

SENATE THIRD READING
SB 616 (Rubio, et al.)
As Amended September 5, 2025
Majority vote

SUMMARY

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

Major Provisions

- 1) Creates the Community Hardening Commission (CHC) as an independent unit within the Department of Insurance (CDI) which shall be chaired by the Insurance Commissioner and consist of the following seven members:
 - (a) The Insurance Commissioner (IC) or their designee.
 - (b) The State Fire Marshal, or their designee.
 - (c) The Director of Housing and Community Development or their designee.
 - (d) The Director of Emergency Services (Cal OES) or their designee.
 - (e) The Director of the Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety or their designee.
 - (f) A member of the public appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly.
 - (g) A member of the public appointed by the Senate President pro Tempore.
- 2) Provides the CHC shall be advised by an advisory council, with eleven members, as specified.
- 3) Requires the IC, beginning on January 1, 2026, and quarterly thereafter, to convene the CHC for all of the following:
 - (a) Develop new wildfire community hardening standards to reduce fire risk and improve access to fire insurance, as specified.
 - (b) Review existing home hardening regulations adopted by the IC, CAL FIRE, and the California wildfire mitigation financial assistance program, and provide recommendations to Cal OES, CAL FIRE, and the IC for changes to their regulations and programs to reduce fire risk and improve access to fire insurance, including outlining the most cost-effective strategies that will lower the risk for loss in a community in a useful manner insurers are able to reflect in underwriting.
 - (c) Make recommendations to expedite proven and cost-effective community hardening practices that reduce fire risk and improve insurability, including recommendations for reducing barriers for cities, counties, and members of those communities to invest in effective home hardening and wildfire mitigation strategies.

- (d) Make recommendations to increase the pace and scale of forest health and landscape management projects with priority for mitigation near vulnerable communities.
- (e) Oversee and facilitate state and local agency participation in a wildfire data sharing platform.
- 4) Requires the CHC to consult with stakeholders and make recommendations that include proposed local and state funding mechanisms and certification processes, as specified.
 - 5) By July 1, 2027 and until January 1, 2032, requires the CHC complete these new wildfire community hardening standards and submit a report to the Legislature on additional actions needed to support cities, counties, and members of those communities in home hardening and wildfire mitigation. Requires the CHC to periodically review and update these standards.
 - 6) By July 1, 2027, requires CDI to develop guidelines for state and local agencies to aggregate and make available data related to parcel-, neighborhood-, and community-level wildfire risk for the purpose of enabling a wildfire data sharing platform.
 - 7) By July 1, 2027 and by January 1 annually thereafter until January 1, 2032, requires the commission to report to the Legislature its assessment of any statutory changes or budgetary resources needed to facilitate the optimal participation of state and local agencies in a wildfire data sharing platform.
 - 8) Requires the CWMP to consider revising its wildfire mitigation program in accordance with the community hardening standards and home hardening guidelines developed by the commission.

COMMENTS

Recent amendments made the following changes to this bill:

- 1) Provides the joint powers authority shall consider revising (as opposed to shall) the wildfire mitigation program in accordance with prescribed community hardening standards and guidelines developed pursuant to the bill's provisions.
- 2) Changes appointments to the CHC by the Speaker and the Speaker from a "member of the legislative body" to a "member of the public."
- 3) Modifies the CHC's duties with respect to risk mitigation specific to water service reliability and delivery of electrical service.
- 4) Expands the stakeholders the CHC shall consult with to include water and electric utilities.

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.

CDI Safer from Wildfires Framework: In 2022, CDI announced the "Safer from Wildfires" framework, which directs insurers to provide discounts to consumers and businesses if they take specified mitigation measures. In crafting this regulation, CDI worked with emergency preparedness agencies in the Governor's Administration, including CAL FIRE, Cal OES, the Governor's Office of Planning and Research, and the California Public Utilities Commission. The framework provides a list of home and community wildfire mitigation measures that consumers and businesses can take to provide protection for the structure, the immediate surroundings, and the community. Under the regulation, the more "Safer from Wildfires" steps a consumer takes, the more they may be able to save on their insurance. >

According to the Author

Senate Bill 616 is an important step toward the hardening of communities and homes, and helping insurance become more accessible and affordable in California. Climate change is making wildfires more frequent and destructive. 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 across the fire science, construction, planning, insurance and emergency response disciplines

Arguments in Support

California Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara writes, "As the proud sponsor of this measure, I write in strong SUPPORT of Senate Bill 616. This bill would create an independent Commission within my Department of Insurance 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."

Arguments in Opposition

The Association of California Water Agencies and California Special Districts Association, are opposed unless amended to remove water infrastructure improvements from the list of wildfire community hardening standards the CHC must develop. 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.

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Committee on Appropriations:

- 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.

VOTES

SENATE FLOOR: 39-0-1

YES: Allen, Alvarado-Gil, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Choi, Cortese, Dahle, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Grove, Hurtado, Jones, Laird, Limón, McGuire, McNerney, Menjivar, Niello, Ochoa Bogh, Padilla, Pérez, Richardson, Rubio, Seyarto, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Strickland, Umberg, Valladares, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

ABS, ABST OR NV: Reyes

ASM EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT: 5-1-1

YES: Ransom, Arambula, Bains, Bennett, Calderon

NO: DeMaio

ABS, ABST OR NV: Hadwick

ASM INSURANCE: 13-2-2

YES: Calderon, Addis, Alvarez, Ávila Farías, Berman, Gipson, Harabedian, Krell, Nguyen, Ortega, Petrie-Norris, Michelle Rodriguez, Valencia

NO: Chen, Ellis

ABS, ABST OR NV: Wallis, Hadwick

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 12-0-3

YES: Wicks, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Elhawary, Fong, Mark González, Ahrens, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache, Tangipa

ABS, ABST OR NV: Sanchez, Dixon, Ta

UPDATED

VERSION: September 5, 2025

CONSULTANT: Mike Dayton / E.M. / (916) 319-3802

FN: 0001773