

Gov. Brown approves tougher penalties for starting major fires

Hours after a man was charged with arson that allegedly caused the sprawling King fire east of Sacramento, Gov. Jerry Brown announced Friday that he has signed into law tougher penalties for those who cause major fires.

The measure reinstates a law that expired in January allowing a 10-years-to-life prison sentence for those convicted of aggravated arson, defined as causing a fire that costs more than \$7 million in damages. The bill adds firefighting costs to the calculation of damages.

Brown's action came as fire officials said it was costing \$5 million a day to fight the King fire and announced that Wayne Huntsman, 37, was charged with forest-land arson. The charge carries a special allegation for aggravating factors because the fire could have caused harm to firefighters and peace officers.

"As record-dry conditions persist and the fire season grows longer and more intense across California, this bill gives law enforcement officials another tool to fight arson," said Evan Westrup, a spokesman for the governor.

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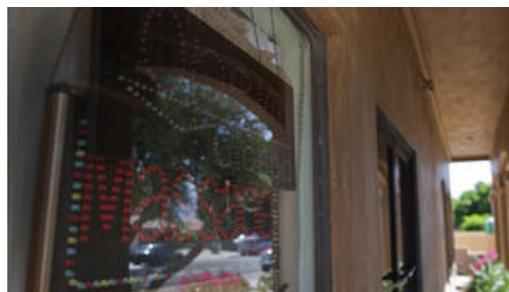


Assemblyman Frank Bigelow (R-O'Neals) was among the lawmakers who had urged Brown to sign the measure, which takes effect immediately and cannot be used retroactively.

"A person who commits arson is only subject to the penalties that are in place at the time that the offense is committed," Bigelow's letter noted.

Sen. Tom Berryhill (R-Modesto), author of SB 930, could not be reached for comment.

The governor also signed a measure barring the charging of fees for driver's license applications. Assemblyman Roger Dickinson (D-Sacramento) said his bill, AB 852, would cut down on scams aimed at people in the country illegally who are or will be eligible for licenses.



And Brown approved AB 1660 by Assemblyman Luis Alejo (D-Watsonville), clarifying that employers cannot discriminate against anyone holding a driver's license indicating he or she is not a citizen, as driver's licenses for those in the country illegally would do.

The governor issued identical vetoes on twin bills that would have required many businesses, such as restaurants and department stores, to provide diaper-changing stations in men's restrooms, or stations available to men and women.

"This may be a good business practice, but not one that I am inclined to legislate," Brown wrote in his veto messages.

The measures were SB 1350 and SB 1358 by Democratic Sens. Ricardo Lara of Bell Gardens and Lois Wolk of Davis, respectively.

Brown also vetoed the state's first "wiki-bill," a measure that was partly drafted by the public through an online page similar to Wikipedia.

The proposal would have allowed individuals who wish to leave money after their deaths for the care of their pets to appoint a guardian for those funds. Brown said existing law governing pet trusts was adequate.

Assemblyman Mike Gatto (D-Los Angeles), who introduced the measure, AB 1520, said he would try more "wiki-bills" in the future.

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