Date of Hearing: April 28, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
Rhodesia Ransom, Chair
AB 275 (Petrie-Norris) – As Amended April 23, 2025

SUBJECT: Office of Emergency Services: wildfire response: SoCal Edison-funded helitanker program

SUMMARY: Requires the Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES), in consultation with the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), to establish a working group tasked with evaluating and developing recommendations for implementing a wildfire aerial response program that is accessible to local fire agencies and always ready to provide rapid aerial suppression capabilities. Specifically, **this bill**:

1) Requires Cal OES, in consultation with CAL FIRE to establish a working group tasked with evaluating and developing recommendations for implementing a wildfire aerial response program to provide year-round, 24 hours per day, seven days per week, rapid aerial suppression capabilities by December 31, 2026.

2) Declares the Legislature's intent that the wildfire aerial response program be available to local fire agencies upon request.

3) Requires the working group to consider a program that includes, but is not limited to, the following elements:

    a. A fleet of firefighting aircraft capable of rapid aerial suppression, including night operations;
    b. A reconnaissance aircraft equipped with night vision and infrared technology, as specified;
    c. A mobile retardant base capable of supporting sustained aerial firefighting operations; and
    d. Support personnel necessary to ensure continuous operational readiness, as specified.

4) Requires the working group to develop recommendations on all the following:

    a. Cost-sharing and operational models between local governments and the state, as specified;
    b. Protocols for local fire agencies to request deployment of program resources, as specified.
    c. the division and staging of resources;
    d. The strategic placement of resources; and
    e. Whether the program should be implemented as pilot program, full-scale statewide initiative, or not at all.

5) Requires the Cal OES Director, in consultation with CAL FIRE, to appoint members to the working group familiar with wildfire aviation response programs, as specified.

6) Requires the working group to report its findings and recommendations, as specified, to the legislature by December 31, 2027.

EXISTING LAW:

1. Establishes the California Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES) within the office of the Governor and makes Cal OES responsible for the state's emergency and disaster response services for natural, technological, or manmade disasters and emergencies. (Government Code § 8550)

2. 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)

3. Establishes Cal FIRE within the California Natural Resources Agency, and establishes various programs for the prevention and suppression of wildfires at Cal FIRE, as provided. (Public Resources Code § 701)

4. Establishes the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development within Cal FIRE. (Government Code § 8586.8)

5. Provides the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development shall serve as the central organizing hub for the state government's identification of emerging wildfire technologies and is under the direct control of the Director of Forestry and Fire Protection. (Government Code § 8586.8)

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

COMMENTS:

Purpose of the bill: According to the author, "Innovative, long-term firefighting resources are critical to strengthening California's fire suppression efforts, especially in the face of increasing wildfire threats. A thorough review of establishing a permanent, state-funded quick response force program could offer cost-effective solutions to reduce the economic and human toll of wildfires. Furthermore, integrating such a program into Cal OES would enhance coordination with other emergency response efforts, ensuring a more unified and efficient approach to wildfire preparedness and response in the years ahead."

Equity Impact: According to the author's office, "This bill will convene a workgroup to study the use of additional emergency response resources that will allow our fire safety crews to safely and efficiently fight wildfires in all communities, including underserved, rural, and marginalized communities."

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. 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.

According to data from CAL FIRE, 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).

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).

As the state continues adapting to climate change, including the increasing likelihood of extreme Fire Weather Index conditions, it will be essential to establish programs and policies that help reduce the risk of loss during a fire.

2025 Los Angeles Fires: In January 2025, Los Angeles County experienced the second and third most destructive fires in California history: the Palisades Fire and Eaton Fire. AccuWeather estimates these fires' total damage and economic loss to be between $250 billion and $275 billion.

At its height, the fires placed an estimated 331,335 people on an evacuation advisory, with nearly 192,000 residents facing mandatory evacuation and roughly 140,000 subject to warnings. The blazes burned a combined 37,469 acres and leveled entire communities in the Pacific Palisades and Altadena neighborhoods of LA County.

The Eaton Fire became the second most destructive fire in California history after destroying 9,418 buildings, 1,074 structures damaged, and 17 confirmed civilian fatalities. The Palisades Fire is the third most destructive fire in state history, with 6,837 structures destroyed, 973 structures damaged, and 12 confirmed civilian fatalities.

As firefighters were battling the largest conflagrations, additional fires broke out in the Los Angeles area. Crews were able to stop the forward spread and contain the blazes. These fires included the Lidia, Archer, Woodley, Sunset, Kenneth, Hurst, and Auto fires, which burned close to 2,400 acres between them. Two weeks after the initial fires, the Hughes Fire began near Castaic Lake in northern Los Angeles County on January 22 and grew to over 10,000 acres. Firefighters fully contained the fire on January 30 after covering 10,425 acres.

