

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 326 (Becker) – As Amended July 9, 2025

Policy Committee:	Emergency Management	Vote:	5 - 0
	Natural Resources		14 - 0

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

SUMMARY:

This bill requires the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) to prepare a Wildfire Risk Mitigation Planning Framework (Framework), Wildfire Risk Baseline and Forecast (Forecast), and Wildfire Mitigation Scenarios Report (Report), and makes CAL FIRE's local assistance grant program funds available for local agencies to fund risk-targeted wildfire prevention work and facilitate early compliance with zone zero regulations.

Specifically, this bill:

- 1) Requires CAL FIRE's Community Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation deputy director to prepare, every three years, beginning on or before January 1, 2027, in consultation with the Office of Emergency Service's (OES's) state hazard mitigation officer, a Framework for short- and long-term mitigation planning that includes geospatial evaluation and is submitted to the Legislature, Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety (OEIS), and the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) for review and consideration.
- 2) Requires the deputy director to prepare, every three years, beginning on or before April 1, 2027, in consultation with the state hazard mitigation officer, a Forecast for the state that includes geographic specificity, establishes key risk metrics for wildfire risk, and is submitted to the Legislature, OEIS, and the PUC for review and consideration.
- 3) Requires the deputy director to annually prepare, beginning on or before August 1, 2027, in consultation with the state hazard mitigation officer, a Report that identifies a reasonable range of possible scenarios for overall wildfire risk mitigation spending and is submitted to the Legislature and the PUC for review and consideration.
- 4) Authorizes the deputy director to contract with a private consultant or a public university with expertise in the quantitative assessment of wildfire risk and risk mitigation to conduct risk modeling and prepare reports to effectuate the Framework, Forecast, and Report.
- 5) Modifies the effective date of zone zero regulations for certain existing structures in the state responsibility area (SRA) to discern between primary residences and rental properties.
- 6) Requires CAL FIRE, upon appropriation, beginning fiscal year (FY) 2029-30 through FY 2044-45, inclusive, to make funds available via CAL FIRE's existing local assistance grant program to local governments for wildfire risk reduction consistent with the Framework.

- 7) Authorizes, for FY 2025-26 through FY 2028-29, inclusive, a local agency to apply for grant funds through CAL FIRE's existing local assistance grant program to support early compliance with zone zero regulations by funding wildfire positions sufficient to conduct inspections in very high fire hazard severity zones (FHSZs). CAL FIRE must, upon appropriation, make funds available for this purpose, and a local agency receiving such funds must adopt an ordinance authorizing a civil fine for violations of defensible space regulations. The local agency must submit an annual report to CAL FIRE with specified inspection information and CAL FIRE must prepare an annual report evaluating the data.
- 8) Requires the State Fire Marshal (SFM) to propose to extend the applicability of California Building Standards Code Chapter 7A (Chapter 7A) home hardening building standards to all reconstructions of buildings destroyed within the perimeters of a wildfire occurring or after July 1, 2026.

FISCAL EFFECT:

- 1) Costs to CAL FIRE of approximately \$108 million in year one, \$113 million in year two, and \$99 million ongoing beginning in year three to develop and update the Framework, Forecast, and Report and administer additional local assistance grants (General Fund). CAL FIRE would need to hire staff for a new Wildfire Risk Modeling Division, requiring approximately 440 positions, including 292 permanent and ongoing positions; acquire hundreds of vehicles; contract with risk modeling vendors; and purchase data collection storage and software to accommodate the additional implementation workload. CAL FIRE notes that up to 270 of the new positions would be forestry technicians and aides to perform parcel and community inspections to gather data on risks and mitigations to inform model development and updates.
- 2) Annual cost pressures of an unknown amount, likely in the tens of millions of dollars, to CAL FIRE to provide additional local assistance grants to achieve wildfire risk reduction consistent with the Framework and support early compliance with zone zero regulations (General Fund, special fund, or Proposition 4). CAL FIRE notes that the local assistance grant program has been consistently funded since FY 2014-15, at amounts in the tens of millions of dollars to the one hundred million dollar range.
- 3) Annual costs of approximately \$260,000 to OES for at least one staff position to consult with CAL FIRE on the Framework, Forecast, and Report (General Fund). OES notes that costs may increase depending on the nature and evolution of the role.
- 4) Likely minor and absorbable costs to OEIS and the PUC to review and consider the Framework, Forecast, and Report, and the California Building Standards Commission to consider extending fire protection building standards to certain reconstructed buildings.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

Preventing catastrophic wildfire requires strong coordination between all of our investments, Building on current efforts, this bill would create a planning structure to maximize the effectiveness of California's work to reduce the impacts of wildfire. As California spends more to prevent catastrophic wildfire, we should also make

sure that these investments go as far as possible in keeping residents safe. This bill creates a planning structure that does just that and ensures that all our efforts are well coordinated.

This bill is supported by insurer groups, environmental organizations, and local governments.

- 2) **Background. *Wildfire Risk and Ignition.*** California has a history of devastating wildfires, with fire risk and severity increasing in recent years. Electrical infrastructure is a common ignition point for wildfires, including the Camp Fire in 2018 and the Dixie Fire in 2021. In 2019 alone, 10% of wildfires and 65% of acres burned were caused by electrical equipment. While high winds can blow vegetation into utility lines from far distances, removing vegetation in contact with utility lines has been found effective in reducing fire starts.

