
SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Josh Becker, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: SB 1079 **Hearing Date:** April 7, 2026
Author: Stern
Version: February 13, 2026 Introduced
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: Edith Hannigan

Subject: Department of Forestry and Fire Protection: Fire Innovation Unit

SUMMARY

This bill would establish the Fire Innovation Unit in the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, under the direction of a Deputy Director of Wildfire Innovation.

BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Department). The Department, in accordance with a plan approved by the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection, is responsible for the prevention and suppression of forest fires (Public Resources Code (PRC) §§4113, 4114). There are several innovation units in the Department, but they are not codified in statute.

Fire Innovation Unit (FIU). In partnership with FireWERX and supported by philanthropic organizations including the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the FIU serves as the Department's hub for innovation, bringing together public, private, academic, tribal, and philanthropic partners to advance solutions that enhance firefighter safety and operational efficiency.

Innovation, Outreach, and Coordination Unit (IOC). The IOC engages directly with the Department's programs, units, and regions to define operational needs and gather technical requirements. IOC staff work closely with partners to ensure that new technologies address true field challenges, leveraging operational experience to guide research and development efforts.

Office of Wildfire Technology, Research, and Development (OWTRD). OWTRD serves as the Department's technical and research backbone. OWTRD evaluates potential solutions, conducts research and field testing alongside the IOC, documents results, and provides recommendations for adoption. OWTRD ensures that every innovation meets CAL FIRE's operational standards, supports the Department's mission, and is ready for practical deployment across the state.

Existing law establishes the Department (PRC §701).

PROPOSED LAW

This bill would:

- 1) Establish the FIU within the Department, under the direction of a Deputy Director of Wildfire Innovation reporting to the Director of the Department.

- 2) Codify the FIU as the Department's innovation arm and the state's principal hub for wildfire technology, research, coordination, procurement, and deployment.
- 3) Codify programs under the FIU and their purposes, including:
 - a) OWTRD, which is required to:
 - i) Perform scientific and technical evaluations of emerging wildfire technologies.
 - ii) Conduct and participate in laboratory and field tests of wildfire technologies within the Department and in partnership with local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies.
 - iii) Document operational and technical results of laboratory, field, and operational evaluations of wildfire technologies.
 - iv) Issue recommendations on wildfire technologies regarding adoption and performance standards.
 - b) IOC, which is required to:
 - i) Coordinate with end users across local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies.
 - ii) Identify innovation gaps.
 - iii) Serve as a liaison between technologists and frontline personnel.
 - iv) Oversee collaborative development efforts between the Department and technology developers.
 - v) Implement the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program, established by the bill.
 - vi) Collaborate with public and private educational and research institutions.
 - vii) Coordinate demonstration events in established testbeds.
 - viii) Provide the requisite firefighting expertise necessary for field trials in operational environments.
 - c) Rapid Acquisition and Deployment Program (RADP), which may:
 - i) Pilot and scale wildfire technologies through use of flexible contracting authorities pursuant to this bill.
 - ii) Manage the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program.
 - iii) Enter into agreements with local governments, state and federal agencies, tribes, nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, utilities, public and private educational institutions, and private companies for purposes of this bill.
 - iv) Ensure that all projects carried out pursuant to this bill include clear objectives, performance metrics, and audit provisions.
- 4) Authorize the FIU to enter into memoranda of understanding, cooperative research and development agreements, contracts, and grant agreements with public agencies, private sector entities, nonprofit organizations, educational and research institutions, tribal governments, and philanthropic partners.
- 5) Authorize the FIU to establish and administer a Wildfire Innovation Grant Program.
- 6) Authorize the FIU to administer or monitor pilot, prototype, or demonstration projects involving public agencies, private technology companies, nonprofit organizations,

educational institutions, tribal governments, and philanthropic partners to evaluate, mature, and validate wildfire-related technologies.

