

Date of Hearing: April 28, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Rhodesia Ransom, Chair

AB 1457 (Bryan) – As Introduced February 21, 2025

SUBJECT: Wildfires: training programs: defensible space: inspections

SUMMARY: Removes sunset dates related to the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection’s (CAL FIRE) defensible space and home hardening assessment programs, and associated reporting and training requirements, and requires the training program to provide training consistent with the “Home Ignition Zone/Defensible Space Inspector” course plan, established by the State Fire Marshal (SFM), as specified.

Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Removes the January 1, 2026 sunset date requiring CAL FIRE to establish a statewide program, and associated data collection platform, to allow qualified entities to support defensible space and home hardening assessment and education efforts; authorizing CAL FIRE to use the collected data for directing resources and determining compliance, as specified; and requiring an annual report to the legislature, as specified.
- 2) Removes the sunset date on the requirement for CAL FIRE to develop and implement a training program for individuals assisting with defensible space and home hardening assessments and public education, and the provided training requirements, as specified.
- 3) Requires the above training program to be consistent with the “Home Ignition Zone/Defensible Space Inspector” course plan, established by the State Fire Marshal, to ensure participants are trained to conduct home ignition zone inspections.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the SFM as an entity within CAL FIRE to foster, promote, and develop ways and means of protecting life and property against fire and panic. (Health & Safety Code 13100 – 13100.1)
- 2) Requires the SFM to identify areas in the state as moderate, high, and very high fire hazard severity zones (FHSZs) based on consistent statewide criteria and based on the severity of fire hazard that is expected to prevail in those areas. Requires FHSZs to be based on fuel loading, slope, fire weather, and other relevant factors including areas where winds have been identified by the Office of the SFM as a major cause of wildfire spread. (Government Code (GC) 51178)
- 3) Defines “home hardening” as the replacement or repair of structural features that are affixed to the property with features that are in compliance with Chapter 7A (commencing with Section 701A.1) of Title 24 of the California Code of Regulations. (Public Resources Code (PRC) 4291.5 (a)(1))
- 4) Requires the director of the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) to establish a statewide program to allow qualified entities to support and augment CAL FIRE

in its defensible space and home hardening assessment and education efforts. Requires qualified entities to be authorized by the director to conduct defensible space assessments to assess compliance within the state responsibility area (SRA), educate property owners about wildfire safety improvements that may be undertaken to harden a structure and make it more resistant to fire, and assess whether wildfire safety improvements have been completed in or on a structure. (PRC 4291.5 (b))

- 5) Requires the director to establish a common reporting platform that allows defensible space and home hardening assessment data, collected by the qualified entities, to be reported and establish any necessary quality control measure to ensure that the assessment data is accurate and reliable. (PRC 4291.5 (c)(1))
- 6) Requires CAL FIRE to annually report to the Legislature all defensible space data collected. Sunsets the reporting requirement on January 1, 2026. The report may include information on the proportion of unique parcels that were inspected, the degree of compliance with requirements, any enforcement actions that may have been taken for noncompliant parcels, and the proportion of parcels that were found to be in compliance across jurisdictions. At minimum, the report shall include data with sufficient detail to facilitate comparisons of community compliance between local governmental entities qualified to conduct defensible space assessments pursuant to this section and local governmental entities that are not. (PRC 4291.5 (h)(1))
- 7) Requires CAL FIRE to develop and implement a training program to train individuals to support and augment the department in its defensible space and home hardening assessment and public education efforts. Sunsets this training program on January 1, 2026. (PRC 4291.6)
- 8) Requires, on or after January 1, 2021, the seller of any real property that is located in a high or very high FHSZ to provide a disclosure notice to the buyer that the property is in compliance with PRC 4291 or local vegetation management ordinances. (Civil Code 1102.6f)

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

COMMENTS:

Purpose of the bill: According to the author, “Meeting defensible space requirements is the responsibility of a property owner, but many property owners may lack the time, resources, tools, or wherewithal to manage their yards to sufficiently maintain defensible space from a fire. The state has a force of defensible space inspectors that make sure residents are complying with the requirements, and provide resources and education where property owners need assistance. But, those inspectors simply cannot inspect every property across the state. AB 1457 augments the training requirements for individuals who support CAL FIRE in its defensible space and home hardening assessment and public education efforts.”

Equity Impact: According to the State Auditor in 2019, California is not prepared to protect its most vulnerable residents from natural disasters. When an emergency strikes, vulnerable populations, including low income individuals, undocumented individuals, and access and

functional needs populations, face the highest risk. Actions taken to reduce wildfire risk ensures the disproportionate impacts to vulnerable populations are mitigated.

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. 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.

Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM): OSFM's mission is to protect life and property by developing and applying fire prevention engineering, education, and enforcement. The principal functions of OSFM are to foster, promote and develop ways and means of protecting life and property against fire and panic. OSFM achieves these functions through several major program elements, including engineering, education, enforcement, and the State Board of Fire Services (Board) support. The Board provides a forum for addressing fire protection and prevention issues of statewide concern; develops technical and performance standards for training of fire service personnel; accredits curriculum; establishes policy for the certification system for the California Fire Service; advises the SFM on the dissemination of regulations; and sits as an appeals board on the application of California State Fire Marshal regulations.

