



around homes...In general, inspections can contribute to improved defensible space compliance in several ways. First, inspections verify whether homeowners are complying with defensible space requirements and best practices. Failure to meet requirements can then lead to enforcement actions. Second, many agencies use inspections as an opportunity to educate homeowners about specific steps they can take to reduce their risk. Third, inspections can play an important role in homeowner financial assistance programs. Creating an incentive for agencies to report defensible space inspection information, centralizing that information, and providing public access to that information should benefit policymakers and administrators where to focus attention to achieve the most effective wildfire prevention efforts.

## 2) **Background.**

- a) **Wildfires in California.** Wildfires in the state have been growing in size, duration, frequency, and severity due to climate change, warmer and drier conditions, prolonged drought, dry vegetation, accumulating fuels, and expanding development in the wildland-urban interface. The 2020 fire season broke numerous records. Five of California's six largest fires in modern history burned at the same time, resulting in the loss of life, destroying thousands of buildings, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes, and exposing millions of residents to dangerously unhealthy air.
- b) **Defensible Space.** According to CAL FIRE, defensible space is the buffer created between a building on a property and the grass, trees, shrubs, or any wildland area that surround it. This space is needed to slow or stop the spread of wildfire, and it can help protect structures from catching fire. Proper defensible space also provides firefighters a safe area to work to defend property. There are numerous defensible space requirements for homeowners who live in certain high fire hazard areas.
- c) **Common Reporting Platform.** CAL FIRE has a program to allow qualified entities to support and augment the department in its defensible space and home hardening assessment and education efforts. Qualified entities participating in the program are authorized by CAL FIRE to assess compliance with defensible space requirements within the state responsibility area (SRA) (the area in the state where state government has the primary financial responsibility for the prevention and suppression of wildland fires), 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. CAL FIRE is in the process of establishing a common reporting platform that will allow defensible space and home hardening assessment data collected by qualified entities to be reported to CAL FIRE.
- d) **Data Gaps.** The Legislative Analyst's Office's (LAO) September 2021 report "Reducing the Destructiveness of Wildfires: Promoting Defensible Space in California" notes there is no comprehensive statewide data on defensible space activities – such as inspections and compliance – reported for both state and local inspection programs. CAL FIRE is required to report to the Legislature the total number of annual defensible space inspections performed by the department, including statewide totals and totals for each CAL FIRE region; however, according to the LAO, there are many gaps in the data and

no centralized collection or reporting of activities undertaken in local responsibility areas or by other local agencies in the SRA. According to the author, a lack of consistent statewide data on defensible space inspections and compliance makes it difficult to identify where gaps in or overlapping inspection programs occur, fully understand the extent to which homeowners are out of compliance with defensible space regulations in different communities, and assess the effectiveness of programs aimed at improving compliance. To address the lack of consistent statewide data to inform policymakers, the LAO report recommends increasing state support for a shared collector application, ensuring agencies feed data into a centralized system, and requiring public reporting of data.

In response, this bill requires any local governmental entity that is qualified to conduct defensible space assessments in very high and high fire hazard severity zones, and reports the assessment information to CAL FIRE, to report that information using the common reporting platform. The bill also requires CAL FIRE to report to the Legislature all defensible space data collected pursuant to this bill.

According to CAL FIRE, this bill will result in minor and absorbable costs to the department because CAL FIRE would include the information captured in the report required by this bill in its annual fire prevention report (Public Resources Code section 4137) detailing the department's fire prevention activities. This report must display the fire prevention activities of the previous fiscal year, as well as the information from previous reports for purposes of a comparison of data. It must also include fire prevention activities performed by CAL FIRE on SRAs, and by counties that have agreed to provide fire protection services in SRAs on behalf of the department. The fire prevention activities included in this report must include, among other things, the number of hours of fire prevention education performed; the number of defensible space inspections conducted, including statewide totals and totals for each region; the number of citations issued for noncompliance; and “any other data or qualitative information deemed necessary by the department in order to provide the Legislature with a clear and accurate accounting of fire prevention activities, particularly with regard to variations from one year to the next.” Unfortunately, CAL FIRE has not submitted this report to the Legislature in at least four years.

- e) **Local Assistance Grant Program.** CAL FIRE’s Wildfire Prevention Grants Program provides funding for fire prevention projects and activities in and near fire threatened communities that focus on increasing the protection of people, structures, and communities. This bill aims to incentivize and improve defensible space assessment data collection and reporting by requiring CAL FIRE, when reviewing applications for the grant program, to give priority to any local governmental entity qualified to perform defensible space assessments in very high and high fire hazard severity zones that uses CAL FIRE’s common reporting platform.