- a) Require the FIU to establish technical and operational criteria for formal validation and require the FIU to consider if the wildfire-related technology meets the criteria for formal evaluation.
 - b) Authorize the FIU to award a technology vendor that completes an FIU-administered or FIU-monitored pilot, prototype, or demonstration project and receives a formal validation a follow-on contract for operational fielding without a separate competitive solicitation process, if the scope of the follow-on contract is substantially similar to the wildfire-related technology that received a formal validation.
 - c) Authorize the FIU to use flexible contracting authorities to acquire proven technologies for pilot, prototype, and demonstration projects.
- 7) Authorize the FIU to collaborate with public and private educational and research institutions on wildfire technology and innovation and enter into partnerships, memoranda of understanding, or cooperative research agreements to support wildfire technology and innovation.
 - 8) Authorize the FIU to provide technical expertise, operational data, field testing environments, and appropriated funding to ensure the technologies developed in the collaborations are transitioned into wildfire operations.
 - 9) Authorize the FIU to establish testbeds to test or evaluate emerging technologies. The FIU shall establish or designate testbeds where technologies can be safely deployed and evaluated under real-world conditions.
 - 10) Authorize the FIU to provide technical assistance to local, state, federal, and international fire agencies to facilitate deployment of wildfire-related technologies.
 - 11) Establish that participation by a private entity in any FIU-authorized pilot, prototype, testing, demonstration, or research activity pursuant to the bill does not by itself constitute a conflict of interest, create an unfair competitive advantage, be considered a gift of public funds, or disqualify the private entity from any simultaneous or subsequent procurement, solicitation, or contracting opportunity with the state or a local agency.
 - 12) Require that information, data, or predecisional materials exchanged during activities conducted pursuant to the bill be treated as nonprocurement sensitive and not be used as a basis to exclude or disadvantage any participant in future competitive procurement.
 - 13) Require the Department, on or before January 1, 2028, and annually thereafter, to submit to the Governor and the appropriate fiscal and policy committees of the Legislature a report summarizing all of the following information:
 - a) Technologies and projects evaluated, tested, or deployed under the FIU.
 - b) Results and findings regarding cost-effectiveness and operational performance of the FIU.
 - c) Partnerships and funding sources leveraged to support innovation activities pursuant to the bill.

- 14) Require the Director of the Department to implement the bill upon an appropriation by the Legislature for its purposes in the annual Budget Act or another statute.
- 15) Authorize the Department to reorganize existing positions and resources to fulfill the purposes of the bill.
- 16) Sunsets these provisions on January 1, 2033.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT

According to the author, “Last year, Angelenos experienced firsthand that California wildfires are becoming more destructive and deadlier with increasingly extreme weather. It is critical we prioritize programs with innovative technology and research to properly equip our emergency management personnel who keep our communities safer in the face of disaster. SB 1079 creates the [FIU] under [the Department], giving California a formal mechanism to identify firefighter needs, source technologies, prototype solutions, and move successful technologies from pilot to scale. By establishing a robust and permanent unit to test and deploy new firefighting technology, protecting Californians from future megafire disasters becomes not just an aspiration, but a coordinated priority for the state.”

ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION

None received.

COMMENTS

This bill is double referred. This bill is referred to this Committee and the Committee on Emergency Management. Issues related to the portfolio of the Emergency Management Committee are included here for context and completeness only.

Codifying, Clarifying, and Specifying Existing Department Programs. There is within the Department a FIU, IOC, and OWTRD. This bill codifies these programs in statute, adds the new RADP to the FIU, and imbues them with specific authorities and limitations to most efficiently deploy effective, innovative technology to the fire front.

Minimal information regarding grant program. California Association of REALTORS (CAR) writes, in a support if amended position, that the grant program should explicitly allow non-profits to apply for grants under this program, when the non-profit is administering grants on behalf of homeowners. However, the grant program as currently written does not specify *any* organizations that might qualify to apply for the program; calling out non-profits at this stage in the Legislative development process might be premature.

As this bill moves through the Legislative process, the author may wish to consider adding additional clarity to the grant program to address CAR’s concerns.

Related Legislation

AB 1891 (Connolly) would establish the Beneficial Fire Capacity Program in the Department, which would fund grants for beneficial fire implementation, capacity building, research, innovation, and training. This bill is currently in the Assembly Appropriations Committee, pending hearing.

SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS: None.

SUPPORT

Megafire Action (sponsor)
Calforests
California Association of REALTORS (if amended)
California Fire Safe Council
California Forward
Climate Resolve
Del Norte Fire Safe Council
Fire Aside
FireWERX
Napa Communities Firewise Foundation
Net-zero California
Pacific Forest Trust
Rain
RockRose Risk
Safe Community Project
San Bernardino County Fire Protection District
The Tahoe Fund

OPPOSITION

None Received

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