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."

California Wildfire Mitigation Program: In 2019, the Legislature passed and the Governor signed into law AB 38 to create the California Wildfire Mitigation Program (CWMP). The law authorized a joint exercise of powers agreement between Cal OES and Cal FIRE to strengthen community-wide resilience against wildfires. This included developing a state home hardening initiative to retrofit, harden, and create defensible space for homes at high risk of wildfires,

focusing on high socially-vulnerable communities, and providing financial assistance for low- and moderate-income households. The effort is meant to encourage cost-effective wildfire resilience measures to create fire-resistant homes, businesses, public buildings, and public spaces. This includes a community hardening approach to achieve wildfire resilience, low-cost retrofits with ignition-resistant materials to bring homes up to the standard of the California Building Code Chapter 7A, community and homeowner wildfire education on defensible space and home retrofitting, and providing financial assistance to support home hardening work for qualifying homeowners.

In coordination with state and local partners, Cal OES and Cal FIRE also established a state wildfire home hardening framework that can be modeled throughout vulnerable California communities. The framework provides the opportunity for California communities to leverage state and federal resources and develop local wildfire home hardening programs that address community resiliency needs. To help expedite local wildfire home hardening program development and inform the build-out of the state's framework, Cal OES and Cal FIRE will provide state funding, resources, and support for demonstration communities to implement community wildfire home hardening projects in areas with high social vulnerability and wildfire risk.

Defensible Space Requirements: Defensible space refers to the area between a building and the surrounding vegetation or landscape that can act as a protective buffer against wildfire. When combined with home hardening, creating defensible space is one of the most effective steps homeowners and business owners can take to reduce the risk of wildfire damage.

The law requires 100 feet of defensible space in SRA and FHSZs. Within that 100 feet, there are three zones:

Zone 0 is an area of defensible space within the first five feet of a home or other building. It is considered the most important area to keep clear of combustible items such as woody mulch and plants to reduce the risk of a structure igniting during an ember-driven wildfire. The Board of Forestry is still drafting the exact regulations, per AB 3074 (Friedman), Chapter 259, Statutes of 2020. Governor Newsom signed Executive Order (EO) N-18-25, which requires the Board to complete these regulations by the end of 2025.

Zone 1 is the area of defensible space extending 30 feet of a home or building. This is referred to the "Lean, Clean and Green Zone" where removing dead and dry vegetation and creating at least 10 feet of space between trees and property creates a buffer that reduces potential fuel for a fire.

Zone 2 is the area of defensible space extending 100 feet of a home or building. Grass may not exceed a height of four inches, fallen vegetation must be removed, horizontal and vertical space between shrubs, tree, and grass must be established, 10 feet of clearance must be established around exposed wood piles, and 10 feet of only soil, and an additional 10 feet of nonflammable vegetation, must be established around the exterior of an outbuilding or propane tank. These actions reduce the fuel zone of a wildfire.

Defensible Space Inspections: CAL FIRE has an annual inspection goal of 250,000 properties. Between 7/1/2023 and 6/30/2024, CAL FIRE inspected 299,273 properties. Between 7/1/2024 and 3/31/2025, 204,355 inspections are complete. Currently, only Zone 1 and Zone 2 defensible

space requirements are evaluated. Once Zone 0 regulations are promulgated, the compliance rate and number of annual inspections may decrease.

Home Ignition Zone / Defensible Space Inspector Course: Developed by the State Fire Marshal, this course is designed to train individuals to serve as Home Ignition Zone / Defensible Space Inspectors. The curriculum covers key topics including the role of inspectors, the science of wildfire behavior in both natural and built environments, relevant codes and regulations, defensible space principles, home hardening techniques, and how to conduct thorough inspections.

Arguments in Support: The Pacific Forest Trust writes in support, “Maintaining the legally required defensible space around homes is one of the most important mitigations to prevent structures from burning. Implementation of the requirement for a “Zone Zero” of five feet around structures that is free of combustible materials will present an increased challenge for defensible space inspections. AB 1457 makes the logical improvement of requiring defensible space inspectors from different agencies to receive consistent training from a course developed by the State Fire Marshall.”

Double Referral: This bill passed the Assembly Committee on Natural Resources on April 7, 2025 on a 14-0-0 vote.

Prior and Related Legislation:

AB 1143 (Bennett) of this session. Requires the Office of State Fire Marshal to develop a home hardening certification program that identifies the best appropriate combination of products and construction assemblies and convene and facilitate a workgroup for such purposes, as specified. (Assembly Floor)

AB 261(Quirk-Silva) of this session. Authorizes 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 300 (Lackey) of this session. Adds a minimum time frame, of 8 years, to the frequency in which the State Fire Marshall must identify and review lands within state responsibility areas (SRA) as fire hazard severity zones (FHSZ), and identify and review of areas in the state as moderate, high, and very high FHSZs.

AB 3074 (Friedman), Chapter 259, Statutes of 2020. Established an ember-resistant zone within 5 feet of a structure as part of revised defensible space requirements for structures located in FHSZs.

AB 38 (Wood), Chapter 391, Statutes of 2019. Established requirements for property transfer inspections in areas designated high and very high FHSZs.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Pacific Forest Trust

Opposition

None on file.

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