

Date of Hearing: April 6, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Isaac G. Bryan, Chair

AB 1960 (Bennett) – As Amended March 26, 2026

SUBJECT: Wildfire Prevention Grants Program: identified cohesive fire communities

SUMMARY: Authorizes self-identified cohesive fire communities, upon certification of any home hardening certification program for having achieved 50% home hardening, to be eligible for grant funds from the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE).

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Requires CAL FIRE to establish a local assistance grant program for fire prevention and home hardening education activities in California and extends eligibility for grants to, among others, local agencies, resource conservation districts, fire safe councils, the California Conservation Corps, certified community conservation corps, Native American tribes, and qualified nonprofit organizations. (Public Resources Code (PRC) 4142.5)
- 2) 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. (PRC 4291.6)
- 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 (CCR). (PRC 4291.5 (a)(1))
- 4) Mandates in the California Building Standards Code strict, fire-resistant construction standards for new buildings, additions, and renovations in Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) fire areas and requires ignition-resistant materials for roofs, eaves, exterior walls, and windows to protect structures from ember intrusion and radiant heat. (Chapter 7A of Part 2 CCR Title 24)
- 5) Requires the Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (CalOES) to enter into a joint powers agreement with CAL FIRE to develop and administer a comprehensive wildfire mitigation program to (1) encourage cost-effective structure hardening and retrofitting that creates fire-resistant homes, businesses, and public buildings, and (2) vegetation management, the creation and maintenance of defensible space, and other fuel modification activities that provide neighborhood or communitywide benefits against wildfire. (Government Code (GC) 8654.4)
- 6) Requires the State Fire Marshal (SFM), in consultation with CAL FIRE and the Director of Housing and Community Development, to identify building retrofits and structure hardening measures eligible for financial assistance under the wildfire mitigation program that are both cost-effective and provide for appropriate site or structure fire risk reduction. (GC 8654.5)
- 7) Requires, on and after July 1, 2021, a seller of a real property that is located in a high or very high fire hazard severity zone (VHFHSZ) in the State Responsibility Area (SRA) and Local

Responsibility Area (LRA), to provide to the buyer documentation stating that the property is in compliance with defensible space requirements. (Civil Code 1102.19)

THIS BILL:

- 1) Defines “identified cohesive fire community” as a neighborhood that has reached 50% of homes certified by any home hardening certification program approved by the SFM on or before June 1, 2027.
- 2) Authorizes any group of residents to apply to CAL FIRE for identified cohesive fire community status. Requires the application to include the community’s justification for why it is a distinct community that should qualify as an identified cohesive fire community.
- 3) Authorizes CAL FIRE to, commencing with the 2028–29 fiscal year, disburse up to 20% of funds appropriated for the Wildfire Prevention Grants Program to identified cohesive fire communities to use for activities related to hazardous fuels reduction, wildfire prevention planning, and wildfire prevention education, among other activities.
- 4) Requires the identified fire cohesive community to work with a fire safe council to be eligible. Requires the fire safe council to be the entity that receives and manages any funding received from the program.
- 5) Requires applications from an identified fire cohesive communities to receive additional points to their application score.

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown

COMMENTS:

1) **Author’s statement:**

Last year, we watched entire communities destroyed by ferocious wildfires. As California continues to grapple with more frequent, intense, and destructive wildfires, we need to ensure whole neighborhoods won’t be decimated. AB 1960 allows CAL FIRE to disperse Wildfire Prevention Grant funding to communities that have reached at least 50% of homes hardened. This bill incentivizes California’s communities to reduce risk together, rather than one home at a time. Through strategic planning, retrofitting, and engagement, Californians will decrease property loss and become more resilient in the face of climate change.

- 2) **Reducing wildfire risk.** There are various measures (some of which are statutorily required) that reduce wildfire risk in a fire hazard severity zone (FHSZ), and in conjunction with one another, multiply risk reduction.

Defensible space is the buffer created between a building on a property and the grass, trees, shrubs, or any wildland area that surrounds it. This space is needed to slow or stop the spread of wildfire, and it helps protect structures from catching fire. A 2019 analysis done by CAL FIRE of the relationship between defensible space compliance and destruction of structures during the seven largest fires that occurred in California in 2017 and 2018 concluded that the

odds of a structure being destroyed by wildfire were roughly five times greater for noncompliant structures compared to compliant ones.

The defensible space requirements for all structures within the three FHSZs in the SRA and VHFHSZs in the LRA is 100 feet. CAL FIRE additionally requires the removal of all dead plants, grass, and weeds, and the removal of dry leaves and pine needles within 30 feet of a structure. The Board of Forestry and Fire Prevention is currently drafting regulations for a 0-5 foot ember-resistant zone for structures located in the FHSZs (known as Zone 0).

Home hardening includes vegetation management compliance and building materials used to resist the intrusion of flames or embers projected by a wildland fire. It can be applied to new construction or for retrofitting an older home. Home hardening considers the relationship between a structure and its exposure to nearby combustible features such as vegetation, vehicles, accessory buildings, or even miscellaneous structures like a fence.

