

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection’s Major Capital Outlay Proposals

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SUMMARY

In this brief, we analyze the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection’s (CalFire’s) 2023-24 budget proposals related to two major capital outlay issues: a new training center and rebuilding an existing conservation camp.

Initiate New Training Center. The Governor’s budget includes two related proposals focused on building a new training facility: (1) funding for the study and acquisition phase of the proposed project to construct the new facility, and (2) funding to support 12 new ongoing positions related to the center, as well as limited-term funding to support costs associated with leasing and operating temporary training facilities. We recommend the Legislature approve funding for the study—with a revised scope—to inform legislative decision-making regarding whether and how to proceed with the project. We recommend rejecting the proposed funding for the acquisition phase of the project since it would be premature to approve such costs before the project’s study is complete and before a forthcoming master plan for one of the state’s main existing training centers is available for legislative review. Additionally, we recommend rejecting the requested facility-related staff positions since they are not adequately justified. Finally, we recommend approving some level of additional funding for temporary training facilities but seeking additional information from CalFire to justify the appropriate level.

Rebuild Growlersburg Conservation Camp. The Governor proposes funding the working drawings phase of a capital outlay project to replace the facilities and infrastructure at the Growlersburg Conservation Camp in El Dorado County. We recommend the Legislature reject the proposal for a few reasons. First, the state may not need the Growlersburg Conservation Camp given the decline in the conservation camp population and the existence of a California Conservation Corps (CCC) facility within close proximity. Second, to the extent the state wants to retain a greater presence in the region than is provided by nearby CCC facilities and conservation camps, whether a conservation camp would be the most appropriate facility is not clear. Third, the costs of the project are much higher than anticipated. Fourth, the project is not a clear priority—particularly in light of the General Fund condition—given that it currently is serviceable.

INTRODUCTION

CalFire Has Responsibilities for Both Wildland Fire Response and Forest Management.

CalFire has primary responsibility for wildland fire response in State Responsibility Areas, which are mostly privately owned wildlands that encompass about one-third of the acreage of the state. CalFire also has various responsibilities for the management and protection of the state’s forests. These include overseeing enforcement of the state’s forest practices regulations, providing grant funding for forest health and fire prevention projects, and regulating timber harvesting on private or state-owned forestland.

The Governor’s proposed budget for 2023-24 includes a total of \$4 billion from various funds to support CalFire, including \$2.9 billion from the General Fund. This represents an increase of about \$150 million (roughly 4 percent) compared to the estimated expenditure level for 2022-23. The Governor’s budget proposes to support 11,500 authorized positions at CalFire in 2023-24, which represents an increase of roughly 3 percent from the estimated number in 2022-23.

CalFire Operates Numerous Facilities.

CalFire operates more than 530 facilities statewide to support its mission. These facilities include 234 fire stations, 112 telecommunications

facilities, 8 fire crew camps, 21 unit headquarters, 16 administrative headquarters, 13 air attack bases, and 10 helitack bases. As we discuss in more detail in this brief, these facilities also include 30 conservation camps and two main training centers.

This Brief Includes Two Main

Sections. In the first section of this brief, we analyze two proposals related to building a new training center: (1) funding for the study and acquisition phases of the proposed project to construct the new facility, and (2) funding to support 12 new ongoing positions related to the center, as well as limited-term funding to support costs associated with leasing and operating temporary training facilities. In the second section, we analyze a proposal to replace the facilities and infrastructure at the existing Growlersburg Conservation Camp in Georgetown, El Dorado County.

NEW CALFIRE TRAINING CENTER FACILITY

Background

CalFire Operates Two Main Training Facilities.

CalFire currently operates two main training centers for its staff. The first is CalFire Training Center (CFTC)-lone, a state-owned facility in Amador County that historically has served as the primary training center for the department. The second is CFTC-South, which is a leased facility in Riverside County. In recent years, CFTC-South has become an important ongoing, year-round location for CalFire training. In addition to these facilities, CalFire also provides training at various other sites, such as Castle Training Center in Atwater. These centers offer a variety of types of training. For example, the CFTCs host the Firefighter Academy and the Company Officer Academy, which are training courses required for classifications of Firefighter II (permanent firefighters) and above. In total, CalFire's training programs train an average of 2,900 students per year.