Southern California Edison Lawsuits Regarding the Eaton Fire: Los Angeles County, the City of Pasadena, the City of Sierra Madre, and the Pasadena Unified School District each filed lawsuits against SCE alleging that SCE's equipment sparked the fire, causing significant damage and loss of life. Hundreds of residents also filed lawsuits against SCE individually or as part of a class action lawsuit.

CAL FIRE is leading the investigation into the cause of the Eaton Fire. Findings may not be available until 2026.

Southern California Quick Reaction Force: The Quick Reaction Force (QRF) was established in 2021 as a specialized wildfire response program funded by Southern California Edison and operated by the Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA), Los Angeles County Fire Department (LACoFD), and Ventura County Fire Department (VCFD). This program is the author's inspiration for this bill.

Designed to provide rapid aerial suppression capabilities, the QRF is a wildfire aerial task force available 24/7, 365 days a year. It comprises an aerial fleet, a retardant base, and support operations. A key feature of the QRF is its ability to operate at night when fixed-wing aircraft are grounded.

In 2023, the QRF fleet dropped 934,371 gallons of water and fire retardant on 64 wildfires across Southern California. In the first seven months of 2024, the QRF fleet conducted water and retardant drops totaling 1.3 million gallons across 85 wildfires.

QRF Cost: The fire agencies lease the helitankers and provide operational control and staffing. If called into action, the requesting fire department will pay for the operational costs. Southern California Edison is currently responsible for the standby costs, which enable the program to be ready in the event of a disaster. Since its launch, the program has been funded with over $100 million over the past six years. In 2023, the program cost $35 million to keep on standby.

According to the author's office, this is Southern California Edison's QRF's budget estimate for 2026, which represents an approximate increase of $2.5 million from the 2023 budget:

Resources	Description	2026 Estimate
Four (4) Helitankers and One (1) Command/Control Helicopter Coordinator Helicopter (S76)	CH-47/S-61 Standby (ORC, LAC & VNC) Standby	30,618,544.72
	S-76 Standby	3,004,712.70
Mobile Retardant Base (MRB)	Mobile Retardant Base (MRB) Standby and Water Tender for MRB Operations	1,868,120.06
Helicopter Coordinator Services	(Two per Day @ $2,500 ea)	1,879,750.00
	Incidentals/Travel/Misc	25,750.00
		37,396,877

QRF Fleet and Support Operations: The QRF fleet consists of:

- Three Coulson-Unical CH-47 Chinook helitankers – The largest firefighting helicopters in the world, each capable of hover-filling 3,000 gallons in 90 seconds without landing.
- A Sikorsky S-76 reconnaissance helicopter – Equipped with night vision technology to provide aerial intelligence and guide precision water and retardant drops.
- A mobile retardant base – Capable of mixing 18,000 gallons of retardant per hour to support sustained aerial operations.

The S-76 reconnaissance helicopter uses night vision systems to identify fire activity, locate hotspots, and coordinate water and retardant drops from the Chinook helitankers. The fleet operates in tandem, continuously monitoring and suppressing fires.

The QRF's mobile infrastructure is designed to sustain extended operations in wildfire-prone areas. According to operational staff, the support team consists of mechanics, logistics crews, porters, relief pilots, and other personnel needed to maintain around-the-clock readiness. The mobile base includes:

- Eight to ten semitrailers carrying equipment and supplies.
- Fuel tankers to sustain aircraft operations.
- Three to four motorhomes to support personnel in the field.
- Trailers stocked with spare aircraft parts, fire retardant mixing equipment, and dip tanks for rapid refilling.

CAL FIRE Aviation Program: CAL FIRE's aviation program is critical in wildfire response, deploying a fleet of air tankers, helicopters, and uncrewed aerial systems (UAS) to support ground crews, enhance situational awareness, and improve firefighting efficiency. With over 60 fixed-wing and rotary aircraft, CAL FIRE operates the world's largest civil aerial firefighting fleet, responding to thousands of fires each year while aiming to contain 95% of wildfires to 10 acres or less.

The fleet includes Grumman S-2T Airtankers, Bell UH-1H Super Huey Helicopters, Sikorsky S-70i Helicopters, North American OV-10A (& 1 D Model) Bronco Air Tactical Aircraft and C-130 Hercules Airtankers. Strategically stationed at 14 air tanker bases, 10 CAL FIRE helitack bases, and one joint base with the San Diego County Sheriff, these aircraft can reach fires in the most remote State Responsibility Area (SRA) within approximately 20 minutes.

