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AB-270 Department of Forestry and Fire Protection: autonomous firefighting pilot project. (2025-2026)

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AMENDED IN ASSEMBLY MAY 05, 2025

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CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE— 2025–2026 REGULAR SESSION

ASSEMBLY BILL

NO. 270

Introduced by Assembly Member Petrie-Norris

January 21, 2025

An act to add Article 4.6 (commencing with Section 4149) to Chapter 1 of Part 2 of Division 4 of the Public Resources Code, relating to fire safety.

LEGISLATIVE COUNSEL'S DIGEST

AB 270, as amended, Petrie-Norris. Department of Forestry and Fire Protection: autonomous firefighting pilot project.

Existing law requires the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, in accordance with a plan approved by the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection, to, among other things, provide fire prevention and firefighting implements and apparatus and organize fire crews and patrols, as provided.

This bill would require the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection to establish a pilot project to ~~equip the state with the nation's first testbed~~ *assess whether a* firefighting helicopter equipped with autonomous aerial suppression technology ~~and the associated configuration, familiarization, and training activities to transition the aircraft~~ *can be transitioned* into operational ~~use in the State of California~~. The bill would also require the department to invite local, state, tribal, and federal fire agencies to participate in those familiarization and training activities. The bill would require the department to convene, within 60 days of completion of the pilot project, *or January 1, 2029, whichever comes first*, leading fire professionals in California to assess the performance of the pilot project and, if the pilot project meets its objectives, determine how to incorporate autonomous aerial suppression technology into existing state wildfire mitigation efforts. *The bill would require an operator of autonomous aerial suppression technology that is part of the pilot project and that is required to submit reports to local or federal agencies about autonomous aerial suppression technology to also provide those reports to the department and the Legislature, as provided.* The bill would include related legislative findings.

Vote: majority Appropriation: no Fiscal Committee: yes Local Program: no

THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA DO ENACT AS FOLLOWS:

SECTION 1. The Legislature finds and declares both of the following:

(a) Over the past decade, unprecedented climate disasters have increased in size, severity, and scale, which present enormous challenges to fire agencies in California and the public they serve. These disasters have strained existing response capacity and caused unimaginable human suffering, economic damage, watershed impacts, and reversal in climate progress.

(b) Firefighting aircraft with autonomous aerial suppression technology have the potential to increase suppression capabilities through operational safety, firefighting effectiveness, and mission efficiency for both crewed and uncrewed missions.

SEC. 2. Article 4.6 (commencing with Section 4149) is added to Chapter 1 of Part 2 of Division 4 of the Public Resources Code, to read:

Article 4.6. Autonomous Aerial Suppression Technology Pilot Project

4149. (a) The department shall establish a pilot project to ~~equip the State of California with the nation's first testbed~~ *assess whether a* firefighting helicopter equipped with autonomous aerial suppression technology ~~and the associated configuration, familiarization, and training activities to transition the aircraft can be transitioned into operational use.~~ *use in the State of California.*

(b) The department shall invite local, state, tribal, and federal fire agencies and personnel to participate in the familiarization and training activities of the pilot project.

(c) Not later than 60 days after the completion of the pilot project, *or January 1, 2029, whichever comes first*, the department shall convene leading fire professionals in California, including stakeholders from local, state, tribal, and federal fire ~~agencies~~ *agencies*, to do both of the following:

(1) Assess the performance of the pilot project. *Metrics used to assess the performance of the pilot project may include, but are not limited to, the following:*

(A) Ability to perform in varying wind conditions.

(B) Ability for autonomous aerial suppression technology to demonstrate safety enhancement mechanisms, such as detection of people and equipment within the suppression drop zone.

(C) Time spent in either autonomous or manually controlled modes.

(D) Number of local, state, and federal fire agencies and personnel who have participated in the pilot project.

(E) Ability to operate within Fire Traffic Area operations management, including coordination with human-piloted aircraft, during autonomous flight.

(2) If the pilot project meets its objectives, determine how to incorporate autonomous aerial suppression technology into existing state wildfire mitigation efforts.

(d) An operator of autonomous aerial suppression technology that is part of the pilot project and that is required to submit reports to the Federal Aviation Administration, the National Transportation Safety Board, or other local or federal agencies about autonomous aerial suppression technology during the duration of the pilot project shall also provide those reports to the department and the Legislature within 30 days of submitting those reports. In the event that the report requires an investigation of an incident, the operator of an autonomous aerial suppression technology shall submit the report to the required regulatory agencies and the Legislature at the completion of the investigation, but no later than six months after the incident. The reports shall include any significant safety incidents, including accidents involving the operation of the autonomous aerial suppression technology, the circumstances of the accident, and whether the accident resulted in damage to property or in bodily injury or death.