CalFire Staffing Has Increased Substantially in Recent Years, Necessitating More Training.

In part due to the recent severe fire seasons and projections that these trends will continue, the state has significantly increased CalFire's staffing,

including firefighters, in recent years. For example, the *2022-23 Budget Act* added approximately 1,500 positions (representing a 15 percent increase compared to their previous staffing level), approximately 850 of which the department reports will require training prior to performing emergency response activities.

CalFire Is Undertaking a Master Plan for CFTC-lone Facility. The 2022-23 budget provided \$150,000 from the General Fund for CalFire to conduct a master plan for the CFTC-lone facility, which was built in 1967. This document—expected to be completed by May 2023—is intended to identify a specific plan for future capital outlay projects to expand and update the facility to meet CalFire's current operational requirements.

Governor's Proposals

The Governor's budget includes two related proposals, as described below.

Proposes Funding to Study and Acquire Site for New Facility. The Governor's budget includes \$19.2 million from the General Fund for two capital outlay activities related to building a proposed new training facility: (1) \$545,000 for a study that is anticipated to be completed in June 2024, which would identify potential parcels in the Sacramento area on which to construct the facility and develop a more refined cost estimate for the project, and (2) \$18.7 million to acquire a property for the new center. The department anticipates needing a minimum of 50 acres for the facility.

Future planned project phases include the preparation of performance criteria and the construction of the new proposed training center using the design-build delivery method. The administration anticipates it would complete these phases using a combination of General Fund (which it would request in a future year) and lease revenue bonds (to be repaid from the General Fund). In total, the estimated cost of the project is \$419 million and construction is anticipated to be completed in 2030.

Funds Temporary Facilities and Operations Costs, as Well as Ongoing Staff for Project Management and Maintenance. In addition to the capital outlay proposal, the Governor's budget also includes a related state operations proposal

that requests a net increase of \$12.9 million from the General Fund and 12 new positions in 2023-24 (\$12 million annually through the completion of the new training center facility—anticipated to be 2030—and \$3.4 million ongoing thereafter). These proposed resources include:

- New Positions for Capital Outlay Project Management and Maintenance (\$3.9 Million in 2023-24, \$3.4 Million Ongoing).** This funding would support the hiring of 12 new positions, including surveyors, engineers, and a right-of-way agent. These positions are proposed to (1) coordinate and consult with the Department of General Services (DGS) as it manages the construction of the new training center facility; (2) support the development of future capital outlay projects that might result from the CFTC-lone master plan; and (3) engage in maintenance activities at training centers, particularly after the new proposed training center facility is constructed.
- Temporary Leased Facilities, Equipment, and Shifting of Staff (\$8.9 Million in 2023-24, \$8.6 Million Through Construction).** This funding would support various costs associated with leasing and operating two temporary facilities that would be used for conducting training until the proposed new center is completed (estimated to be 2030)—one at Shasta College in Redding and one at a University of Phoenix campus in Sacramento. Specifically, the proposal includes additional funding for (1) facility leasing, utilities, and housing (\$3.7 million); (2) logistics and supplies (\$1.6 million); (3) leasing of fire engines (\$1.3 million); and (4) vehicles and fuel (\$845,000). The proposal also includes roughly \$1 million in new net costs to shift 12 existing CalFire staff positions from the California Correctional Center in Susanville—which is scheduled to be deactivated by June 30, 2023—to provide instruction and administrative support.

Uses Some Existing Funding to Help Support Near-Term Training Costs. In addition to the new funding, CalFire also proposes to use a total of \$5.8 million from 2022-23 funding augmentations to—on a one-time basis—support the full costs of similar temporary activities to those discussed above, such as equipment, leased vehicles, and other operational costs. This \$5.8 million represents a portion of the \$214 million ongoing General Fund originally provided for 17 new firefighter crews and for staffing to support CCC and California Military Department (CMD) crews.

Assessment

Uncertainty About Future Training Needs Results in Unclear Need for New Facility.