Budget Change Proposal: CAL FIRE requests an increase in its Exclusive Use (EU) aircraft contracting threshold from $27.5 million to $65 million to enhance wildfire response. The Department contracts with vendors that support firefighting aircraft that provide fire suppression through two processes: (1) the Exclusive Use (EU) full contracting process, and (2) Call When Needed (CWN) done through emergency authority. CAL FIRE argues the increase will allow CAL FIRE flexibility to contract with EU aircraft to support its fire suppression operations at the beginning stages of a wildfire, will allow the expansion of resources to expedite fire response times, and continue the "significant positive impact additional firefighting aircraft are having on the Department's fire suppression capabilities."

Modular Aerial Fire Fighting Systems (MAFFS): The Modular Airborne Firefighting System (MAFFS) was established in 1971 as a collaboration between the U.S. Forest Service and the Department of Defense to integrate military C-130 aircraft into national wildfire response efforts. When contracted airtankers are unavailable or fully committed, California can use MAFFS-equipped C-130s to provide additional aerial firefighting support to strengthen wildfire suppression efforts.

Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development : The Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development (OWTRD) was established within the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) by Senate Bill 109 (Dodd, Ch. 239, Stats. 2021) to serve as California's central organizing hub for identifying emerging wildfire technologies. The OWTRD has developed a balanced multimodal research and development program designed to identify, research, test, and evaluate emerging technologies and tools designed to improve the State's preparation for, and response to, wildfires within the State. Senate Bill 109 also established the Wildfire Technology Research and Development Advisory Review Board (Advisory Board). The Advisory Board is required to submit its findings annually to the Governor and Legislature beginning in January 2024 and every year thereafter until the scheduled date of repeal, January 1, 2029.

According to Cal FIRE, "In 2023, the Office prioritized recruitment, hiring, and training of personnel, and created a bespoke database and management system to support its work. The Office conducted internal outreach within CAL FIRE and external outreach with federal and local agencies, private vendors, academic institutions, and other relevant entities to raise awareness of its mission and identify priority areas of focus related to emerging technologies. Current focus areas include last-mile connectivity, dismounted firefighter location, enhanced situational awareness, firefighter health and safety, and data availability and integration. The Office conducted evaluations and field tests in these areas, including in Jackson Demonstration State Forest in Mendocino County, and expects to work with the Advisory Board to fine-tune these focus areas in the coming year." The office is also now prioritizing Artificial Intelligence (AI) and IoT (internet of things) technology. AI can be used to improve wildfire suppression by detecting fires early, predicting their occurrence, analyzing satellite imagery and environmental data, providing real-time mapping and tracking, guiding firefighting efforts, deploying AI-powered drones for aerial surveys, and aiding in post-fire analysis and restoration. IoT improves wildland firefighting by enhancing situational awareness, firefighter safety, and resource management through connected technologies. IoT capabilities are only expected to grow as this technology continues to emerge and be implemented in this field.

Additionally, the office developed business processes for capturing, screening, and evaluating prospective emerging technologies, which will inform product development and innovation by communicating the specific needs of the wildfire industry to entities developing emerging technologies.

Arguments in Support: According to Southern California Edison, "QRF enables rapid response and improves safety. Since its inception in 2020, the QRF program has proven to be an invaluable asset in the fight against wildfires in Southern California. Through collaboration with Southern California's local fire agencies, the QRF program has responded to over 200 fires and is available year-round to prevent fires from escalating into devastating events. The program's ability to swiftly deploy helitankers enhances capacity to respond to and contain wildfires during the day and night, thereby protecting lives, property, and critical infrastructure. SCE has

supported QRF, but given the frequency and intensity of wildfires in California, it is imperative QRF funding move to a more sustainable funding source ensuring that the QRF can continue to be a valuable resource for all Californians."

Prior and Related Legislation:

SB 109 (Dodd) Chapter 239, Statutes of 2021 established, within Cal FIRE, the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development and the Advisory Review Board to conduct research and testing on emerging technologies to prevent, predict, and fight wildfires.

AB 609 (Papan, 2023) would have required Cal FIRE to submit a report to the Legislature that assesses the feasibility to conduct an evaluation of innovative new aerial firefighting technologies. (Held on the Senate Appropriations Committee Suspense File)

AB 270 (Petrie-Norris, 2025) of this session. Requires the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) to establish a pilot project to provide a testbed firefighting helicopter equipped with autonomous aerial suppression technology and the necessary activities, as specified, to make the helicopter operational. (Currently in the Assembly Committee on Emergency Management).

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

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Fire Chiefs Association
Edison International and Affiliates, Including Southern California Edison
Fire Districts Association of California

Opposition

None on file.

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