

SENATE THIRD READING  
SB 581 (McGuire, et al.)  
As Amended April 10, 2025  
Majority vote

## SUMMARY

Amends existing law relating to state firefighter classifications within the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE).

### Major Provisions

- 1) Establish the Fight for Firefighters Act of 2025.
- 2) Require the California Department of Human Resources (CalHR), the State Personnel Board (SPB), and any other state agency to take necessary actions to transition the Firefighter I (FFI) classification within the CAL FIRE to a permanent firefighter employment classification.
- 3) Require the aforementioned transition to include meeting and conferring in good faith between the exclusive representative and the state employer to bargain over wages, hours, and other terms and conditions of employment for affected employees during and after the transition.

## COMMENTS

### *Responsibilities of the CAL FIRE*

The CAL FIRE is responsible for the fire protection, fire prevention, maintenance, and enhancement of the state's forest, range, and brushland resources, contract fire protection, associated emergency services, and assistance in civil disasters and other non-fire emergencies. There are approximately 85 million acres of wildlands in California. The CAL FIRE also is responsible for providing wildland fire protection for approximately 31 million acres of these wildlands, classified as the State Responsibility Area (SRA). These lands are mostly privately owned.

Existing law defines the SRA as the area in which the state has the primary financial responsibility of preventing and suppressing fires. The areas where local governments or federal governments have primary financial responsibility for providing this service are known as the Local Responsibility Area (LRA) and the Federal Responsibility Area (FRA).

It is worth noting that counties can elect to assume responsibility for the prevention and suppression of fires on all land in the county, including lands within the SRA. Kern, Los Angeles, Marin, Orange, Santa Barbara, and Ventura Counties had elected to do so. In some cases, local jurisdictions contract with the CAL FIRE to provide fire protection and other services on their behalf. Further, the CAL FIRE provides support and assistance on fires in the LRA and FRA.

### *Wildfires in California*

Wildfires have been growing in size, duration, and destructivity over the past 20 years. Growing wildfire risk is due to accumulating fuels, a warming climate, and expanding development in the wildland-urban interface, and where the 2020 fire season broke numerous records. Five of California's six largest fires in modern history burned at the same time, with more than 4.3 million acres burned across the state – double the previous record. The Los Angeles fires have burned an area nearly the size of Washington, D.C., killed 28 people and damaged or destroyed nearly 16,000 structures, according to CAL FIRE.

### *The CAL FIRE Budget*

The CAL FIRE's workweek, staffing, and operational models are dictated in large part by its service needs, which include providing 24-hours per day, 7-days per week coverage on a year-round basis, as well as augmented response capacity during peak wildfire season. The CAL FIRE's firefighters, fire engines, and aircraft respond to more than 5,400 wildland fires that burn an average of 156,000 acres each year, and, according to the CAL FIRE, "answer the call [of duty] more than 450,000 times for other emergencies each year."

According to the Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), the CAL FIRE's staffing levels have increased significantly over the past decade. Specifically, between fiscal years (FYs) 2014-15 and 2023-24, the number of positions that the CAL FIRE categorizes as related to fire protection increased from 5,756 to 10,275, and the total number of positions at the CAL FIRE grew from 6,632 to 12,000 (representing roughly an 80% increase in both cases).<sup>1</sup> In the FY 2020-21 and 2022-23 budgets, the Legislature approved proposals totaling roughly \$170 million per year on an ongoing basis to provide relief staffing, such as adding new fire crews at the CAL FIRE and partner agencies. As of 2024-25, the LAO estimates that roughly three-quarters of wildfire response-related positions are permanent and the rest are seasonal.

### *66-Hour Workweek*

Under existing law, seasonal firefighters cannot work more than nine months in any 12-consecutive-month period. This forces the CAL FIRE to lose experienced, trained firefighters for three months annually – precisely when California might face major fires.

Deployments during wildfire season, which now can stretch through the entire year, can exceed 60 days in a row, with exhausting 48-hour shifts lined up back-to-back with little to no opportunities for rest. To address overworked firefighters and professional burnout, the state is currently implementing a 66-hour work week plan for the state's firefighters. State Bargaining Unit 8 (CAL FIRE Local 2881), which represents most of the CAL FIRE's positions, such as Fire Captains, Fire Apparatus Engineers, and the FFI and Firefighter II classifications, executed a memorandum of understanding with the state in September 2022 with the state to, among other things, reduce the CAL FIRE firefighter workweek from 72 hours to 66 hours – a 24-hour reduction per 28-day pay period.

By FY 2028-29, the state is committed to adding 2,457 new permanent positions to the CAL FIRE for a total of 12,900 positions focused on wildfire response. Staffing up at that capacity takes time, which is why the proposal is phased in over four budget years.

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<sup>1</sup> "The 2024-25 Budget: CalFire – Implementation of a 66-Hour Workweek." LAO, March 2024.