In our view, CalFire has not adequately justified that its ongoing training needs are sufficient to justify the construction of the new proposed facility. Specifically, CalFire argues that the facility is needed because of recent increases in demand for training, driven in large part by the significant number of new authorized positions approved as part of the *2022-23 Budget Act*. However, we expect that much of the corresponding increases in training needs will be short term in nature, associated with preparing personnel to fill the new authorized positions as they are onboarded. Once these new authorized positions have been filled, attrition will lead to some ongoing training needs, but those are likely to be much smaller than the current short-term demand. (CalFire currently assumes a 10 percent attrition rate annually.)

Moreover, the proposed new training facility is not projected to be completed until 2030, well after the recently authorized positions will be filled. Accordingly, the state's decision regarding whether to construct this facility should be based not on the *current* training needs—which may be temporarily high—but rather on a *long-term* assessment of training needs. Over the longer term, the growth rate for CalFire staffing is unknown and, therefore, so is whether future training needs will be consistently higher on an ongoing basis.

Premature to Fund New Project When CFTC-lone Master Plan Is Still in Progress.

Uncertain training needs is not the only reason we find this project proposal to be premature. Even if CalFire were to provide well-substantiated projections of future training demand increases continuing beyond 2030, whether the proposed new training center would be the most cost-effective solution to address such needs is unclear. Specifically, the CFTC-lone master plan that the Legislature funded in the *2022-23 Budget Act* is intended to provide insights into the expansion capacity at that facility. As noted above, this assessment is still in progress. While it is anticipated to be completed this spring, it could be delayed and may not be available with sufficient time for careful legislative review before the adoption of the budget in June. Moving forward with approving a new training center before the Legislature has adequate time to incorporate the findings of this plan into its deliberations could result in a higher level of state spending than ultimately necessary.

Premature to Fund Acquisition Phase Before Completing Study Phase. Even if the Legislature were to feel sufficiently confident that a new training facility is needed, providing funding for acquisition before the proposed study is complete still would be premature. The study is anticipated to provide information on available sites, as well as develop refined scope and cost estimates for the project. This would be important information for the Legislature to have before deciding whether it makes sense to move forward with the project, as well as to more accurately estimate how much funding is specifically needed for the site acquisition.

Staffing Component Not Adequately Justified. As noted above, the Governor's request includes \$3.9 million in 2023-24 (decreasing to \$3.4 million annually beginning in 2024-25) for 12 facility staff to consult with DGS as it manages the training center project, as well as other potential capital outlay projects at CFTC-lone that may be identified in the forthcoming master plan. For a department to request staffing—much less 12 positions—to coordinate with DGS on a capital outlay project is *highly* unusual. Rather, departments typically absorb this type of workload, which generally is modest. Additionally, since the CFTC-lone master plan has not yet been completed and no corresponding specific projects

have been proposed thus far, requesting staffing now to support unidentified projects is premature.

We note that the department also plans to use these positions to perform some maintenance activities, particularly on an ongoing basis after the new proposed training center is completed. However, we find this aspect of the proposal is also unjustified for two key reasons. First, different classifications, skills, and staffing levels likely would be needed to conduct maintenance activities as compared to the specific positions the Governor is proposing (such as land surveyors). Second, the facility is not anticipated to be completed until 2030. Accordingly, it would make sense for the department to request appropriate maintenance staff if and when the new proposed facility is completed rather than at the initiation of the study phase. For these reasons, we do not find a compelling need for the requested staff.

Some Funding for Temporary Training Needs Warranted, but Specific Costs Not Yet Clear.

CalFire also requests funding to support various costs associated with leasing and operating two temporary facilities until the new training center is constructed. As described above, some of the funding for these costs is requested as part of this proposal (\$8.9 million in 2023-24 and \$8.6 million until the new center is built). CalFire would also support some of these one-time costs using a portion (\$5.8 million) of the funding already authorized in the 2022-23 budget package. Given its elevated near-term training needs—resulting from the significant recent increases in firefighter staffing—the department's intent to pursue temporary leases and to support other costs associated with operating temporary training facilities is justified. Moreover, using some of the funding appropriated in last year's budget to help offset these costs is reasonable, since those funds were provided to help support the staffing augmentations. However, at this time, the department has not adequately substantiated the need for the specific amount of new funding proposed. For example, CalFire proposes \$1.3 million to lease fire engines for training purposes until the permanent engines funded in the *2022-23 Budget Act* arrive in 2024 or 2025. Why these needs could not be met at a lower cost, such as by using older fire engines that the department would otherwise sell, is unclear. We believe the Legislature needs

more information that explains and justifies the costs of operating the temporary training centers before taking action on the Governor's request.

