
SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Monique Limón, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No:	AB 1457	Hearing Date:	July 16, 2025
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Urgency:	No	Fiscal:	Yes
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Subject: Wildfires: training: defensible space: inspections

SUMMARY

This bill would repeal the sunset for a program that permits defensible space qualified entities and trained volunteer programs to augment certain Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's (Department's) activities and the establishment of the Department's training course for those volunteers.

BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

Department. The Department, in accordance with a plan approved by the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection, is responsible for the prevention and suppression of forest fires (Public Resources Code (PRC) §§ 4113, 4114).

Defensible Space. Defensible space is the buffer between a structure and the surrounding area. Creating defensible space in combination with home hardening reduces the wildfire risk to residences and businesses. The Department and their partners conduct defensible space inspections in the State Responsibility Area (SRA), where the Department has primary responsibility for wildfire protection.

Defensible space acts as a barrier to slow or halt the progress of fire that would otherwise engulf a property. It also helps to ensure the safety of firefighters defending structures. The intensity of wildfire fuel management varies within the 100-foot perimeter of the home, with more intense fuels reduction occurring closer to the structure.

Defensible Space Inspectors. The Department annually hires temporary employees as Defensible Space Inspectors (DSIs), in the Forestry Aide classification, to conduct defensible space inspections and interact with the public to provide fire prevention information. DSIs are required to be 18 years of age and possess either a) at least 12 semester units/18 quarter units from an accredited college or university in forestry, fire science, natural resource management, conservation, or a closely related subject, or b) three months of experience performing sub-professional work in forestry, fire prevention, fire suppression and control, natural resources management, or related work. The Department hires approximately 150 DSIs on a temporary (up to 9 months) basis each year.

Defensible Space Inspection Dashboard. The Department publishes a public, online dashboard demonstrating the progress of inspections towards the Department's annual goal (by fiscal year (FY)) of 250,000 defensible space inspections. As of May 31, 2025, in FY 24-25, the Department conducted 268,487 inspections in the SRA. In the previous

FY, 23-24, the Department completed 299,273 inspections. Most of the inspections in FY 23-24 took place between March and August, inclusive. In FY 24-25, September, October, November, and May saw a greater number of inspections than the previous year.

Defensible Space Compliance. In FY 23-24, 30,506 properties in the SRA received initial notices of noncompliance. That number dropped to 7,946 second noncompliance notices, and 1,695 third noncompliance notices.

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Qualified Entities Program. Existing law requires the Department to establish a statewide program to allow qualified entities, as defined, to support and augment the Department's efforts in defensible space and home hardening assessments (PRC §4291.5). Qualified entities are those who have completed training by the Department and received a certificate from the program. These entities include:

- A) Counties, state conservancies, special districts, and other political subdivisions of the state.
- (B) Members of the California Conservation Corps, the Board of Commissioners under California Volunteers, local conservation corps, resource conservation districts, fire safe councils, and Firewise USA organizations, as provided.
- (C) University of California fire advisors.
- (D) Registered Professional Foresters.
- (E) Other entities or individuals deemed appropriate by the Director of the Department.

Qualified entities are authorized by the Director of the Department to conduct defensible space assessments regarding compliance with defensible space requirements, educate property owners about home hardening, and assess whether wildfire safety improvements have been made in or on a structure. The Director of the Department is required to establish a common reporting platform that allows qualified entities to submit assessment data (PRC §4291.5(c)).

As of May 31, 2025, in FY 2024 - 2025, qualified entities conducted 2,027 defensible space assessments in the SRA. The California Conservation Corps conducted most of them, 1,741; Fire Safe Councils conducted 32; and other qualified entities conducted 254. A plurality of the assessments (245) were conducted in El Dorado County; 207 in Santa Cruz County; 194 in Nevada County; 183 in Mono County; 133 in Los Angeles County; 131 in San Diego County; and 103 in Humboldt County. Other counties saw fewer than 100 assessments by qualified entities.

Existing law sunsets this program on January 1, 2026 (PRC §4291.5(i)).