The plan shifts a significant number of seasonal firefighters to permanent firefighters; meaning, that more fire engines will be staffed year round than historically has been the case and more firefighters will be working at any given time during non-peak periods than otherwise would have been the case. According to the LAO, the proposal extends the peak staffing period from five months to nine months, resulting in additional CAL FIRE firefighters being on duty at any given time because there will be more engines deployed overall. Further, by extending peak season for an additional four months, the plan will significantly increase the number of firefighters on duty throughout the whole year. The permanent personnel would allow the CAL FIRE to adjust its staffing rotation to a platoon model in which firefighters would rotate on and off duty together as a group rather than individually. For example, an engine might be staffed by a team made up of a Fire Captain, Fire Apparatus Engineer, and FFI on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday; a separate trio of individuals on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday; and a third group on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

### *The Firefighter I (FFI) Classification*

The FFI classification is an entry-level position for seasonal firefighters that requires basic training and skills for fire suppression, wildland firefighting, and hazardous materials response. This position involves suppressing various fires, assisting with maintenance and repairs, and performing other related duties under supervision.

### *This Bill*

This bill requires the CalHR, the SPB, and any other relevant state agency to take the necessary actions to transition the FFI classification within the CAL FIRE to a permanent firefighter employment classification.

Please see the respective policy committee analyses for a full discussion of this bill.

### **According to the Author**

"California and the entire West are burning at historic rates. Eight of the most destructive wildfires in California history have hit over the past five years, with two of the deadliest wildfires burning over 16,000 structures in Los Angeles County just 13 days after Christmas. It is crystal clear, even with the state's historic investments in CAL FIRE—which doubled the number of CAL FIRE Firefighters in the last eight years—they need our help. The Golden State continues to face unprecedented challenges—wildfires burning longer, hotter, faster and more frequently than ever before. The new reality has set in and we're never going back."

### **Arguments in Support**

The California Professional Firefighters express, "[d]evastating wildfires have become a regular occurrence in California, exacerbated by a changing climate and years of dry conditions. Large scale incidents such as the Dixie Fire, the Camp Fire, and the Eaton and Palisades Fires have strained not only the resources of fire departments to the limit, but placed unimaginable burdens onto the firefighters employed by CAL FIRE who are on the front lines of many of these blazes. Deployments during wildfire season, which now can stretch through the entire year, can extend up to and over 60 days in a row, with exhausting 48-hour shifts lined up back-to-back with little to no opportunities for rest. The men and women of all employment classifications of CAL FIRE are among the most well-trained and highly-skilled firefighters in the world, but the new normal in California means that the older model of employment for seasonal workers must

change in order for them to be most effective. Wildfire season is now year-round, with some of the most devastating fires in California's history taking place during the winter months that were previously thought to be "safe" from this sort of destruction. Instead of losing the valuable resources and skills provided by seasonal firefighters for three months of the year, [this bill] will bring these firefighters on to permanent, full-time status, ensuring that CAL FIRE is always ready to battle the next big wildfire that threatens our communities."

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors states that, "[e]nsuring year-round staffing for CAL FIRE would strengthen wildfire response capabilities across California. According the Los Angeles County Fire Department, boosting CAL FIRE staffing would improve mutual aid response and ease the burden on county resources. Additionally, this bill would ensure that critical resources are available not only during peak wildfire season but throughout the year for essential tasks such as vegetation management, ultimately enhancing wildfire prevention efforts."

### **Arguments in Opposition**

None on file.

## **FISCAL COMMENTS**

According to the Assembly Committee on Appropriations, this bill would result in the following:

- 1) One-time General fund costs of \$145 million, \$230 million, and \$330 million in each of the first three years of implementation, respectively, and \$439 million annually thereafter for CAL FIRE to eliminate approximately 2,969 FFI positions and transition them into permanent, full-time FFII positions.
- 2) One-time General Fund costs of \$13.4 million in the first year of implementation, and \$12.5 million annually thereafter, for the California Conservation Corps to realign its fire crews to CAL FIRE's year-round operations schedule to support 72 staff and 47 Corps members.

## **VOTES**

### **SENATE FLOOR: 39-0-1**

**YES:** Allen, Alvarado-Gil, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Choi, Cortese, Dahle, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Grove, Hurtado, Jones, Laird, Limón, McGuire, McNERney, Menjivar, Niello, Ochoa Bogh, Padilla, Pérez, Richardson, Rubio, Seyarto, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Strickland, Umberg, Valladares, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

**ABS, ABST OR NV:** Reyes

### **ASM PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT AND RETIREMENT: 7-0-0**

**YES:** McKinnor, Lackey, Alanis, Boerner, Elhawary, Garcia, Nguyen

### **ASM NATURAL RESOURCES: 13-0-1**

**YES:** Bryan, Alanis, Connolly, Ellis, Flora, Garcia, Haney, Hoover, Kalra, Muratsuchi, Pellerin, Schultz, Zbur

**ABS, ABST OR NV:** Wicks

**ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 15-0-0**

**YES:** Wicks, Sanchez, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Elhawary, Fong, Mark González, Ahrens, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache, Ta, Tangipa

**UPDATED**

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