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## SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Sabrina Cervantes, Chair  
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

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### **AB 2483 (Elhawary) - Wildland firefighters: Formerly Incarcerated Firefighter Certification and Employment Program**

**Version:** June 24, 2026

**Policy Vote:** N.R. & W. 7 - 0, L., P.E. & R.  
5 - 0

**Urgency:** No

**Mandate:** No

**Hearing Date:** August 3, 2026

**Consultant:** Ashley Ames

**Bill Summary:** This bill would require the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection to implement a standardized process to ensure that all eligible individuals in the Conservation Camp program receive official written certification reflective of the training they've received, and award hiring preference under Fire Fighter 1 Category Placement 2 to qualified formerly incarcerated individuals, as well as count their training and field work toward the minimum qualifications for the Forestry Technician classification.

#### **Fiscal Impact:**

- CalFire estimates costs of \$670,000 in the first year and about \$568,000 annually thereafter (General Fund) to document, process, track, and create certifications for incarcerated individuals who successfully complete Conservation Camp firefighter training, and to acquire and maintain specialized equipment including electronic tablets.
- CDCR anticipates minor and absorbable workload costs as a result of this bill (General Fund), with the majority of workload and associated fiscal impacts falling to CalFire. To the extent CDCR would be required to provide additional training or licensing to meet the minimum requirements for the Fire Fighter 1 or Forestry Technician classifications, the department anticipates additional associated costs of an unknown amount.

#### **Background:**

*The Conservation Camp program.* The Legislature created the California Conservation Camp program to provide for the training and use of incarcerated individuals and wards assigned to CDCR custody to perform public conservation projects, including forest fire prevention and control, forest and watershed management, recreation, fish and game management, soil conservation, and forest and watershed revegetation (PRC §4951). CDCR, in cooperation with CalFire and the Los Angeles County Fire Department, jointly operates 35 conservation camps, commonly known as fire camps, located in 25 counties. All camps are minimum-security facilities staffed with correctional personnel, and work projects are supervised by CalFire employees (PRC §4952). According to CDCR, the program's primary mission is to support state, local, and federal agencies responding to fires, floods, and other natural disasters.

*Participation has declined.* California's incarcerated firefighter ranks have decreased in recent years, due in part to measures reducing the prison population 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.

*Training received.* To participate, incarcerated individuals must pass a physical fitness test and complete CalFire's Firefighter Training (FFT) program — four days of classroom training and four days of field training. Participants become certified wildland firefighters. CalFire operates four training centers statewide providing year-round training in fire prevention and protection, emergency response, law enforcement, and enhancement of natural resource systems. Some prisons partner with community colleges to offer correspondence courses; Columbia College, for example, offers a fire science certification course under which crew members can earn a certificate transferring credits to a two- or four-year program after release.

*Barriers after release.* A 2003 study found that formerly incarcerated people are one-half to one-third as likely to receive callbacks from employers. AB 1008 (McCarty, 2017) made it illegal for employers with five or more employees to inquire about a candidate's conviction history until a conditional job offer has been made. After AB 1008 was enacted, formerly incarcerated hand crew members struggled to demonstrate their experience without preemptively disclosing their conviction history.

*Classifications and hiring categories.* Fire Fighter 1 is an entry-level position for seasonal firefighters, requiring basic training and skills for fire suppression, wildland firefighting, and hazardous materials response. Forestry Technician is a permanent civil service classification requiring merit-based hiring. Successful Fire Fighter 1 applicants are placed into one of four categories based on experience: Category 0, for applicants with returnee rights to a departmental unit; Category 1, for applicants considered fully trained who have documented all required training; Category 2, for applicants considered partially trained who have documented at least one required or desirable training; and Category 3, for applicants who have not documented any required or desirable training. By receiving a certification from CalFire, formerly incarcerated hand crew members can be placed into Category 2, as they were prior to AB 1008.

