

Date of Hearing: April 28, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Rhodesia Ransom, Chair

AB 300 (Lackey) – As Amended April 23, 2025

SUBJECT: Fire hazard severity zones: State Fire Marshal

SUMMARY: Adds a minimum time frame, of eight years, to the frequency in which the State Fire Marshall (SFM) must review lands within state responsibility areas (SRA) identified as fire hazard severity zones (FHSZ) and areas in the state identified as moderate, high, and very high FHSZs, and requires the SFM to re-review areas in the state and lands in the SRA not previously identified or classified as FHSZs, as specified, and if applicable, identify or classify new areas, as specified. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Requires the SFM to re-review areas in the state not previously identified as moderate, high, and very high FHSZs at least every eight years and, if applicable, identify new areas consistent with existing state law.
- 2) Requires the SFM to review areas in the state identified as moderate, high, and very high FHSZs at least every 8 years instead of the existing periodic review requirement and requires the review to coincide with the review of state responsibility area (SRA) to every eight years instead of the existing every five years timeline.
- 3) Requires the SFM to re-review areas in SRAs not previously classified as FHSZs at least every eight years, and, if applicable, classify new areas consistent with existing state law.
- 4) Requires the SFM to review lands in the SRA identified as FHSZs at least every 8 years instead of the existing periodic review requirement.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Requires the SFM to identify areas in the state as moderate, high, and very high FHSZs based on consistent statewide criteria and based on the severity of fire hazard that is expected to prevail in those areas. (Government Code (GC) § 51178)
- 2) Requires the SFM to periodically review the areas in the state identified as very high FHSZs, and as necessary, make recommendations relative to those zones. Requires this review to coincide with the review of state responsibility area (SRA) lands every five years and, when possible, fall within the time frames for each county's general plan update. (GC § 51181)
- 3) Requires the SFM to classify lands within the SRA into FHSZs. (Public Resources Code (PRC) § 4202)
- 4) Requires the SFM to periodically review designated FHSZs and, as necessary, revise zones or their ratings or repeal the designation of zones. (PRC § 4204)

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. A fiscal committee has not heard this bill.

COMMENTS:

Purpose of the bill: According to the author, “Given the recent devastating wildfires, it is crucial for the State Fire Marshal to assess and review fire hazard severity zones across the state. Not only do insurance companies rely on these maps to assess homeowner insurance risks, but local governments use them to determine evacuation routes. AB 300 will help ensure our communities are more accurately represented in assess wildfire risks by having these high fire hazard severity zones updated on a fixed schedule.”

Equity Impact: When an emergency strikes, vulnerable populations, including low income individuals, undocumented individuals, and access and functional needs populations, face the highest risk. If the author’s stated goals are achieved, these vulnerable populations would face reduced risks.

Background: Throughout California’s history the state has contended with destructive wildfires impacting communities that were constructed amongst or adjacent to timber and chaparral forests. These areas, commonly referred to as the “wildland urban interface,” have long been considered some of the most fire-prone areas in the state. In the last decade, unprecedented wildfires led to the deadliest wildfire in California’s history. The impacts of these wildfires cannot be understated, many lives were lost, thousands of homes were destroyed, and residents, in some cases entire communities, have been forced to relocate. Billions of dollars in damage was caused to homes, businesses, and infrastructure throughout the state.

The confluence of a changing climate, urbanization, and constraints on forest management has added urgency to the need to enhance our strategy to address this threat. The Legislature has made substantial investments to continue strengthening forest and wildfire resilience statewide to mitigate the ongoing impact of climate change on California’s wildlands, as it continues to drive critically dry fuel conditions and longer, more severe fire seasons.

In recent years, an increasing number of wildfires have burned outside of wildland areas and into more urban settings. While persons living in forested areas and those in the wildland urban interface, have long faced significant risks from wildfires, as a result of climate change, more Californians face wildfire risks than ever before.

