRE Unit on a hand crew, the FF1 hand crew member is trained by the hiring Unit, and provided the minimum training necessary for response capabilities and fuels mitigation.

### *Firefighter Training Confusion*

The FF1 classification 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: FF1, 1140: Wildland FF1, and NFPA 470: Hazardous Material Awareness and Operations.<sup>3</sup> The CAL-FIRE Forestry Training and the S-190

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<sup>2</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions: Conservation (Fire) Camp Program," CDCR website. Visit: <https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/facility-locator/conservation-camps/faq-conservation-fire-camp-program/>

<sup>3</sup> National Fire Protection Association. Visit: <https://www.nfpa.org/news-blogs-and-articles/blogs/2024/11/06/history-of-nfpa>

Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior certifications required to be provided by this bill do not align with the certifications required for FF1 eligibility.

Further, “firefighting training program” is not semantically interchangeable with the CAL FIRE’s Fire Fighting Training Centers. The CAL FIRE operates four Fire Fighting Training Centers (Ione, Riverside, Redding, and Atwater) where it 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.

### *Preferential hiring*

This bill requires, on and after January 1, 2028, if a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for a FF1 Classification position with the CAL FIRE, the 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 the CAL FIRE, the 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:<sup>4</sup>

- *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, and it is estimated that there are currently more than 5,000 individuals on the list that have completed the physical agility and written exams through the Firefighting Joint Apprenticeship Committee and are actively trying to get hired by the CAL FIRE. 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 the CAL FIRE categorizes applications for FF1 positions, as the categories are determined internally and could require updates based on future training or hiring requirements.

Notably, Forestry Technician and FF1 Hand Crew positions are separate classifications. A Forestry Technician is hired for wildfire resiliency efforts with a focus on fuel reduction disciplines. The FF1 has the Forestry Technician component in addition to the fire suppression

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<sup>4</sup> CAL FIRE Training. Visit: <https://www.fire.ca.gov/join-calfire/-/media/calfire-website/direct-links/required-trainings.pdf>, and “*Become a FF1.*” CAL FIRE website. Visit: <https://www.joincalfire.com/classifications/fire-protection/firefighting-and-paramedics/fire-fighter-i?tab=hiringTab>

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, Section 6, art. VII, Cal. Const. provides the Legislature with the ability to provide an exclusive hiring preference to “veterans and their surviving spouses” for civil service classifications.

### **Opportunity for Entry into California’s Public Sector Workforce**

The committee is reminded of its informational hearing on May 10, 2023, titled “Strengthening California through the Public Sector and Its Workforce,” which focused on various subjects, including contracting out of public employee work.

During that hearing, the committee heard from a number of panelists, including experts from the University of California at Berkeley Labor Center, where data was provided and substantial concerns were expressed by other panelists about the ongoing and increasing reliance by public employers, including the state – as an employer, on a contingent, part-time, temporary, contracted out, or retired annuitant workforce to fill public sector vacancies, or to perform the duties of willing and capable existing and prospective public employees. These concerns also detailed how public employers are increasingly relying on these forms of employment and in a manner that has deleterious effects on wage growth, employee morale, employer-employee relations, and the need to ensure operational consistency and quality in the provision of services to the public that could be performed by permanent employees. These concerns also detailed how public employers are increasingly relying on these forms of employment and in a manner that has deleterious effects on wage growth, employee morale, employer-employee relations, and the need to ensure operational consistency and quality in the provision of services to the public that could be performed by permanent employees.

On April 17, 2024, the committee held another information relating to that subject titled: “Public Service Delivery and Workforce Wellbeing – Addressing the Vacancy Crisis in Local Government,” where civil service vacancies, impacts of vacancies on the civil service workforce and services, and collaborative solutions to address civil service vacancies, were discussed.

Although the former hearing largely focused on contracting out of public sector work while the latter focused on vacancies in local government, this bill proposes to support the CAL FIRE’s public safety functions by affording the targeted individuals an opportunity to be considered for gainful and sustained employment by the department to continue positive contribution to the State and the public that may be viewed as aligned with the premise of those hearings.