California's wildfire building code (known colloquially by its citation reference as Chapter 7A) went into effect in 2008 and mandates fire-resistant siding, tempered glass, vegetation management, and ignition-resistant roofs, standards for vents, decks, under eaves, siding, windows, gutters, vents for attics and crawlspaces designed to resist embers and flames. These standards, which are periodically updated, have been shown to work. An analysis by the Sacramento Bee showed that approximately 51% of the 350 single-family homes built after 2008 in the path of the Camp Fire were undamaged. By contrast, only 18% of the 12,100 homes built prior to 2008 escaped damage. Factors that can cause post-2008 homes to combust include not having adequate defensible space and proximity to neighboring non-fire hardened homes.

- 3) **Fire resilience inspections.** In 2023, the SFM established a statewide program to allow qualified entities to support CAL FIRE in its defensible space and home hardening assessment and education efforts. This includes educating property owners about wildfire safety improvements that may be undertaken to harden a structure and make it more resistant to wildfire and assessing whether wildfire safety improvements have been completed on or around a structure.

A pilot program was established using trained personnel from the El Dorado County Fire Safe Council with the first Defensible Space and Home Hardening Assessor course being taught in April 2023. The California Conservation Corps hosted a training for its corpsmembers and staff in the fall of 2023. As of May 2025, there were 214 trained assessors under the program.

CAL FIRE estimates there are about 1.25 million structures in the SRA and an additional 870,000 structures in LRA VHFHSZs¹. Combined, this is estimated to be 17% of all structures statewide. In 2022, CAL FIRE inspected 194,176 homes, up from 83,714 in 2021, representing a major increase due to extended staffing. Further augmented staffing will accelerate the state's ability to meet its goal of completing 250,000 defensible space inspections annually and inspecting a home once every three years.

The Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (Proposition 4) authorizes \$135 million to CalOES for a wildfire mitigation grant program, which will be available, among other things, as grants under the Home

Hardening Program to retrofit, harden, or create defensible space for homes at high risk of wildfire in order to protect California communities, and \$50 million for CalOES to provide grants to conduct fuel reduction, structure hardening, create defensible space, reforestation, or targeted acquisitions to improve forest health and fire resilience. CAL FIRE is requesting \$6.2 million and 31 positions for the Fiscal Year 2026-27 budget and ongoing annual appropriations.

There currently is no dedicated home hardening inspection and certification program. AB 1934 (Bennett) requires, by January 1, 2028, the SFM's Wildfire Mitigation Advisory Committee to develop a home hardening certification program that identifies home hardening measures that can be voluntarily implemented. Until that bill, or another requirement or administrative effort to certify home hardening is enacted, this bill will not go into effect.

- 4) **Can we create meaningful “herd immunity” with these actions?** Defensible space, in combination with home hardening, substantially reduces a home's ignition risk and increases its resistance from embers, radiant heat, and flame impingement.

The creation and maintenance of defensible space around private properties is an owner responsibility. When homeowners or other property owners fail to maintain defensible space, they can put their neighbors and the larger community at greater risk of devastating wildfires, which can have myriad negative impacts on the state.

Implementation of defensible space requirements works best when applied to all or the majority of structures in the areas where the requirements are intended to be applied. The Legislative Analyst's Office 2021 report on defensible space explains, “While homeowners benefit from defensible space on their properties, the benefits extend to others, as well. For example, when homeowners maintain defensible space, their homes are less likely to ignite other nearby homes, overwhelm firefighters, and ultimately threaten larger communities with wildfire disasters. As such, an individual homeowner's decision to create and maintain defensible space can help protect communities, governments, and insurers from the significant costs of wildfire disasters.” In other words, a resident in the WUI may comply with all of the applicable defensible space requirements, but those clearances will only keep so much fire at bay if the adjacent structures are not managed and have surrounding vegetation that feeds a burning fire.

According to fire simulation-based research by Kunreuther, et al. (2023), researchers found that when homes are closer together, the percentage of mitigated homes needed to reach peak marginal benefit increases. The research was done based on the assumption that mitigations reduced fire spread by 80%, and the marginal benefit of mitigations peaked between 35-60% of the housing stock depending on spacing between homes. What that suggests is that while there is not much benefit in hardening/defending a small percentage of homes, communities may not need to harden/defend 100% of the homes in a given community to reach a ‘herd immunity’ condition where the expected wildfire losses drop back down to a level we can handle.

- 5) **Wildfire Prevention Grants Program.** CAL FIRE's Wildfire Grants Program (Program) is a broad set of competitive grants to fund wildfire prevention and related activities, which includes the wildfire prevention grants funded by California Climate Investments (cap-and-trade funds) and other state appropriations. These grants enable local organizations like fire

safe councils, to implement activities that address the hazards of wildfire and reduce wildfire risk to communities, including hazardous fuels reduction, wildfire planning, education and outreach, and other ecosystem-based activities that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and protect public health.