Many of these areas have been classified by the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection as belonging to “very high fire hazard severity zones.” As a result of this designation, the properties within a very high fire hazard zone are subject to the strictest requirements from the building codes, “Fire Safe” regulations, and defensible space requirements. Properties not immediately in the wildland urban interface but subject to fire risks are now characterized as being in “high fire hazard severity zones.”

Wildfires: Wildfires are a severe and growing threat to lives, property, and infrastructure in California. The confluence of a changing climate, urbanization, and constraints on forest management has added urgency to the need to enhance our strategy to address this threat. California’s Fourth Climate Change Assessment projects that by 2100, if climate change continues on this trajectory, the frequency of extreme wildfires would increase, and the average area burned statewide would increase by 77 percent.

Wildfires that threaten thousands of homes are now an annual occurrence, as autumn days with severe fire-weather prone weather have more than doubled in California since the 1980s. Over the last four decades, the wildfires have increased in size and intensity with five of the eight largest fires in California history occurring in 2020 alone. Of the remaining three, two of the largest fires occurred since 2020. Additionally, 15 of California's 20 most destructive fires have occurred in the past decade. Collectively, these most recent fires have resulted in 180 deaths and the loss of 57,483 structures (homes, outbuildings, and commercial properties).

In Cal FIRE's 2020 Fire Siege Report, the Director states, "at the end of 2020, we closed the book on, arguably, the worst fire year ever experienced on the west coast, and specifically in California. Since 2015, the term "unprecedented" has been used year over year as conditions have worsened, and the operational reality of a changing climate sets in. In California, the 2020 Fire Siege claimed the lives of 28 civilians and three firefighters, destroyed 9,248 structures and consumed 4.2 million acres. While fewer wildfires threatened California in 2023 due to the increased number of weather events and atmospheric rivers, the vegetative growth from the significant rainfall contributed to devastating wildfires in 2024 and 2025. In 2024, the Park Fire became the fourth-largest fire in California's history. Despite aggressive initial attack suppression efforts, the fire rapidly expanded, ultimately consuming 429,603 acres across Butte and Tehama counties. The Park Fire led to the destruction of 709 structures and damage to 54 others, prompting widespread evacuations and the temporary closure of Lassen Volcanic National Park. In 2025, Los Angeles County experienced two of the most destructive wildfires in history (discussed below).

Palisades and Eaton Fires: At its height, the fires placed an estimated 331,335 people on an evacuation advisory, with nearly 192,000 residents facing mandatory evacuation and roughly 140,000 subject to warnings. The blazes burned a combined 37,469 acres and leveled entire communities in the Pacific Palisades and Altadena neighborhoods of LA County.

The Eaton Fire became the second most destructive fire in California history after destroying 9,418 buildings. The Palisades Fire is the third most destructive fire in state history with 6,837 structures destroyed. As firefighters were battling the largest conflagrations, additional fires broke out in the Los Angeles area. Crews were able to stop the forward spread and contain the blazes. These fires included the Lidia, Archer, Woodley, Sunset, Kenneth, Hurst and Auto fires, which burned close to 2,400 acres between them.

Two weeks after the initial fires, the Hughes Fire began near Castaic Lake in northern Los Angeles County on January 22 and quickly grew to over 10,000 acres. It was fully contained on January 30 after covering 10,425 acres.

Fire Hazard Severity Zones (FHSZ): As referenced above, Public Resource Code 4202 requires the SFM to classify lands within state responsibility areas into fire hazard severity zones. Each zone shall embrace relatively homogeneous lands and shall be based on fuel loading, slope, fire weather, and other relevant factors present, including areas where winds have been identified by the department as a major cause of wildfire spread. Under Government Code 51178, the SFM is required to identify areas in the state as moderate, high, and very high fire hazard severity zones based on consistent statewide criteria and based on the severity of fire hazard that is expected to prevail in those areas. Moderate, high, and very high fire hazard severity zones shall be based on fuel loading, slope, fire weather, and other relevant factors including areas where winds have been identified by the SFM as a major cause of wildfire spread.