### **The Legislature’s Constitutional Authority and Limitations on Granting Preference in Public Employment**

Among other provisions in the Cal. Const. that are not relevant to this bill, the Cal. Const. explicitly authorizes the Legislature to grant preference in hiring, but explicitly limits that authority to “veterans and their surviving spouses.” (Section 6, art. VII, *ibid.*) It is noted that, although Section 18220, Gov. Code authorizes state agencies to grant preference when hiring for internships and student assistant positions, such positions are temporary and not a part of the state civil service.

To the extent that this bill seeks to statutorily authorize by extending hiring preference to an individual other than those expressly provided for pursuant to the Cal. Const., *ibid.*, this bill may be construed as an impermissible exercise of legislative authority and a violation of that constitutional provision.

### **Conflict Notice to the Author**

The author is informed that the Office of Legislative Counsel has issued a conflict notice regarding this bill and Assembly Bill 1380 (Elhawary).

A conflict exists when two or more bills and/or constitutional amendments amend, add, repeal, or amend and renumber the same section, article, chapter, division, title, or heading. The enactment of these measures in their present form could give rise to a serious legal problem that may be avoided by appropriate amendments.

### **Author's Statement**

“[This bill] 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] CAL FIRE, these individuals are often released without certification and shut out of the very workforce they helped sustain. By requiring [the] CAL FIRE and [the] CDCR to issue formal certification and prioritizing the hiring of qualified former fire camp participants, [this bill] 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.”

### **Comments by Supporters**

The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program states, among other things, “[w]ithout a standard, industry-recognized certificate of participation, formerly incarcerated hand crew members face major barriers to employment. Despite their real-world firefighting experience, uncredentialed individuals face limited access to stable careers which undermine their ability to protect our statewide community. [This bill] would allow [the] CAL FIRE, in coordination with [the] CDCR, to issue official certification to fire camp participants who complete training, qualifying them for hand crew or firefighter positions. Beginning in 2028, certified formerly incarcerated firefighters would receive hiring consideration that does not advance them to the front of the line, but it provides a modest merit-based boost, making employment far more likely. The bill recognizes their training, supports reentry, and strengthens California’s wildfire workforce.”

In part, Prosecutors Alliance in Action states, “[f]or decades, California’s firefighting force has included incarcerated individuals who have served alongside [the] CAL FIRE, local, state, out-of-state, and international firefighters. These brave individuals complete thorough training and hours of practical work, but do not receive the certification that would allow them to work for [the] CAL FIRE after release. This bill will change that... [and] accomplishes several public benefits....”

Among other things, the Michelson Center for Public Policy states, “California continues to experience more frequent and destructive wildfires that threaten communities, natural resources, and infrastructure across the state. In 2025 alone, more than 57,000 acres burned, including

37,728 acres in the Palisades and Eaton Fires. As wildfire risk intensifies, California's need for a skilled and ready firefighting workforce becomes increasingly urgent. Incarcerated individuals play a critical role in the state's fire response efforts, serving alongside [the] CAL FIRE and county firefighters through the [CC Camp] program. However, despite this training and service, many participants leave the program without formal documentation of the skills they have acquired. [This bill] would strengthen California's wildfire preparedness, support workforce development, and promote public safety."

Others offer similar statements in support of this bill.

### **Comments by Opponents**

None on file.

### **Prior or Related Legislation**

Assembly Bill 1380 (Elhawary, 2025) proposed to require the CAL FIRE, in partnership with the CDCR and the CC 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 Committee on Appropriations.

Assembly Bill 409 (Weber, 2023) proposed to require the CDCR to modify its training program for inmate firefighters serving as hand crew members through the CC Camp Program to provide participants the opportunity to earn a specified list of certifications related to firefighting, among other provisions. This bill was held in the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources.

Assembly Bill 1908 (Maienschein, 2022) proposed to allow an incarcerated individual who successfully participated and completed training in a program, as specified, as a incarcerated hand crewmember, to be eligible for a firefighter certificate provided by the CDCR, among other provisions. This bill was held in the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources.

### **REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**

#### **Support**

Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program (Co-sponsor)

Michelson Center for Public Policy (Co-sponsor)

Prosecutors Alliance Action (Co-sponsor)

All Hands Ecology

Center for Employment Opportunities

Central Coast Prescribed Burn Association

Greater Sacramento Urban League

Lake Tahoe Community College, Fire Academy; Fire and Forestry; Rising Scholars Program

UC Berkeley's Underground Scholars Initiative

**Opposition**

None on file.

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