This bill authorizes a group of residents to apply to CAL FIRE as an “identified cohesive fire community” as having reached 50% of its homes certified by any home hardening certification program in order to be eligible for funding from the Wildfire Prevention Grants Program. The application is required to include the community’s justification for *why* it is a distinct community that should qualify as an identified cohesive fire community, which could be tethered to current Program eligibility requirements, fire hazard severity zone designation, details on home hardening retrofits, plans and resources for maintaining defensible space, past wildfire footprints on or near the neighborhood, and so forth.

- 6) **How is a neighborhood defined?** There is no statutory or uniform definition for “neighborhood,” so it is unclear how 50% of a neighborhood will be determined to be home hardened if the parameters are unknown. This bill could instead lean on the definition of “community” as it’s defined in GC 65302.10 (a)(1), which is defined as an inhabited area within a city or county that is comprised of no fewer than 10 dwellings adjacent or in close proximity to one another.
- 7) **Fire Safe Councils.** Fire Safe Councils are grassroots community-based organizations in California that share the objective of making communities less vulnerable to catastrophic wildfire. Fire safe councils use education programs and projects such as shaded fuel breaks or firebreaks to protect area residents against an oncoming wildfire and to provide firefighters with a place to fight the oncoming fire. The first fire safe councils started in the early 1990s, and there are now more than 100 around the state.

It is unclear if there is a fire safe council in every community where an identified cohesive fire community would want to apply for funding. It is also unclear how the fire safe council would manage any funds awarded by the state.
- 8) **Establishing priority.** While community-wide coordination and shared investment in fire resiliency should be acknowledged, the real reward is the increased fire resiliency shared by neighbors. Communities that have invested in home hardening and defensible space maintenance are less likely to need state resources for wildfire prevention activities over other communities who do not have compliance with home hardening and defensible space. The upfront costs, absent a state subsidy or grant, can be cost prohibitive for many disadvantaged and low-income communities – and those are the communities that should be prioritized for the Wildfire Prevention Grants. The bill could prioritize disadvantaged communities for state funding while still rewarding eligibility to those communities who have successfully been certified.
- 9) **Double referral.** This bill is also referred to the Assembly Emergency Management Committee.
- 10) **Committee amendments.** The *committee may wish to consider* amending the bill to:
 - a) Define “community” pursuant to GC 65302.10 (a)(1);

- b) Create tiered percentages of achieved community home hardening to be eligible for the certification;
- c) Allow certification of an identified cohesive fire safe community by an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit scientific research and communications organization supported by property insurers, reinsurers, and affiliated companies until a state home hardening certification program is created;
- d) Strike (b) and instead require an identified cohesive fire community to work with a fire safe council to apply on their behalf to CAL FIRE for grant funding from the Wildfire Prevention Grants Program;
- e) Strike the 20% earmark in the wildfire Prevention Grants Program for identified cohesive fire communities;
- f) Require a fire safe council to determine how to use the funds in the identified cohesive fire safe community for hazardous fuels reduction, wildfire prevention planning, and wildfire prevention education, among other activities; and,
- g) Strike the provision of application points and instead require CAL FIRE to prioritize disadvantaged fire cohesive communities.

11) **Related legislation:**

AB 1934 (Bennett) Requires the SFM's Wildfire Mitigation Advisory Committee to develop a home hardening certification program that identifies home hardening measures, including defensible space, that can be voluntarily implemented during renovation or property improvement projects, or both, to substantially reduce the risk of loss during a fire and bring existing building stock into alignment with state building standards for wildland-urban interface area. This bill is referred to the Emergency Management Committee.

AB 1986 (Bennett) Requires, upon request for a premium quote for residential property insurance, an insurer to provide a premium quote for the residential property that includes the price of insurance if the property is certified as "hardened" by a home hardening certification program established or approved by the SFM and a premium quote for the residential property in its current state. This bill is referred to the Assembly Insurance Committee.

AB 261 (Quirk Silva, 2025) Authorizes the SFM to confer with entities and members of the public on actions that may impact the degree of fire hazard in an area or the area's recommended FHSZ designation, and authorizes the SFM to provide a written response to an entity on actions that may impact the degree of fire hazard, and would require this written response to be posted on the SFM's internet website. This bill was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 1143 (Bennett, 2025) Requires, on or before January 1, 2027, the SFM's Wildfire Mitigation Advisory Committee to develop a home hardening certification program that identifies home hardening measures, including defensible space, that can be implemented during renovation or property improvement projects, or both, to substantially reduce the risk of loss during a fire and bring existing building stock into alignment with state building standards for wildland-urban interface areas. This bill was vetoed by the governor.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

California Fire Chiefs Association
Fire Districts Association of California
Matador Fire
Sierra Club

Opposition

None on file

Analysis Prepared by: Paige Brokaw / NAT. RES. /

ⁱ [fire-safety-zone-zone-0-faq-sept-17-2025.pdf](#)