

Date of Hearing: August 20, 2025

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Buffy Wicks, Chair

SB 616 (Rubio) – As Amended July 10, 2025

Policy Committee:	Emergency Management	Vote:	5 - 1
	Insurance		13 - 2

Urgency: No      State Mandated Local Program: Yes      Reimbursable: Yes

**SUMMARY:**

This bill establishes the Community Hardening Commission (CHC), chaired by the Insurance Commissioner (IC), to develop new wildfire community hardening standards to reduce fire risk and improve access to fire insurance.

Specifically, this bill:

- 1) Creates the CHC as an independent unit within the Department of Insurance (CDI). The CHC must consist of seven specified members, including the State Fire Marshal (SFM), Housing and Community Development (HCD) director, Office of Emergency Services (OES) director, Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety (OEIS) director, and IC, who serves as chair. The CHC must be advised by an 11-member advisory council representing specified fields, with 10 members appointed by the IC.
- 2) Requires the IC to convene the CHC quarterly and consult with certain stakeholders to develop new wildfire community hardening standards. The CHC must complete the new standards by July 1, 2027, and submit a report to the Legislature regarding additional actions needed to support local agencies and communities in home hardening efforts. The CHC must also review existing home hardening regulations and make recommendations regarding related program alignment, funding mechanisms, and certification processes.
- 3) Requires the joint powers authority (JPA) established to administer the California Wildfire Mitigation Program (CWMP) to revise the CWMP in accordance with the CHC's new wildfire community hardening standards, with additional moneys to fund the program subject to appropriation by the Legislature.
- 4) Requires the CHC to complete an after-action investigation and report after identified wildfire catastrophe events. The CHC chair may enter into data sharing agreements with specified entities to complete the analysis.
- 5) Requires CDI, in consultation with the CHC, to develop guidelines by July 1, 2027, for state and local agencies to aggregate and make available data related to parcel-, neighborhood-, and community-level wildfire risk to enable a wildfire data sharing platform. The CHC must submit an annual report to the Legislature regarding statutory changes or budgetary resources needed to facilitate optimal participation of state and local agencies in the platform. CDI may enter into data sharing agreements with specified entities to enable the platform, subject to CHC oversight.

**FISCAL EFFECT:**

- 1) Costs of approximately \$226,000 in fiscal year (FY) 2025-26, \$426,000 in FY 2026-27, and \$367,000 annually thereafter to CDI to establish the CHC, develop new wildfire community hardening standards, complete an after-action investigation and report after identified wildfire catastrophe events, and develop guidelines for state and local agencies to enable the wildfire data sharing platform (Insurance Fund). CDI notes that the Budget Act of 2025 provided \$12.5 million to CDI to support community hardening oversight and wildfire risk mitigation efforts, including measuring risk for communities and individual residential property owners, pursuant to pending legislation, which includes this bill, among others.
- 2) Annual costs of approximately \$226,000 to HCD for one additional position to accommodate CHC-related staff workload (General Fund (GF)). Additionally, HCD anticipates additional costs for consultant fees to support research and other informational needs.

Costs of an unknown amount to OEIS to serve on the CHC. The Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) does not anticipate costs from this bill.

- 3) Annual costs of approximately \$929,000 to OES for four additional staff positions to serve on the CHC and change CWMP regulations and program operations pursuant to the CHC's revised community hardening standards, including providing technical assistance and outreach to local communities (GF).
- 4) Annual cost pressures of an unknown amount, likely in the tens of millions of dollars, between OES and CAL FIRE to provide additional community hardening grants under the revised CWMP (GF, special fund, or Proposition 4). Since 2020, approximately \$35 million has been allocated across budget years to support CWMP administrative costs and grants.
- 5) Annual cost pressures of an unknown amount, potentially in the millions of dollars, to CDI to develop or procure the wildfire data sharing platform and facilitate optimal participation, after developing the data guidelines for state and local agencies (Insurance Fund or GF). To the extent such guidelines require a state or local agency to participate in data sharing, the impacted agencies would also incur costs related to data collection and synthesis (GF, special fund, or Proposition 4). If the Commission on State Mandates determines this bill's requirements to be a reimbursable state mandate, the state would need to reimburse these costs to local agencies.

**COMMENTS:**

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

As homeowners and communities work to harden their properties to make them more resilient to wildfires, there is a need for greater coordination across local, state and federal government in ways that include the perspectives of leaders of fire science, construction, planning, insurance and emergency response disciplines...The [CHC] will be tasked with bringing together state and local governmental entities, as well as experts and stakeholders, to create consistent, data-driven standards to guide statewide fire mitigation policies and programs across state and local agencies. Effective fire mitigation is

critically important to help improve availability and affordability of property insurance.

