

JAN 17 2025

A BILL FOR AN ACT

RELATING TO FIREFIGHTING.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF HAWAII:

1 SECTION 1. The legislature finds that Hawaii's unique
2 status as an island state, positioned thousands of miles away
3 from the nearest continent, makes addressing wildfires
4 challenging. For example, while other states may request
5 assistance from out-of-state firefighting agencies under mutual
6 aid agreements, Hawaii's isolation makes it difficult to request
7 similar assistance. The fact that each major Hawaiian island
8 has its own unique geography, terrain, and resources further
9 compounds challenges that firefighters face. The legislature
10 further finds that, because the threat of wildfires has
11 increased in recent decades, the State must adapt its
12 firefighting approaches to meet this threat.

13 The legislature also finds that aerial firefighting is
14 critical for rapid initial attack strategies, where every minute
15 counts. Studies have shown that swift aerial intervention can
16 significantly reduce the extent of wildfire damage. According
17 to the National Wildfire Coordinating Group, responding to



1 wildfires within the first hour can decrease the likelihood of
2 large-scale spread by over seventy per cent. Helicopters can
3 drop water or fire retardants directly onto the fire, often
4 reaching areas inaccessible to ground crews, thus preventing
5 small fires from escalating.

6 The legislature believes that the adoption of a unified,
7 state-driven approach to firefighting would enhance fire safety
8 throughout the State. In particular, the establishment of a
9 dedicated statewide firefighting helicopter program is
10 imperative for the State to fortify resilience against
11 wildfires, enhance emergency response capabilities, and
12 safeguard the well-being of residents and visitors. Although
13 the individual counties currently operate firefighting
14 helicopters, these resources are limited and are difficult to
15 quickly deploy outside of a county in times of an emergency. A
16 dedicated statewide firefighting helicopter program equipped
17 with appropriate technical capabilities and material resources
18 will significantly reduce response times, enabling rapid
19 deployment to contain wildfires in their early stages. In
20 addition, helicopters can be strategically placed to support
21 county fire departments in times of need. For example,



1 helicopters may be proactively stationed near areas under red
2 flag warnings.

3 The importance of helicopters in wildfire response cannot
4 be understated. Hawaii's geography includes densely forested
5 regions, arid landscapes, steep cliffs, and remote valleys, all
6 of which present formidable challenges for ground-based
7 firefighting efforts. Rapid intervention and precision
8 firefighting are often hindered by difficulties in accessing
9 certain parts of the State. A helicopter's ability to reach
10 remote and inaccessible areas greatly increases firefighting
11 capabilities and increases the chance that a fire can be brought
12 under control early, before the fire spreads and destroys human
13 life, communities, ecosystems, and critical infrastructure.

14 Equipped with state-of-the-art technology, helicopters can
15 deliver targeted water drops, fire retardant, and other
16 firefighting agents with precision, maximizing the effectiveness
17 of suppression efforts. A dedicated statewide firefighting
18 helicopter program will enhance monitoring capabilities, enable
19 coordinating efforts, and promote the strategic allocation of
20 assets, tools, and resources. This capability is critical for
21 minimizing the impact of wildfires on the environment and



1 safeguarding natural resources. A helicopter's agility and
2 versatility empower firefighting crews to adapt quickly to
3 evolving fire dynamics, ensuring a more proactive and strategic
4 approach to containment. In particular, the legislature notes
5 the important role that Hawaii army national guard helicopters
6 played in responding to wildfires on the islands of Hawaii,
7 Maui, and Oahu in 2023.

8 The legislature further finds that, beyond firefighting,
9 helicopters are versatile platforms that can respond to many
10 emergencies besides wildfires. Helicopters purchased for
11 firefighting are also essential tools in human and cargo
12 transport, fire recognizance, search and rescue operations, and
13 law enforcement missions. Helicopters can also help areas
14 burned by wildfires recover by aiding in re-seeding, thereby
15 preventing erosion and runoff. In particular, the ability of
16 helicopters to access challenging terrains in remote areas make
17 them invaluable assets in locating and extracting individuals in
18 distress. Hawaii's reliance on tourism and outdoor recreational
19 activities on land and in the ocean underscores the importance
20 of having helicopters available to perform search and rescue
21 operations.



1 The legislature also finds that other states have
2 successfully implemented helicopter programs that demonstrate
3 their efficacy. During the 2021 Oregon wildfire season,
4 helicopters played a pivotal role in suppressing fires that
5 threatened urban areas. The State's aerial resources, including
6 helicopters, contributed to a ninety per cent success rate in
7 initial fire containment efforts. Similar programs in Colorado
8 and California have consistently shown that timely aerial
9 interventions can significantly improve fire management
10 outcomes.

11 The legislature notes that although the initial investment
12 in a statewide firefighting helicopter program may seem high,
13 the long-term savings are considerable. The National
14 Interagency Fire Center reports that the cost of managing a
15 wildfire can exceed \$50,000 per acre once it spreads beyond
16 initial control. Conversely, an effective aerial response can
17 contain a fire at a fraction of that cost, potentially saving
18 millions in recovery efforts and property damage. A study from
19 California's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
20 indicated that the use of aerial resources during the 2020



1 wildfire season resulted in a cost savings of approximately
2 \$250,000,000.

3 In summary, the legislature finds that the allocation of
4 funding to create a dedicated statewide firefighting helicopter
5 program is imperative to fortify Hawaii's resilience against the
6 growing threat of wildfires, enhance overall emergency response
7 capabilities, and safeguard the well-being of residents and
8 visitors.

9 Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to require the
10 state fire marshal to establish a statewide firefighting
11 helicopter program and appropriate moneys.

12 SECTION 2. Chapter 132, Hawaii Revised Statutes, is
13 amended by adding a new section to be appropriately designated
14 and to read as follows:

15 "§132- Statewide firefighting helicopter program
16 agreements; reimbursement rates. (a) The state fire marshal
17 shall establish a statewide firefighting helicopter program.
18 For the purposes of this program, the state fire marshal shall:
19 (1) Purchase, acquire, lease, or contract for the
20 provision of firefighting helicopters, facilities,
21 equipment, drones, and supplies;



- 1 (1) Purchase, acquire, lease, or contract for the
- 2 provision of firefighting helicopters, facilities,
- 3 equipment, drones, and supplies;
- 4 (2) Establish permanent, full-time equivalent
- 5 (FTE) positions to administer the statewide
- 6 firefighting helicopter program, including staff to
- 7 operate and maintain firefighting aircraft and
- 8 equipment;
- 9 (3) Provide necessary staff training; and
- 10 (4) Do other things necessary to ensure that the statewide
- 11 firefighting helicopter program is ready to begin
- 12 providing aerial firefighting services on July 1,
- 13 2026.

14 The sums appropriated shall be expended by the department
15 of labor and industrial relations for the purposes of this Act.

16 SECTION 4. New statutory material is underscored.

17 SECTION 5. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2025.

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INTRODUCED BY: *Hugh M. Puckett* *yo*



S.B. NO. 512

Report Title:

State Fire Marshal; Statewide Firefighting Helicopter Program; Appropriations

Description:

Requires the State Fire Marshal to establish a Statewide Firefighting Helicopter Program. Appropriates funds for the State Fire Marshal to obtain helicopters, facilities equipment, drones, and supplies; hire and train staff; and do other things necessary to ensure that the Program is ready to begin providing aerial firefighting services on 7/1/2026.

The summary description of legislation appearing on this page is for informational purposes only and is not legislation or evidence of legislative intent.

