

WSAB Consultation to Energy Safety on Fiscal Year 2026-2027 budget

Staff Draft

March 5, 2025

Introduction

Public Utilities Code 326.1(e) requires Energy Safety to consult with the Wildfire Safety Advisory Board (WSAB or the Board) in the preparation of its budget. In the standard state government budget process, departments begin development of budget change proposals (BCPs) more than a year before the beginning of the fiscal year in which the BCP would take effect. Therefore, to provide timely consultation to Energy Safety, the Board is providing input to the preparation of the budget for fiscal year (FY) 2026-2027, which begins July 1, 2026.

The Board appreciates the work of Energy Safety, the Newsom administration, and the legislature in FY 2023-2024 cycle to increase staffing of the WSAB Branch to a total of four. The current staffing is one supervisor, two senior policy advisors, and one analyst. We acknowledge the challenging budget situation for state government in FYs 2024-2025 and 2025-2026. While there are many uncertainties about the budget for a fiscal year commencing more than a year from now, it is important for us to provide our observations and input to Energy Safety.

WSAB Budget Priorities

Staffing

Our strategic plan recognizes the importance of staff support for a board of dedicated members who are largely uncompensated for their time. To achieve its goals, the Board has prioritized staff retention and development. It is of the highest importance to the Board that the resources at Energy Safety to support the work of the Board at least maintain staffing levels and include adequate funding and staff time for training and professional development.

Even with four full-time staff, the Board is highly constrained in meeting its statutory requirements of providing annual advice to Energy Safety on a range of topics and providing advisory opinions to each of 50 publicly owned utilities and rural electrical cooperatives. The Board requests additional staff resources to allow staff to support the Board members' priorities and meet these obligations. Specifically, the Board requests that staff resources

expand to include senior staff with utilities engineering experience and knowledge, and environmental science and utility vegetation management experience and knowledge. This will support Board priorities and recommendations on grid hardening and utility vegetation management and allow for more in-depth review of those sections of WMPs, including identifying best practices among utilities. The Board also requests additional utilities analyst resources to do more comprehensive reviews and research, and spend additional time in collaboration with utilities, Energy Safety staff, and external experts.

Travel for Meetings and Site Visits:

Provisions of the open meeting requirements that facilitated Board members' remote participation in Board meetings will sunset on January 1, 2026, making Board member travel to meetings essential. The Board has also prioritized site visits in its strategic plan, for their value in educating Board members and building external relationships. For these reasons, it is imperative that WSAB have the resources necessary to make these possible, including travel reimbursements for Board members and staff, room or equipment rental as needed, etc.