Utilities Involvement. Electric utilities are required to implement wildfire management plans assessing their level of wildfire risk and providing strategies for wildfire risk reduction. The six investor-owned utilities (IOUs) currently employ technology that can turn the circuit off if an IOU senses a disturbance on an energized distribution line.

State Solutions. AB 9 (Wood), Chapter 225, Statutes of 2021, created the Community Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation Division within the Office of the SFM and required the deputy director to prepare wildfire risk frameworks, forecasts, and mitigation strategies. Under this law, the SFM must identify FHSZs. FHSZs categorize fire likelihood and severity as moderate, high, and very high over a 30-to-50-year period based on fuel loading, slope, fire weather, winds, and other relevant factors.

Existing law defines the SRA as an area where the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection (Board) determines that the state bears primary financial responsibility to prevent and suppress fires and defines the local responsibility area (LRA) as an area where the Board determines a local government bears such primary financial responsibility. CAL FIRE has mapped the three tiers of FHSZs for the SRA and very high FHSZs for locally managed lands in the LRA. SB 63 (Stern), Chapter 382, Statutes of 2021, requires CAL FIRE to adopt maps for all three FHSZ tiers in the LRA. In March 2025, CAL FIRE began releasing such maps adding thousands of acres of FHSZ lands. Existing law requires maintenance of a defensible space of 100 feet from each side of a structure located in any of the following: the SRA, an area classified as a very high FHSZ, or on land covered with flammable material.

AB 3074 (Friedman), Chapter 259, Statutes of 2020, required the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection (Board) to adopt regulations to create an ember-resistant zone within five feet of a structure (zone zero). The Board has not yet promulgated such regulations, and the zone zero requirement will not take effect until the Board issues the regulations and corresponding guidance document. On February 6, 2025, Governor Newsom signed an executive order directing the Board to adopt regulations by December 31, 2025. AB 38 (Wood), Chapter 391, Statutes of 2019, requires defensible space inspections upon the sale of a home in areas designated as high and very high FHSZs. Such inspections will include compliance with zone zero regulations once the regulations are in effect.

In addition to defensible space requirements, using certain building materials may help resist the intrusion of flames or embers projected by a wildland fire. Such home hardening measures may be applied to new construction or when retrofitting an older home. Chapter 7A building standards, developed with the SFM, provides for ignition resistant construction

standards, such as fire-resistant siding, tempered glass, and ignition-resistant roofs, in the wildland urban interface. Chapter 7A is applicable to all new construction located in the SRA and in very high FHSZs within the LRA.

State and Private Coordination. Wildfire management and prevention funding comes from a variety of sources, including significant federal funds, an investment of over \$580 million per year from the state, and over \$10 billion per year from IOUs. While the Governor's California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force has produced plans to better manage wildfire risk across agencies, the state still lacks systematic coordination among the state and federal government, electric utilities, and other parties to ensure effective and efficient use of these substantial investments.

This bill attempts to close that coordination gap by requiring CAL FIRE to develop a cohesive Framework, Forecast, and Report, and, contingent upon appropriation, enhance resources for local grant programs to achieve wildfire risk reduction consistent with the Framework and support early compliance with zone zero regulations. This bill also requires the SFM to propose extending Chapter 7A building standards to the reconstruction of all buildings destroyed within the perimeter of a wildfire occurring on or after July 1, 2026.

- 3) **Related Legislation.** AB 1455 (Bryan) requires the Board to adopt regulations to implement zone zero defensible space regulations in the SRA and in very high FHSZs within the LRA, and authorizes the Board to adopt these regulations as emergency regulations. AB 1455 is pending hearing in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

SB 429 (Cortese) creates the Wildfire Safety and Risk Mitigation Program within the Department of Insurance to provide grants for the development and deployment of a public wildfire catastrophe model. SB 429 is pending hearing in this committee.

SB 514 (Cabaldon) removes the sunset date on the statewide program to allow qualified entities to support and augment CAL FIRE in its defensible space and home hardening assessment responsibilities and expands the list and role of qualified entities. SB 514 is pending hearing in this committee.

SB 616 (Rubio) establishes the Community Hardening Commission, chaired by the Insurance Commissioner, to develop new wildfire community hardening standards and promote alignment of related programs across the state. SB 616 is pending hearing in this committee.

SB 629 (Durazo) requires the SFM to map areas of the state previously burned by a wildfire and requires the application of specified wildfire risk mitigation regulations to those mapped areas. SB 629 is pending hearing in this committee.

- 4) **Prior Legislation.** SB 209 (Dodd), Chapter 405, Statutes of 2019, required the Office of Emergency Services and CAL FIRE to jointly establish a center for wildfire forecasting.

SB 1014 (Dodd), of the 2023-2024 Legislative Session, would have required CAL FIRE to prepare the Framework, as is required by this bill. An earlier version of SB 1014 would have required OES to also prepare the Forecast and Report, but those provisions were removed by the Senate Appropriations Committee. SB 1014 was held on this committee's suspense file.