Commits the State to Significant—and Unknown—Amount of Out-Year Costs. Together, the Governor's training center proposals would commit the state to significant costs over the coming years, including about \$400 million to construct the new proposed facility, as well as ongoing costs associated with its operations and maintenance. We note that these ongoing costs may not be fully reflected in the proposals. Specifically, the only costs proposed to be funded on an ongoing basis are for the 12 facility-related staff mentioned above. Potential remaining costs—such as for utilities, vehicles, and costs associated with the shift of personnel from Susanville—are only proposed to be funded through the end of construction of the facility. We would expect that many of these types of activities would need to be funded even after the new facility is complete, however. Accordingly, the \$3.4 million in ongoing funding requested as part of these proposals likely understates the full costs associated with operating the facility in the out-years.

Higher Bar for Approving New Proposals Given General Fund Condition. These proposals would commit the state to significant discretionary General Fund expenditures in not only the budget year but also in the out-years. Importantly, the state currently is experiencing a budget problem, where revenues already are insufficient to fund existing commitments. In this context, every dollar of new spending in the budget year comes at the expense of a previously identified priority and requires finding a commensurate level of solution somewhere within the budget. The Governor "makes room" for this (and other) proposed new spending by making reductions to funds committed for other programs, including many in the climate and natural resources areas. Moreover, because these training center proposals also have significant out-year costs, they would contribute to projected future budget deficits and would require finding additional solutions in the coming years. We therefore think the Legislature likely will want to apply a higher bar to its review of new spending proposals such as these than it might in a year in which the General Fund had more capacity to support new commitments, as it

will need to weigh the importance and value of the proposed new activities against the activities to which it has already committed. Essentially, it will want to consider whether it wants to make reductions—either those proposed by the Governor or equivalent alternatives—to free up resources for this project. In our view, this proposal does not meet that higher bar.

Recommendations

Approve Proposed \$545,000 for a Facility Study With Revised Scope to Be Completed After CFTC-lone Master Plan. We recommend the Legislature approve the proposed funding to study options for a new training center. However, we recommend that the Legislature require that CalFire modify the scope of this study to include (1) estimates of *future* growth in CalFire staffing and associated training needs and (2) an evaluation of multiple potential alternatives for meeting those training needs (with constructing a new training center as one but not the only option considered). We recommend the Legislature require that CalFire incorporate the results of the master plan for CFTC-lone—anticipated to be completed by May 2023—into this study to ensure the assessment is comprehensive.

Reject Proposed \$18.7 Million for Site Acquisition. We recommend the Legislature reject the \$18.7 million proposed for site acquisition until after the completion of the CFTC-lone master plan and the aforementioned facility study. The additional information from these reviews can help inform the Legislature's deliberations by providing clarity on the options available to meet CalFire's long-term training needs, as well as a more refined cost estimate for the potential construction of a new training center should it be determined to be necessary.

Reject Proposed \$3.9 Million in 2023-24 and \$3.4 Million Ongoing for Facility Staffing. We recommend the Legislature reject the funding proposed for additional facility-related staffing. These positions are not needed to oversee the completion of the revised study, which is the only portion of the proposal that we recommend the Legislature approve at this time. However, even if the Legislature were to approve the Governor's proposed funding for both the study and acquisition, we still would recommend against authorizing these positions, as we find the department's justification for their need to be lacking.

Approve Some Level of Funding to Meet Temporary Needs, but Seek Additional Information. We recommend the Legislature approve some level of funding to help meet the short-term training needs associated with CalFire’s recent increase in authorized positions. Because the specific amount of funding needed is still unclear, we recommend the Legislature seek additional justification from CalFire in the coming months to help determine the appropriate level of resources to provide.