Trained Volunteers Program. Existing law also requires the Department to implement a training program for individuals to support and augment defensible space and home

hardening assessments and public education efforts (PRC §4291.6). The training program is required to:

- (1) Provide for consistent training for third-party assessors who shall function to provide nonregulatory assistance to homeowners to reduce fire risk and to achieve compliance with defensible space requirements.
- (2) Ensure that all defensible space and home hardening assessment and education programs undertaken by the Department and by third parties are conducted to the same standard and use coordinated messaging, including messages at www.readyforwildfire.org.

Existing law sunsets this program on January 1, 2026 (PRC §4291.6(d)).

Existing law:

- 1) Requires the Department to establish a statewide program to allow qualified entities, as defined, to support and augment the Department's efforts in defensible space and home hardening assessments (PRC §4291.5).
- 2) Requires the Department to establish a common reporting platform that allows qualified entities to submit assessment data (PRC §4291.5(c)).
- 3) Sunsets the qualified entities program on January 1, 2026 (PRC §4291.5(i)).
- 4) Requires the Department to implement a training program for individuals to support and augment defensible space and home hardening assessments and public education efforts (PRC §4291.6).
- 5) Sunsets the trained volunteer program on January 1, 2026 (PRC §4291.6(d)).
- 6) Establishes the SRA as the lands where the State has the financial responsibility for the prevention and suppression of wildfires (PRC §4102).
- 7) Establishes requirements for "defensible space" around structures in the SRA (PRC §4291).

PROPOSED LAW

This bill would:

- 1) Repeal the sunset provisions of the qualified entities and trained volunteer programs.
- 2) Require that trained volunteer training be conducted in alignment with the Department's "Home Ignition Zone/Defensible Space Inspector" course plan.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT

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 [the Department] in its defensible space and home hardening assessment and public education efforts.”

ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION

None received.

COMMENTS

Sunset comes too soon. This bill proposes to repeal the sunset provisions of the trained volunteers and qualified entities programs. These provisions authorize the Department to certify qualified entities and volunteers, respectively, to conduct defensible space and home hardening assessments and conduct public education regarding the same. These programs were established by SB 63 (Stern, Chapter 282, Statutes of 2021), have only been in place for three and a half years, and will sunset at the end of this year. Although qualified entities have so far performed a small percentage of defensible space assessments, it is unknown if their impact on defensible space and home hardening public education efforts has been significant, as education efforts are not tracked in the dashboard.

Qualified entities provide a softer touch. The DSIs hired by the Department wear Department-issued uniforms, which may be intimidating to the public when DSIs approach their property. Qualified entities and trained volunteers, who live and work in the local community for years at a time, may be a more comforting presence to the public. Defensible space inspections and formal enforcement mechanisms are an important part of ensuring defensible space requirements are adhered to, and it is not suggested that qualified entities or verified individuals should replace the work of DSIs, but informal conversations between community members play an important role in reducing the amount of defensible space violations.

The qualified entities and trained volunteers programs are valuable components of the defensible space and home hardening assessment program. Repealing their sunset provisions would recognize the value these programs have contributed so far and allow them to continue to grow, ultimately improving the fire safety of Californians across the state.

Statewide Fire Training. Statewide Fire Training (SFT) is a division of the Department through the Office of the State Fire Marshal that establishes, develops, and delivers standardized training and education for the California fire service. SFT is responsible for the Fire Service Training and Education Program (FSTEP), which produces continuing education and topic-specific training courses.

The “Home Ignition Zone/Defensible Space Inspector” course provides the skills and knowledge needed to perform the duties of a Home Ignition Zone/Defensible Space Inspector (HIZ/DSI) including roles and responsibilities relating to wildfire in the natural and built environment, codes and regulations, defensible space, home hardening, and the inspection process. It would be appropriate to align the Department’s trained volunteer program with this course to ensure statewide consistency between and among volunteers conducting home ignition zone or defensible space inspections.

Related Legislation

SB 514 (Cabaldon, 2025) repeals the sunset provisions of the qualified entities and trained volunteer programs. This bill was heard in this Committee on April 8, 2025, and passed 6-0. This bill is pending before the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

SB 662 (Alvarado-Gil, 2025) would have extended the sunset provisions for the qualified entities and trained volunteer programs. This bill was held on the Senate Appropriations suspense file.

SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS: none**SUPPORT**

California Fire Chiefs Association
Fire Districts Association of California
Pacific Forest Trust
United States Green Building Council California

OPPOSITION

None Received

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