

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 514 (Cabaldon) – As Amended June 25, 2025

Policy Committee: Natural Resources

Vote: 14 - 0

Urgency: No

State Mandated Local Program: No

Reimbursable: No

**SUMMARY:**

This bill removes the sunset date on a statewide program to allow qualified entities to support and augment the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) in its defensible space and home hardening assessment and education efforts; expands the list of eligible qualified entities; and authorizes qualified entities to additionally assess compliance with defensible space requirements applicable to local responsibility areas (LRAs).

Specifically, this bill, among other things:

- 1) Eliminates the January 1, 2026, sunset date on CAL FIRE's (a) statewide program to allow qualified entities to support and augment the department in its defensible space and home hardening assessment and education efforts, (b) an associated defensible space training program for qualified entities, and (c) a common reporting platform that allows defensible space and home hardening assessment data collected by qualified entities to be reported to CAL FIRE.
- 2) Expands the definition of "qualified entity" to include (a) nonprofit entities focused on wildfire resiliency and (b) contractors who conduct defensible space, home hardening, fuel reduction, roadside clearance, and other contracting activities for wildfire reiliency efforts.
- 3) Provides CAL FIRE to authroize qualified entities participating in the program to additionally assess compliance with defensible space requirements in the LRA.
- 4) Requires data obtained voluntarily from a property owner for reasons other than responding to a request related to compliance, as specified, be anonymized and kept confidential if requested by the property owner, and prohibits the data from being used for compliance or enforcement purposes associated with ordinances directly related to defensible space and home hardening investigations unless specifically requested by the property owner.
- 5) Requires CAL FIRE's annual report to the Legislature on defensible space compliance to additionally include defensible space compliance in the LRA.

**FISCAL EFFECT:**

CAL FIRE will incur ongoing annual costs (General Fund or special fund such as the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF)) to implement this bill. Expanding the definition of "qualified entity" to include certain nonprofits and contractors, as well as authorizing an expansion of the qualified entities program to include LRAs, is likely to drive significant interest

from organizations, businesses, and individuals interested in receiving training and certification from CAL FIRE to serve as qualified entities – thereby increasing CAL FIRE statewide training- and certification- related workload.

For its part, CAL FIRE estimates costs of approximately \$1.3 million in year one, \$1.2 million in year two, and \$1.1 million annually thereafter (GGRF) to hire two Battalion Chiefs and two Fire Prevention Specialist IIs to implement this bill. The Battalion Chiefs – under the direction of the Assistant Chief of Defensible Space for the Office of the State Fire Marshal's (OSFM) Community Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation Division – will, among other tasks, support CAL FIRE units throughout the state and coordinate and provide oversight of outreach and training to participants of the qualified entities program and to CAL FIRE personnel. This includes offering a greater number of CAL FIRE Home Ignition/Defensible Space Inspector courses as well as other courses as appropriate. The Fire Prevention Specialist IIs will, among other tasks, maintain curriculum updates and provide training to qualified entities as defensible space and home hardening assessors and to CAL FIRE defensible space inspectors.

Additionally, CAL FIRE estimates costs of \$724,000 in year one, \$300,000 in year two, and \$204,000 annually thereafter to support the cost of four vehicles for the Battalion Chiefs and Fire Prevention Specialist IIs. The department contends the vehicles are necessary for staff to travel to various statewide locations to provide expanded training and meet with various entities to explain and enforce appropriate rules, laws, and codes. CAL FIRE notes there are no additional vehicles within the department that can be redirected for this purpose.

## COMMENTS:

### 1) **Purpose.** According to the author:

The state has left defensible space rules largely unenforced with an average inspection rate of just 17 percent. Nonetheless, fear of enforcement can make homeowners reluctant to seek technical assistance on how to create defensible space. SB 514 will help by encouraging property owners to voluntarily comply. The bill lets those who request defensible space inspections keep their data confidential and ensures the information won't be used for enforcement against them. It also allows wildlife resiliency non-profits and qualified contractors to do inspections. Finally, it removes the sunset from the defensible space data reporting platform, which allows the state to gather information about compliance, helping California further understand how our homes can be protected.

### 2) **Background. *Defensible Space.*** State responsibility areas (SRA) are areas where CAL FIRE is the primary emergency response agency responsible for fire suppression and prevention. LRAs are areas where local agencies are primarily responsible for fire protection and emergency response. State law requires the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection to establish defensible space requirements for structures in SRAs and Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones in LRAs. According to the Legislative Analyst's Office, there are about 768,000 structures in SRAs and roughly 700,000 structures in Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones in the LRAs.

In 2023, OSFM established a statewide program to allow qualified entities to support CAL FIRE in its defensible space and home hardening assessment and education efforts. Qualified entities include the California Conservation Corps, California Volunteers, Resource Conservation Districts, Fire Safe Councils, Firewise, University of California Fire Advisors, Registered Professional Foresters, and local agencies. Once certified, these entities may provide non-regulatory assistance to homeowners to reduce fire risk and achieve compliance with defensible space requirements within SRAs. 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.

This bill authorizes qualified entities to additionally assess compliance with defensible space requirements applicable to LRAs, as provided. The bill also expands the list of qualified entities to include nonprofits and contractors, boosting the workforce that can skillfully inform and educate residents living in LRAs. The Napa County Board of Supervisors writes in support, “SB 514 will enhance and expand local capacity for defensible space work, while protecting resident privacy and supporting collaboration with trusted nonprofit and community partners.”

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