GROWLERSBURG CONSERVATION CAMP REPLACEMENT

Background

Conservation Camps Provide a Key Source of Hand Crews. Hand crews support fire response by constructing fire lines, assisting fire engine crews with the deployment of fire hoses over long distances, providing logistical operational support, and extinguishing hotspots to help contain fires. These crews also do fire mitigation work, such as hazardous fuels reduction and vegetation management projects. Historically, the majority of the hand crews utilized by CalFire have been operated through agreements with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) for use of labor performed by people committed to state prison. These people are housed at conservation camps located in or near forests throughout the state. They generally qualify for voluntary placement in camps if CDCR has determined they (1) can be safely housed in a low-security environment, (2) can work outside a secure perimeter under relatively low supervision, and (3) are medically fit for conservation camp work. Conservation camp hand crews are compensated for their work.

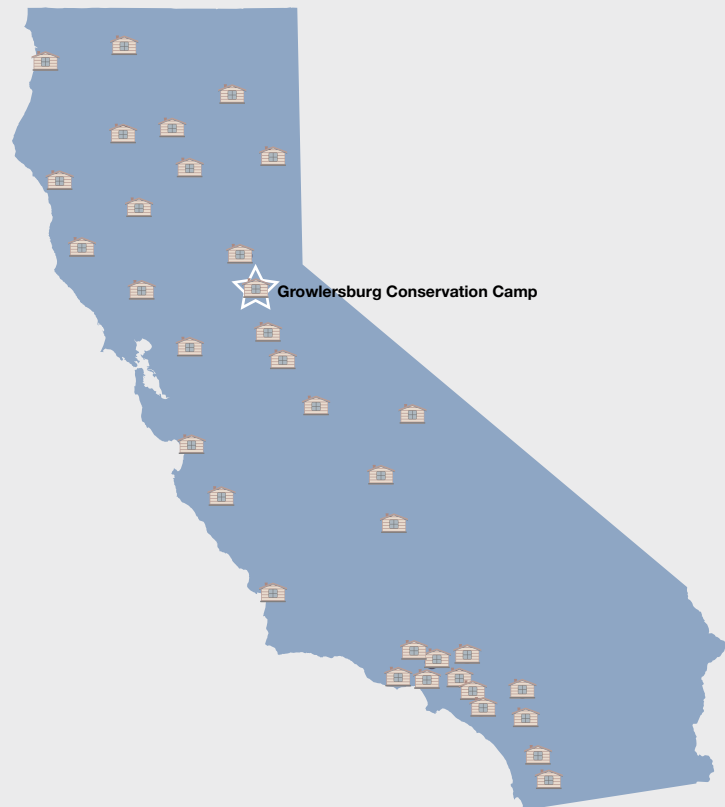
State Prison Population Has Decreased in Recent Years, Resulting in Declines at Conservation Camps. Over the past dozen years, the state has enacted

various changes to sentencing laws that have significantly reduced the state prison population, particularly those individuals who can be housed in low-security environments. This, in turn, has reduced the population housed at conservation camps and available to serve on hand crews. Specifically, as of January 2023, 1,689 people were housed in conservation camps, compared to 3,980 people in January 2010.

Population Declines Have Resulted in the Closure of Eight Conservation Camps. In response to the declines in the population at conservation camps, the state initiated the closure of eight camps in 2020-21, consolidating the remaining crews into the other 35 camps. The locations of these remaining camps, five of which are operated by Los Angeles (LA) County rather than CalFire, are shown in **Figure 1**. As highlighted, the Growlersburg facility is located in the northern part of the state in proximity to several other camps.

Figure 1

Conservation Camps Are Located Across the State



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Remaining Camps Operating Below

Design Capacity. Even with the closure of eight conservation camps, the remaining sites continue to operate well below capacity. Specifically, as of January 2023, 1,689 people are housed at facilities that have a combined total capacity of 3,368. (Excluding the LA County-operated camps, 1,612 people are housed at CalFire-operated facilities that have a combined total capacity of 3,040—which represents an occupancy rate of just over 50 percent.)

