

SB 1153 (Caballero)

Water Systems and Wildfire Preparedness

August 2026

Background

California faces catastrophic climate-driven wildfires, exacerbated by periods of heavy rainfall followed by periods of extreme drought, decades of fire suppression, and historically limited focus on forest health and vegetation management projects. These wildfires place extraordinary demands on water systems.

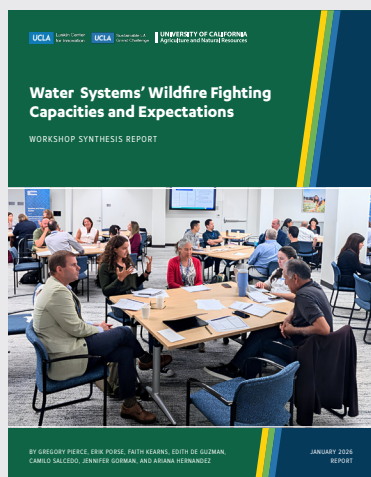
Despite these demands, public water agencies are making investments to adapt to climate change, including preparing for catastrophic wildfires. Water agencies also take specific actions in response to wildfire events. The investments and activities of each agency vary based on the needs of that agency and area of the state.

Public water systems are designed to provide customers with safe, reliable drinking water and aid in structural firefighting for the properties they serve. They are not designed, intended or funded to supply the significant volume of water necessary for large-scale

wildfire defense and suppression, and doing so would be physically impracticable, financially infeasible, and would compromise water quality and affordability.

Water systems can become overwhelmed when too many fire hydrants are used within the same pressure zone. For a structural fire, there might be three to five fire engines responding to the fire. For a wildfire, there can be hundreds of fire engines hooked up to the same system. Wildfires can also damage pipelines, storage tanks, and power infrastructure, further limiting system performance.

Misunderstandings of the limitations of public water systems have led to unrealistic public expectations and have resulted in the public perception that water systems underperformed following a wildfire event. Following major wildfire events, public water agencies have increasingly faced claims and lawsuits for wildfire damages. The financial burden of litigation ultimately is borne by ratepayers, impacting water affordability.



“Participants reached a strong consensus that water systems have a limited and inherently constrained role in wildfire suppression. Hydrants, storage, and pipe networks are neither required nor engineered to deliver the sustained flows and pressures required to stop fast-moving, multi-block fires. Yet public perception, misinformation, and fragmented communication have created unrealistic expectations and, at times, misplaced blame. Workshop discussions emphasized the need for clearer communication with policymakers and the public; improved coordination among water systems, fire agencies, and emergency response entities; and careful evaluation of trade-offs in proposed infrastructure or operational interventions.”

— UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation

The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Luskin Center for Innovation published a report titled, “[Water Systems' Wildfire Fighting Capacities and Expectations](#),” which synthesizes insights from a workshop of 42 experts representing water agencies, fire services, regulators, researchers, and technical assistance providers.

Existing Law

- State law recognizes that water service is distinct from fire service. Hydrants are generally designed to protect properties served by the water provider — not wildfire suppression.
- The California Emergency Services Act requires public water systems with 10,000+ service connections to review and revise their disaster preparedness plans in conjunction with related agencies, to ensure the plans address possible disaster scenarios.
- The federal Safe Drinking Water Act requires certain public water systems to maintain emergency response plans to address risks to drinking water infrastructure and public health.

How SB 1153 Would Help

- Strengthen preparedness by requiring urban retail water suppliers in high and very high fire hazard severity zones to incorporate wildfire-specific response procedures into existing emergency plans, beginning January 1, 2028.
- Establish that water supply or pressure limitations during a wildfire are not a substantial cause of wildfire damages.

By improving wildfire planning and resilience while recognizing the physical and financial limits of water infrastructure, this bill protects ratepayers, supports emergency response, and ensures the long-term reliability of California's drinking water systems.



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