

Date of Hearing: May 6, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

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

Policy Committee:	Natural Resources	Vote:	14 - 0
	Public Employment and Retirement		7 - 0

Urgency: No                      State Mandated Local Program: No                      Reimbursable: No

**SUMMARY:**

This bill requires the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) to implement a standardized process to ensure any individual who successfully completes training in a CAL FIRE firefighting training camp while incarcerated receives official written certification before their release from prison and requires CAL FIRE to award hiring preferences to certain qualified formerly incarcerated individuals.

Specifically, this bill:

- 1) Requires CAL FIRE, on and after July 1, 2027, in partnership with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and the California Conservation Camp program, to implement a standardized process to ensure that an eligible individual who successfully completes training in a CAL FIRE firefighting training camp while incarcerated receives official written certification before their release from prison.
- 2) Requires the official written certification to include certification commensurate with the individual’s training towards meeting relevant minimum requirements for the Fire Fighter 1 (FF1) Classification or the Forestry Technician (FT) Classification.
- 3) Requires CAL FIRE, on and after January 1, 2028, if a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for an FF1 Classification position with CAL FIRE and has the required training and meets the minimum qualifications for the position, to award hiring preference to the qualified formerly incarcerated individual under Category Placement 2.
- 4) Requires CAL FIRE, on and after January 1, 2028, if a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for an FT Classification position with CAL FIRE, to count the duration of training and field work as an incarcerated hand crew member towards the minimum qualifications for the FT classification and award hiring preference to the qualified formerly incarcerated individual.
- 5) Provides that nothing in this bill (a) 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 and (b) 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 have completed the “FFT program.”

- 6) Defines “qualified formerly incarcerated individual” as any formerly incarcerated individual who successfully completed training in a CAL FIRE firefighting training camp, has a valid certification, and has successfully participated as an incarcerated hand crew member in the California Conservation Camp program, as specified.
- 7) Authorizes CAL FIRE, if it establishes new entry level classifications or positions, including the successor classifications of those mentioned in this bill, and if 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:**

- 1) CAL FIRE estimates General Fund costs of approximately \$670,000 in year one followed by ongoing annual costs of \$568,000 to hire four office technicians and for specialized equipment to document, process, track, and create certifications for eligible incarcerated individuals.

The fiscal year (FY) 2024-25 budget allocated \$199 million (mostly General Fund) and 338 positions for CAL FIRE to begin implementing a shorter workweek for its firefighters (from 72 hours to 66 hours). The Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) expects the cost of the proposal to increase in the coming years as CAL FIRE phases in the changes, rising to \$770 million on an ongoing annual basis. LAO estimates that by the time the change to the workweek is fully implemented in FY 2028-29, CAL FIRE positions focused on wildfire response will increase to roughly 12,900. It is not clear how these ongoing efforts at CAL FIRE will intersect with the requirements of this bill.

- 2) CDCR anticipates potential ongoing annual General Fund costs in the hundreds of thousands of dollars for necessary staffing. Tasks include working with CAL FIRE to establish a standardized process to ensure that individuals who complete CAL FIRE’s firefighting training program while incarcerated receive official written certification prior to release. CDCR must also coordinate with CAL FIRE to obtain the certificates, upload them to each individual’s electronic file, and ensure staff are trained to provide a printed copy upon release. To the extent CDCR is required to provide additional training or licensing to meet the minimum requirements for the FF1 or FT classifications, CDCR anticipates additional costs.

The LAO recently warned of General Fund structural deficits of around \$35 billion per year in the 2027-28 FY and ongoing.

#### **COMMENTS:**

- 1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

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.

- 2) **Background.** California’s inmate firefighter ranks have decreased in recent years, due in part to measures to reduce the prison population under Governor Newsom and hastened by the early release of nonviolent offenders during the pandemic. In 2011, more than 4,000 incarcerated individuals were in a conservation fire camp; as of March 2026, that number was around 1,900.

***Conservation (Fire) Camp Program.*** CDCR, in cooperation with CAL FIRE and the Los Angeles County Fire Department, jointly operates 35 conservation camps, commonly known as fire camps, located in 25 counties across California. All camps are minimum-security facilities and staffed with correctional staff. According to CDCR, the primary mission of the fire camp program is to support state, local, and federal government agencies as they respond to emergencies including fires, floods, and other natural disasters.

***CAL FIRE Training Centers.*** CAL FIRE operates four training centers in the state that provide year-round training in fire prevention and protection, emergency response, law enforcement, and enhancement of natural resource systems.

***Preferential Hiring.*** The FF1 classification is an entry-level position for seasoning firefighters, requiring basic training and skills for fire suppression, wildland firefighting, and hazardous materials response. FT is a permanent civil service classification, requiring merit-based hiring. As discussed in the Assembly Public Employment and Retirement (P&ER) Committee’s analysis of this bill, the California Constitution authorizes the Legislature to grant preference in hiring but explicitly limits that authority to “veterans and their surviving spouses.” Although the Government 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 this bill seeks to statutorily authorize hiring preference – particularly for the FT classification – this bill may be construed as an impermissible exercise of legislative authority and a violation of the California Constitution.

Among others in support, the Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program argues this bill does not lower standards or hand out unearned credentials; instead, it creates a pathway for qualified individuals to meet industry requirements and continue serving communities. The organization asserts that without 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.”

- 3) **Related Legislation.** AB 1380 (Elhawary) of the current legislative session is similar to this bill and was held on the Senate Appropriations Committee’s suspense file.

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