



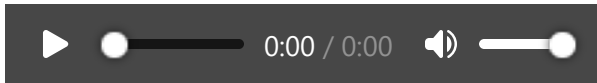
Northern Colorado Center for Investigative Reporting

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A wildfire camera bill repeatedly fails. Secret survey results at the Capitol might explain why

KUNC | By [Scott Franz](#)

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Elk graze in a forest burned by the East Troublesome Fire near Grand Lake in July, 2021. Colorado lawmakers did not pass a bill this year aiming to spend \$2 million to install new wildfire detecting cameras around the state.

Scott Franz

It's a four year-old mystery at the state Capitol.

Why does a bill that would deploy high-tech cameras to scan for potentially deadly wildfires fail year-after-year despite universal praise from lawmakers from both sides of the aisle?

Equipped with artificial intelligence and heat sensors, the cameras are steadily replacing an older warning system [used in wildfire areas that relied on humans scanning the horizon from watch towers.](#)

State Sen. Joann Ginal, D-Fort Collins, said the new technology can give firefighters a key advantage.

“It can detect just a wisp of smoke, and it’s that type of situation in remote areas that

could save forests and homes and properties and lives,” she said at the bill’s first hearing this year.

Colorado lawmakers have tried and failed three times in the last four years to pass a bill to purchase the cameras. They’ve also struggled to explain why such a bill has not passed.



Wildfire smoke above Leadville makes the sun appear a dark shade of red in 2021. Proponents of wildfire cameras say they can detect and warn firefighters about the start of blazes more quickly than humans can.

Scott Franz

Democrats blamed Republican filibuster attempts of other bills at the very end of last year's session for its death, but that didn't explain why Democrats didn't schedule it for a key vote after it passed its first test unanimously two months earlier.

This year's revived version of the camera bill unanimously passed the Senate in April. But just like last year, the bill never got scheduled for that key vote in the House

appropriations committee.

Republican Rep. Mike Lynch sponsored the bill and said he wasn't told why it was being killed before a public vote.

"If there's backroom stuff that went on with it, I wasn't privy to it," he said last week.

KUNC discovered there was some "backroom stuff" that Lynch and the public weren't aware of at the time. And it might help explain what happened.

In late March, Democrats who control the legislature privately ranked the legislation in a secret ballot process they call quadratic voting.

Democrats in the Senate, which passed the bill unanimously, ranked the bill as their no. 2 priority on a list of 25 bills requiring one time payments. On that same list, the House ranked the bill 15th of 25.

The results are anonymous though, so it isn't clear which House members didn't vote to prioritize the camera bill, and why.

Lynch said Republicans don't participate in the survey and aren't given the results. Only Democrats received links to this year's survey.

The results of the survey weren't released to the public until almost a month after it was taken in response to an open records request .

Lynch says if he had known earlier that the cameras ranked at the bottom half of the House Democrats list of priorities, he would have fought harder to pass it.

"I think that that's a pretty scary way of legislating," he said of the anonymous bill ranking process. "You know, when you start putting something into a calculation, you now have taken some of the human aspects...or the subjectivity out of there."

Sen. Chris Hansen, D-Denver, introduced the secret bill ranking survey to the Capitol in 2019 as a way to help Democrats decide how to spend a limited budget. He told KUNC last year that bills that rank higher tend to get scheduled for votes earlier in

the session.

“And the earlier something gets moved, the better chance it has of success,” he said. “If it gets held up or delayed, there’s always more risk.”

Some lawmakers have downplayed the influence of the secret survey, saying it doesn’t determine what legislation lives or dies.

[A KUNC analysis of the outcome of the bills included in the secret survey shows a pattern.](#)

Bills with higher price tags that ranked at the bottom of the survey typically had funding removed, were voted down or left to die without a public vote more often than the bills that ranked at the top of the survey.

Rep. Lynch says the Democrats’ survey process raises questions and could help explain why his push to buy wildfire cameras suddenly died this year without a public vote.

“Especially a bill that (passed) unanimous out of the Senate,” he said. “That kind of raises an eyebrow going, ‘wait a minute, where was the pushback on this?’”

Lawmakers did pass several other wildfire-related bills this year, including a new military-grade firefighting helicopter and investments in flame-resistant building materials.

Rep. Junie Joseph, D-Boulder, co-sponsored the failed camera bill with Lynch.

She said it was unique because it was one of the only policies focused on preventing fires from getting out of control.

“We know, for instance, the Marshall Fire actually spread pretty quickly,” she said. “Imagine if we had more of (the cameras)...Could we have gotten gotten to it quick, much (more) quickly.”

Joseph says she’s committed to sponsoring the wildfire camera bill again next year.

“I'm disappointed that community members do not have that extra tool or, you know, in their toolbox to help them when it comes to mitigating a wildfire,” she said last week.

The wildfire detection camera program would have cost \$2 million, while the new firefighting helicopter lawmakers ordered will cost \$26 million.

Some wild-fire prone places aren't waiting for the legislature to pay for the cameras. Officials in San Miguel County in southwestern Colorado announced they are installing four of them this year to scan for fires.

The state forester's office estimated in 2019 that 2.9 million Coloradans, or more than half the state's population, [lived in areas that are prone to wildfire](#).

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Scott Franz

Scott Franz is an Investigative Reporter with KUNC.

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