Prison Population Projected to Continue to Decline. The administration currently projects that the state’s prison population will decline by roughly 7 percent between 2023-24 and 2025-26. These declines, should they materialize, likely would result in further reductions to the population housed at conservation camps. To address the existing and projected declines, CalFire has expanded its partnerships with other agencies, including CCC and CMD, to provide staff for hand crews. Additionally, the state has provided CalFire with funding to hire additional firefighters to help backfill for these losses.

Governor’s Proposal

Proposes Replacing Growlersburg Conservation Camp at Existing Site. The Governor’s budget proposes \$4.5 million from the General Fund in 2023-24 to restart a previously paused project that would replace the existing facilities and infrastructure at the Growlersburg Conservation Camp site in Georgetown (El Dorado County). (As we discuss in further detail below, this project was initiated in the *2007-08 Budget Act*.) The proposed funding would support the working drawings phase. CalFire estimates the total cost of the project—including \$93 million for construction—to be \$100 million, and that it would be completed in 2028. The administration anticipates funding the construction phase of this project with lease revenue bonds, which ultimately would be repaid from the General Fund over about 25 years.

Assessment

Population in Conservation Camps Has Changed Substantially, Raising Questions About Need for Remaining Camps. As described in the nearby box, the Legislature first approved this project 16 years ago, in 2007. Since that time, the population housed in conservation camps—and

Need for Growlersburg Project Has Been Questioned Since its Inception in 2007

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection’s (CalFire’s) Growlersburg Conservation Camp project has a long history of stops and starts, beginning roughly 16 years ago. Key steps of the project include:

2007: Project Initiated. The *2007-08 Budget Act* authorized \$46 million for the completion of all the phases of the project, including preliminary plans, working drawings, and construction. Construction on the project was originally anticipated to be completed by 2013.

2016: Funding Expired, Project Halted. CalFire allowed the expenditure authority for this project to expire in June 2016 due to funding and department workload constraints and differing priorities. At that time, only the preliminary plans phase had been completed.

2021: Funding Provided for Working Drawings. The *2021-22 Budget Act* included \$3 million to complete working drawings for the project.

2022: Funding Reverted, Project Halted. The administration decided to halt the project after completion of the preliminary plans phase due to cost increases and uncertainty over whether Growlersburg might be a good candidate for closure to help reduce the conservation camp program. Accordingly, the *2022-23 Budget Act* reverted the *2021-22 Budget Act* appropriation for working drawings.

2023: Funding Proposed Again. The administration proposes to restart the project in 2023-24.

the associated need for facilities—has changed dramatically. Even within the two years since the Legislature last considered providing funding for this project in 2021, the prison population has declined faster than previously anticipated. Notably, the Growlersburg Conservation Camp has a capacity of 120 but currently houses 81 people, and several nearby camps also are currently operating below capacity. For example, the Washington Ridge Conservation Camp in Nevada City has capacity for 100 but currently houses only 52 people. The current overall 50 percent occupancy rate at CalFire-managed conservation camps together with projections for further declines in the state prison population call into question whether all of the remaining camps are needed or whether some additional closures may be appropriate in the coming years. As trends become clearer over the next few years, we expect the state will have a better picture about the ongoing need for these camps.

State May Not Need Growlersburg Facility.

Part of the administration's proposed justification for this project is Growlersburg's strategic location in the Sierra Nevada region and close proximity to sawmills. While this is true, the Sierra Nevada region is home to other conservation camps as well, such as Washington Ridge in Nevada City, that could provide similar situational benefits. Furthermore, to truly understand the need for this facility, the state needs to consider not only the location of other conservation camps, but also other similar resources, such as hand crews operated by CCC and CMD. For example, CCC is in the midst of replacing its Greenwood Center, which is less than three miles away from the Growlersburg Conservation Camp. The Greenwood Center focuses specifically on forest management and emergency response. That CCC has a facility within close proximity and is playing an increasingly important role in meeting the needs once filled by conservation camp crews makes the continued need for Growlersburg even less certain.

