

SENATE THIRD READING

SB 1079 (Stern)

As Amended April 28, 2026

Majority vote

SUMMARY

Establishes the Fire Innovation Unit (FIU) in the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), under the direction of a Deputy Director of Wildfire Innovation.

Major Provisions

- 1) Establishes a FIU to serve as CAL FIRE'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 and Development (Office) and two new programs created by the bill: the Innovation, Outreach, and Coordination Program (IOCP) and the Rapid Acquisition and Deployment Program (RADP).
- 3) Specifies functions of the Office related to scientific and technical evaluations, among other things.
- 4) Specifies requirements of the IOCP related to governmental coordination, serving as a liaison to specified entities, and, facilitating information sharing, among other things.
- 5) Authorizes the RADP to pilot wildfire technologies and manage the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program, among other things.
- 6) Requires all grants awarded pursuant to the Wildfire Innovation Grant Program to align with statewide wildfire resilience goals and include clear metrics for success that are informed by end-user input.
- 7) Provides specified authorizations to the FIU, including:
 - a) To enter into various types of agreements.
 - b) To consult with and invite participation from relevant state agencies.
 - c) To establish and administer a Wildfire Innovation Grant Program.
 - d) To administer or monitor specified pilot, prototype, or demonstration projects.
 - e) To authorize use of flexible contracting authorities.
 - f) To collaborate with public and private educational and research institutions.
 - g) To provide technical expertise, operational data, field testing environments, and appropriate funding.

- h) To establish testbeds to test or evaluate emerging technologies.
 - i) To provide technical assistance to local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies to facilitate deployment of wildfire-related technologies.
 - j) To maintain a publicly available resource, including, but not limited to, an information bulletin, to provide visibility into technologies evaluated, piloted, or deployed.
 - k) To provide opportunities to participate in demonstrations, pilot programs, and field testing.
- 8) Requires the FIU to seek operational feedback from participating local, state, tribal, federal, and international fire agencies, and where appropriate, state agencies.
- 9) Requires, on or before January 1, 2028, and annually thereafter, CAL FIRE to submit to the Governor and the appropriate fiscal and policy committees of the Legislature a report summarizing specified information.
- 10) Requires the director to implement this bill only upon an appropriation by the Legislature for its purposes in the annual Budget Act or another statute.
- 11) Sunsets the provisions of this bill on January 1, 2033.

COMMENTS

The Office currently serves as a central hub in CAL FIRE for identifying emerging technologies, but functions primarily as an information-gathering channel rather than a structured pathway for testing, validating, procuring, and deploying solutions.

CAL FIRE has an existing Fire Innovation Unit, which represents its unified effort to drive the development and deployment of next-generation wildfire technology and operational advancements. By partnering with philanthropic organizations and nonprofits, CAL FIRE has access to capital to fund the innovation pipeline without relying exclusively on state funds.

The Innovation, Outreach & Coordination (IOC) Unit engages directly with CAL FIRE 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.

A January 2026 Rapid Acquisition and Deployment Program (RAND) Corporation report, *Accelerating Technological Innovation Across the U.S. Wildfire Management System*, concluded that the wildfire management system remains fragmented and lacks mechanisms to coordinate innovators, accelerators, and end users, recommending the creation of dedicated innovation structures to speed adoption of wildfire technologies.

This bill places CAL FIRE's FIU and IOC programmatic structure in statute, creates a new RADP, and requires the IOC to implement a new Wildfire Innovation Grant Program.

The advancement of technology has been important for state and local agencies to improve their detection of and response to emergencies. With the advent of AI and the ever-present need to coordinate amongst state, federal, and local jurisdictions on emergency response, technology can

improve our ability to detect the most minute changes in weather or temperature and respond faster and in a more coordinated fashion to prevent wildfire destruction and death.

The FIU will be authorized to establish testbeds to test or evaluate emerging technologies and provide technical expertise, operational data, field testing environments, and appropriate funding to ensure the technologies developed in the collaborations are transitioned into wildfire operations.

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. 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 Support

Supporters state that SB 1079 expands the foundation of the current Fire Innovation Unit into a complete innovation pipeline, including pilots, demonstrations, testbeds, grant support, academic partnerships, and pathways for rapid operational adoption.

Arguments in Opposition

None on file

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, 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. Additionally, cost pressures of an unknown, but potentially significant amount (General Fund, special fund, or bond funds) is expected to fund grants under the proposed Wildfire Innovation Grant Program, should CAL FIRE opt to establish the program.

VOTES

SENATE FLOOR: 33-0-7

YES: Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Choi, Cortese, Dahle, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Grove, Jones, Laird, Limón, McGuire, McNerney, Menjivar, Ochoa Bogh, Pérez, Reyes, Richardson, Rubio, Seyarto, Smallwood-Cuevas, Strickland, Umberg, Valladares, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

ABS, ABST OR NV: Allen, Alvarado-Gil, Becker, Hurtado, Niello, Padilla, Stern

ASM NATURAL RESOURCES: 14-0-0

YES: Bryan, Ellis, Alanis, Connolly, Garcia, Haney, Hoover, Kalra, Macedo, Muratsuchi, Pellerin, Schultz, Wicks, Zbur

ASM EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT: 6-0-1

YES: Ransom, Hadwick, Arambula, Bennett, Calderon, DeMaio

ABS, ABST OR NV: Bains

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 15-0-0

YES: Wicks, Hoover, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Fong, Mark González, Krell, Pacheco, Pellerin, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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