

Date of Hearing: August 5, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 1079 (Stern) – As Amended April 28, 2026

Policy Committee:	Natural Resources	Vote:	14 - 0
	Emergency Management		6 - 0

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

SUMMARY:

This bill establishes the Fire Innovation Unit (FIU) in the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE).

Specifically, this bill, among other things:

- 1) Establishes within CAL FIRE the FIU to serve as the department's innovation arm and as the state's principal hub for wildfire technology research, coordination, procurement, and deployment for technologies that improve ecosystem and landscape-scale resilience, community risk reduction, ignition reduction, early detection, fast fire suppression, and decision support tools.
- 2) Requires the FIU to consist of the existing Office of Wildfire Technology Research (OWTR), the Innovation, Outreach, and Coordination Program (IOCP), and the Rapid Acquisition and Deployment Program (RADP).
- 3) Prescribes numerous requirements for the OWTR, such as performing scientific and technical evaluations of emerging wildfire technologies; conducting and participating in laboratory and field tests of wildfire technologies within CAL FIRE and in partnership with local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies; and issuing recommendations on wildfire technologies regarding adoption and performance standards.
- 4) Prescribes numerous requirements for the IOCP, such as coordinating with end users across local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies; implementing the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program established by this bill; and providing the requisite firefighting expertise necessary for field trials in operational environments.
- 5) Authorizes the RADP to undertake numerous specified actions, such as piloting and scaling wildfire technologies through the use of flexible contracting authorities pursuant to this bill.
- 6) Authorizes the FIU to undertake numerous specified actions, including, among many other things, establishing and administering a Wildfire Innovation Grant Program and administering or monitoring pilot, prototype, or demonstration projects to evaluate, mature, and validate wildfire-related technologies, as specified.
- 7) Requires, on or before January 1, 2028, and annually thereafter, CAL FIRE to submit to the Governor and the Legislature a report with specified information; requires CAL FIRE to implement this bill only upon appropriation; authorizes CAL FIRE to reorganize existing

positions and resources to fulfill the purposes of this bill; and sunsets the provisions of this bill on January 1, 2033.

For a detailed summary of the bill's provisions, please see the Assembly Natural Resources Committee's analysis.

FISCAL EFFECT:

- 1) CAL FIRE estimates General Fund costs of approximately \$2.1 million in year one and \$1.9 million in year two and ongoing for seven positions, training, and travel; to evaluate and pilot emerging technologies; and to comply with the other requirements in the bill.

As discussed below, the OWTR already exists within CAL FIRE and is funded and staffed using existing CAL FIRE resources. And while CAL FIRE has information about a FIU and IOCP on its website, the department notes that neither the unit nor the program formally exist; this bill seeks to codify these informal efforts. CAL FIRE notes it would need to transition staffing and resources currently assigned to its OWTR into the new FIU should this bill go into effect. The RADP and the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program proposed in the bill would be entirely new programs for CAL FIRE.

- 2) Cost pressures of an unknown but potentially significant amount (General Fund, special fund, or bond funds) to fund grants under the proposed Wildfire Innovation Grant Program, should CAL FIRE opt to establish the program. The bill does not specify the number or size of the grants to be awarded under the program.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** 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 CAL FIRE, giving California a formal mechanism to identify firefighter needs, source technologies, prototype solutions, and move successful technologies from pilot to scale.

- 2) **Background.** SB 109 (Dodd), Chapter 239, Statutes of 2021, established the OWTR as the central organizing hub in CAL FIRE for identifying emerging wildfire technologies, but this office functions primarily as an information-gathering channel rather than a structured pathway for testing, validating, procuring, and deploying wildfire solutions. Supporters of this bill state that the bill “expands that foundation into a complete innovation pipeline, including pilots, demonstrations, testbeds, grant support, academic partnerships, and pathways for rapid operational adoption.”

As noted previously, CAL FIRE's FIU (not currently codified in statute) represents the department's unified effort to drive the development and deployment of next-generation wildfire technology and operational advancements. In partnership with FireWERX and

supported by philanthropic organizations, CAL FIRE states its FIU serves as its hub for innovation, bringing together public, private, academic, tribal, and philanthropic partners to advance solutions that enhance firefighter safety and operational efficiency.

Similarly, the department's Innovation, Outreach & Coordination Unit (also not currently codified in statute) engages directly with CAL FIRE programs, units, and regions to define operational needs and gather technical requirements. Unit staff work closely with partners to ensure new technologies address true field challenges, leveraging operational experience to guide research and development efforts.

This bill codifies CAL FIRE's FIU and IOCP programs in statute, creates a new RADP, and authorizes the FUI to implement a new Wildfire Innovation Grant Program.

While the department administers numerous grant programs, the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program proposed in this bill does not appear to duplicate CAL FIRE's efforts, as existing grants are generally focused on wildfire prevention, fuels, forest health, and community resilience, whereas the author and bill supporters intend for the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program to focus on wildfire technology, operational validation, and pilot-to-scale development.

Writing in support, a coalition of organizations argues that while new wildfire innovation technologies are emerging to support early detection, rapid suppression, community risk reduction, ecosystem resilience, and ignition prevention, "the pathway from promising idea to proven pilot to scaled deployment remains fragmented and slow." The coalition argues that too often, innovative tools stall between demonstration and adoption, not because they lack value, but because there is no formal system to evaluate, integrate, and deploy these technologies efficiently across the state's wildfire agencies. This bill, the supporters argue, addresses this structural gap.

There is no opposition registered against this bill.

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