- 2) **Background. *Home Hardening.*** Home hardening includes vegetation management compliance and building materials used to resist the intrusion of flames or embers projected by a wildland fire. Such measures may be applied to new construction or when retrofitting an older home. California Building Standards Code Chapter 7A, developed with the SFM, provides for ignition resistant construction standards, such as fire-resistant siding, tempered glass, and ignition-resistant roofs, in the wildland urban interface. Additionally, the Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety, a non-profit research and communications organization supported by property insurers, reinsurers, and affiliated companies, established the “Wildfire Prepared Home” mitigation program allowing homeowners to earn a designation by completing certain actions to reduce their wildfire risk.

***Safer from Wildfires.*** The Safer from Wildfires framework (Framework) was created in February 2022 in partnership between CDI, OES, CAL FIRE, and other agencies. The Framework provides a list of home and community wildfire mitigation measures that a consumer may take to protect a structure, immediate surroundings, and community, such as adopting a Class-A fire-rated roof, a five-foot ember resistant zone, ember- and fire-resistant vents, or upgraded windows. Under subsequent regulations proposed by IC Ricardo Lara, which took effect on October 14, 2022, a consumer who adopts more Framework mitigation steps may save more money on insurance costs.

***CWMP.*** AB 38 (Wood), Chapter 391, Statutes of 2019, created the CWMP, a JPA between OES and CAL FIRE to develop and administer a comprehensive wildfire mitigation program to encourage cost-effective structure hardening and retrofitting in high-risk, socially vulnerable communities and provide financial assistance for low- and moderate-income households.

On April 23, 2025, the Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) noted in a presentation to the Assembly Budget Subcommittee on Climate Crisis, Resources, Energy and Transportation that “CWMP has been slow to launch. Despite receiving funding starting in 2020-21, recent reports indicate that roughly 20 homes have completed retrofits. The average cost per home has been roughly \$50,000.” The LAO added:

The state lacks clear cost-effectiveness data both on how pursuing defensible space and home hardening efforts compares to other risk-reduction activities, as well as on the relative performance of different programs designed to improve defensible space compliance and home hardening adoption. [AB 38], as subsequently modified, requires CalFire and [OES] to submit a report evaluating the cost-effectiveness of the [CWMP] compared to other programs by July 2028, which may help provide insights.

This bill establishes the CHC to improve home and community hardening efforts undertaken by government and other stakeholders. Although the CHC would be an independent unit within CDI and the CHC’s decisions would not be subject to the IC’s review, the IC would chair the CHC and appoint 10 of 11 advisory committee members. Among other responsibilities, this bill requires the CHC to complete an after-action investigation and report after identified wildfire catastrophe events and develop new wildfire community

hardening standards, and requires OES and CAL FIRE to revise the CWMP in accordance with those standards. This bill requires CDI to consult with the CHC to develop guidelines for state and local agencies to report data related to parcel-, neighborhood-, and community-level wildfire risk to enable a wildfire data sharing platform, but does not specifically require CDI to develop and administer the platform.

- 3) **Support and Opposition.** This bill is sponsored by IC Ricardo Lara, who envisions a CHC “with the goal of communicating the benefits of community-wide mitigation clearly, with one voice, to every corner of our state by aligning our statewide efforts for community wildfire risk reduction and mitigation efforts.” This bill is also supported by firefighter groups, many local government entities, and some consumer groups.

This bill is opposed by the Association of California Water Agencies and California Special Districts Association, unless amended to remove water infrastructure improvements from the list of wildfire community hardening standards the CHC must develop, as “water agencies might not be able to meet the established standards for a variety of reasons, including to maintain water quality for drinking water, financial constraints, and operational realities.” This bill is also opposed by the Consumer Federation of California, unless amended to include more community members on the CHC’s advisory committee and make other changes to the CHC’s structure.

- 4) **Related Legislation.** SB 429 (Cortese) creates the Wildfire Safety and Risk Mitigation Program within CDI to provide grants for the development and deployment of a public wildfire catastrophe model. SB 429 is pending hearing by this committee.

AB 1 (Connolly) requires CDI to consider whether to update the Safer from Wildfires regulations to include certain building hardening measures. AB 1 is pending hearing by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 888 (Calderon) establishes the California Safe Homes grant program within CDI to reduce wildfire losses, improve insurability and resilience of vulnerable communities, and support home hardening measures. AB 888 is pending hearing by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 1143 (Bennett) requires the SFM’s Wildfire Mitigation Advisory Committee to develop a home hardening certification program. AB 1143 is pending hearing by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 1531 (Committee on Emergency Management) adds CDI to the CWMP Board and requires CDI to appoint two additional board members. AB 1531 is pending hearing by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

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