How are FHSZs determined?: According to CAL FIRE, “the best available science and data were used to develop and field test a model that now serves as the basis of zone assignments. The model evaluated the probability of the area burning and potential fire behavior in the area. Many factors were included such as fire history, vegetation, flame length, blowing embers, proximity to wildland, terrain, and weather.”

Arguments in support: The California Fire Chiefs Association (CalChiefs) and the Fire Districts Association of California (FDAC) write in support, “As wildfire risks increase due to climate change and evolving fuel conditions, up-to-date hazard mapping is essential for fire prevention, emergency response planning, and public safety. FHSZ maps inform building codes, insurance rates, and evacuation planning, but irregular updates have left communities relying on outdated risk assessments.”

They continue, “AB 300 ensures science-based, regularly scheduled updates that reflect current wildfire threats, providing fire agencies, local governments, and residents with the best available data for effective mitigation and preparedness efforts. By establishing a clear and consistent review timeline, this bill strengthens California’s wildfire prevention strategy and enhances the state’s ability to protect lives, property, and infrastructure.”

Double referral: This bill passed the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources on March 24, 2025 on a 13-0-1 vote.

Committee Amendments:

The Committee recommends the following amendments:

Government Code **51178**.

(b) At least once every ~~eight~~ **five** years, the State Fire Marshal shall re-review areas in the state that are not identified as moderate, high, and very high fire hazard severity zones and, if applicable, identify those areas pursuant to subdivision (a).

Government Code **51181**.

At least once every ~~eight~~ **five** years, the State Fire Marshal shall review the areas in the state identified as very high fire hazard severity zones pursuant to this chapter, and as necessary, shall make recommendations relative to very high fire hazard severity zones. This review shall coincide with the review of state responsibility area lands every ~~eight~~ **five** years and, when possible, fall within the time frames for each county’s general plan update. Any revision of areas included in a very high fire hazard severity zone shall be made in accordance with Sections 51178 and 51179.

Public Resources Code **4202**.

(b) At least once every ~~eight~~ **five** years, the State Fire Marshal shall re-review lands within state responsibility areas that are not classified into fire hazard severity zones and, if applicable, classify those areas pursuant to subdivision (a).

Public Resources Code 4204.

At least once every ~~eight~~ *five* years, the State Fire Marshal shall review zones designated and rated pursuant to this article and, as necessary, shall revise zones or their ratings or repeal the designation of zones. Any revision of a zone or its rating or any repeal of a zone shall conform to the requirements of Section 4203. In addition, the revision or repeal of a zone may be petitioned pursuant to Sections 11340.6 and 11340.7 of the Government Code.

Prior and Related Legislation:

AB 261(Quirk-Silva) of this session. Would authorize the State Fire Marshal (SFM) to confer with, and receive documentation from, entities, as specified, on actions that may impact the degree of fire hazard in an area or the area's recommended fire hazard severity zone (FHSZ) designation and authorizes the SFM to provide a written response to an entity, which must be posted on the SFM's website along with any related documentation provided by an entity. (Pending in Assembly Emergency Management Committee).

AB 3150 (Quirk-Silva, 2024). This bill would have revised existing fire safety laws by requiring the State Fire Marshal (SFM) to review and update fire hazard severity zones every five years, involve public agencies and other entities in fire hazard assessments, and adopt updated regulations for defensible space and fuel management. In addition, this bill would have shifted responsibilities for maintaining fire safety standards from the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection (BOF) to the SFM and expand the definition of a person responsible for maintaining defensible space to include certain public agencies. (Held in Senate Appropriations)

SB 610 (Wiener, 2024) would have eliminated the state's fire hazard severity mapping for the state responsibility area (SRA) and local responsibility area (LRA) and requires the State Fire Marshal to designate Wildfire Mitigation Area (WMA), through regulations, for fire mitigation across the state. (Held in the Senate Appropriations Committee).

AB 9 (Wood), Chapter 225, Statutes of 2021. Established the Deputy Director of Community Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation in the Office of the SFM to be responsible for fire preparedness and mitigation missions of CAL FIRE.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:**Support**

California Fire Chiefs Association
Fire Districts Association of California

Opposition

None on file.

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