Premature to Decide That Conservation Camp Is Best Long-Term Use of Growlersburg Site. We view the Governor's proposal to rebuild the Growlersburg site as a conservation camp to be premature, not only given the existing

trends in prison populations and other nearby facilities but also because the state might identify potential other, more effective uses of the site. To the extent the state wants to retain a greater presence in this region than is provided by the CCC's Greenwood Center and other nearby conservation camps, it is not clear whether a conservation camp would be the most appropriate facility. Yet investing \$100 million in replacing Growlersburg Conservation Camp facilities would make it impractical to then depopulate this site as part of a potential future plan to reduce the number of conservation camps. We think eliminating that option now is unwise, because the best future uses of the Growlersburg site still are unclear. For example, the site could be a reasonable candidate for permanent closure, or perhaps it could be repurposed for other non-inmate hand crews in the future. In the coming years, the state may decide that another type of crew—such as a CalFire firefighter hand crew—might be more appropriate for firefighting activities in this area (particularly given the trends in prison populations). If a different type of crew were to ultimately occupy the Growlersburg site, it would necessitate different facilities (for example, to provide more space and to accommodate those who identify as females). Accordingly, proceeding with a large replacement project such as the one proposed does not make sense until the optimum long-term use of the site is clearer.

Project Costs Have Grown Dramatically.

The estimated costs of the Growlersburg project have more than doubled since the Legislature first approved it in 2007—from \$46 million to \$100 million. Notably, most of the estimated increase in costs has occurred over just the past two years (from \$59 million in 2021-22 to \$100 million in 2023-24). According to the department, the cost increases have resulted from various factors, including supply chain delays and inflationary pressures (such as increases in lumber costs, transportation costs, and construction wages), and the update of several building code cycles. These higher costs further call into question whether the level of expenditure is warranted, particularly given uncertainty about the long-term need for this and other conservation camps.

Project Not a Clear Immediate Priority, Particularly Given General Fund Condition.

The existing Growlersburg Conservation Camp buildings were constructed in 1967 and thus are over 50 years old. However, overall, the facility is still serviceable and well-maintained, as discussed in a recent [external review](#) conducted by the El Dorado County Grand Jury. (Such reviews of prison facilities, including conservation camps, are required annually under state law.) Additionally, we note that CalFire continues to rely on even older facilities, many of which have significant infrastructure needs. For example, CalFire indicates that many of the state's conservation camps were built 70 to 80 years ago and are in dilapidated condition. Similarly, many other departments have facilities that were built 50 or more years ago and have significant deficiencies. Why the administration views the Growlersburg project as a higher priority for funding than potential alternative capital outlay projects that play a central role in providing state services—by CalFire or other departments—is unclear. Moreover, the administration itself has moved slowly on this project and the department has repeatedly questioned its priority and merit (as described in the box referenced earlier). As discussed above, given the state's budget problem, funding this proposal—like other new General Fund spending proposals—would come at the expense of previously identified priorities. Given these trade-offs, we do not find a compelling rationale for prioritizing this project at this time. The Legislature could revisit the need for this facility in a future year when the General Fund condition is more robust and the key questions we have raised about its merit have become clearer. For example, revisiting this project at a future date would provide more time for the Legislature to glean more certainty on the extent to which the conservation camp population continues to decline and additional camp closures are necessitated.

Recommendation

Reject Proposal. We recommend the Legislature reject the proposal to replace the Growlersburg Conservation Camp for several reasons. First, the state may not have long-term needs for the facility given the current conservation camp population only fills about half of the existing capacity and that future declines in the inmate population are projected. Second, other existing facilities housing various types of similar crews are located nearby. Third, the state may identify other, more effective uses for the Growlersburg site in the coming years, so committing to rebuilding it as a conservation camp now is premature. Fourth, the costs of the project are higher than anticipated, raising additional questions about its benefit-to-cost justification. Finally, given the state's budget problem, dedicating new General Fund to this project would come at the expense of previously identified priorities, and we do not find it sufficiently justified for prioritizing limited state resources. We note that the Legislature could always revisit the need for the project at some time in the future when the General Fund condition is more robust and the state has more clarity on its firefighting needs and plans in the region.

LAO PUBLICATIONS

This report was prepared by Helen Kerstein, and reviewed by Rachel Ehlers and Anthony Simbol. The Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) is a nonpartisan office that provides fiscal and policy information and advice to the Legislature.

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