**Proposed Law:** This bill would:

1. Require CalFire, on and after July 1, 2027, in partnership with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the California Conservation Camp program, to implement a standardized process ensuring that all eligible individuals who successfully complete training in a departmental firefighting training camp while incarcerated receive official written certification reflective of the training completed before their release from prison, with that certification commensurate with the individual's training toward meeting relevant minimum requirements for the Fire Fighter 1 Classification or Forestry Technician Classification.
2. Require CalFire, on and after January 1, 2028, to award hiring preference under Category Placement 2 to a qualified formerly incarcerated individual who applies for a Fire Fighter 1 Classification position, or any successor classifications, and who has the required training and meets the minimum qualifications for the position.

3. Require CalFire, on and after January 1, 2028, to count the duration of training and field work as an incarcerated hand crew member toward the minimum qualifications for the Forestry Technician Classification, or any successor classifications, when a qualified formerly incarcerated individual applies for such a position.
4. Provide that nothing in the section would preclude CalFire 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. Provide that nothing in the section would preclude 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. Define "qualified formerly incarcerated individual" as any formerly incarcerated individual who successfully completed training in a departmental firefighting training camp, holds a valid certification under the bill, and has successfully participated as an incarcerated hand crew member in the California Conservation Camp program as described in Penal Code §1203.4b.

**Related Legislation:**

AB 1380 (Elhawary, 2025) would have required CalFire to implement a standardized process to ensure that all individuals who complete the department's firefighting training program while incarcerated receive official written certification before their release, would have required CalFire to award hiring preference to qualified formerly incarcerated individuals, and would have required the department to track those individuals and report to the Legislature on the effectiveness of the program. The bill died in this committee.

AB 409 (Weber, 2023) would have required CalFire, by January 1, 2026, to modify its training program for incarcerated firefighters serving on hand crews through the California Conservation Camp program to provide participants the opportunity to earn specified firefighting certifications, or the department's equivalents, while incarcerated. The bill would have required the department, commencing January 1, 2027, to update its application process for Type 1 Hand Crew positions to recognize certifications earned through the program, and to establish rules providing eligibility priority rankings in the application, interview, and hiring process to formerly incarcerated individuals who earned those certifications. The bill died in the Assembly Natural Resources Committee.

AB 1908 (Maienschein, 2021) would have allowed an incarcerated individual who successfully participated in and completed training as a hand crew member to be eligible for a firefighter certificate provided by CalFire, and would have stated legislative intent, findings, and declarations relating to incarcerated individuals receiving firefighting certificates. The bill died in the Assembly Natural Resources Committee.

**Staff Comments:** The Budget Act of 2026 included the \$1.25 billion Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund CalFire backfill for state operations and fire protection, and appropriated all other proposed GGRF funding for CalFire. It included \$6,241,000 and

31.0 positions starting in FY 2026-27, \$6,211,000 in 2027-28, \$6,439,000 in 2028-29, \$5,683,000 in 2029-30, and \$5,623,000 ongoing from the General Fund to directly support the state zone zero inspection goal of 250,000 annual parcel inspections. The budget also included \$66,508,000 in FY 2026-27 through 2028-29, \$69,636,000 in 2029-30, and \$74,149,000 ongoing from the General Fund for fixed-wing pilot and mechanics contract cost increases, along with substantial capital outlay appropriations for facility relocations and replacements across the state. Separately, the budget updated the amount for the Home Hardening Inventory Report from \$5 million to \$2.5 million General Fund, contingent upon passage of AB 1964.

*Workweek implementation.* The FY 2024-25 budget allocated \$199 million, mostly General Fund, and 338 positions for CalFire to begin implementing a shorter workweek for its firefighters, reducing hours from 72 to 66. The Legislative Analyst's Office expects costs to rise as the department phases in the change, reaching \$770 million on an ongoing annual basis, and estimates that upon full implementation in FY 2028-29 CalFire positions focused on wildfire response will increase to roughly 12,900. It is not clear how these ongoing efforts intersect with the requirements of this bill.

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