
SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Senator Anna Caballero, Chair
2025 - 2026 Regular Session

SB 662 (Alvarado-Gil) - Wildfires: defensible space: education efforts

Version: February 20, 2025

Urgency: No

Hearing Date: April 21, 2025

Policy Vote: N.R. & W. 6 - 0

Mandate: No

Consultant: Ashley Ames

Bill Summary: This bill would extend for five years the sunsets on the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's statewide program to support its defensible space inspection and home hardening assessment and education efforts, including its training pilot program for volunteers to January 1, 2031, as provided.

Fiscal Impact:

- Unknown, potentially significant cost pressure (General Fund) to continue providing funding for CalFire's statewide program to support its defensible space inspection and home hardening assessment and education efforts, including its training pilot program for volunteers, for 5 years after these programs otherwise would have sunset.
- Unknown, potentially significant cost pressure (General Fund) to continue or scale up this program following the new January 1, 2031 sunset that would be established by this bill.

Background: In certain areas of the state, homeowners are required to maintain 100 feet of defensible space around their homes where vegetation is cut back or trimmed to reduce the amount of flammable materials around the home. These science-based standards are stricter within 30 feet of a home, and, will become stricter yet within five feet of a home later this year. Home hardening means incorporating more inflammable materials in the construction of the home, such as flame-resistant roofing material and fine mesh on vents to prevent embers from entering attic space, among other things. In addition to hardened homes, community hardening also includes strategic fire breaks and community design informed by wildland fire risk.

New wildfire prevention activities include the direction to the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection to implement new regulations for the area within 5 feet around a home or structure ("zone zero" or the "ember-resistant zone"), as noted above; renewed emphases on vegetation management through prescribed and cultural fire; more fire-resistant building standards for new homes at risk from wildfire; and renewed efforts to provide transparency to defensible space inspection data and public outreach.

Among other provisions, SB 63 (Stern, Chapter 382, Statutes of 2021) required the Director of the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire director) to establish a statewide program to allow certain "qualified entities" - such as members of the California Conservation Corps or others that have received appropriate trainings – to support and augment CalFire's defensible space inspection and home hardening assessment and education efforts. The qualified entities could conduct defensible space assessments to evaluate compliance with defensible space requirements in the

state responsibility area, educate property owners about wildfire safety improvement to harden a structure and assess whether these improvements had been completed on a structure. The benefit of the assessments performed by others was to help improve compliance with defensible space requirements and direct CalFire's attention and effort to non-compliant properties. The bill also required a common reporting platform to be established for defensible space assessment and inspection efforts in both the state and local responsibility areas, and the development of a training pilot program to train and certify volunteers to perform these assessments. These provisions sunset on January 1, 2026.

The pilot program to train volunteers – the Defensible Space Assessor training program – is fully developed and implemented according to CalFire. The program includes training for both defensible space and home hardening. Between 2023 and early 2025, 15 classes have been held with 311 participants receiving certification. Three additional classes are scheduled for Butte, Mendocino, and San Diego Counties. Firesafe councils, Firewise USA communities, and resource conservation districts have been the source of many pilot program participants. CalFire's defensible space inspection form has been adapted for use by others to perform their assessments, and a new home hardening form has also been developed for use. These completed forms are typically left with the property owner to identify where the assessments have shown success and where more needs to be done.

In Fiscal Year 2024/2025 thus far, 1,314 primary and 169 auxiliary structures have been assessed, primarily in the SRA and by certified California Conservation Corps personnel. For context, CalFire reports there are approximately 800,000 structures in the SRA, and a ballpark estimate is that there are about 700,000 homes in the Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone (VHFHSZ) in the local responsibility area (LRA) where defensible space requirements apply. CalFire's goal is to complete 250,000 defensible space inspections annually.

The common reporting platform authorized in SB 63 has been developed – the Defensible Space Data Dashboard – and is available through links at CalFire's website. About one dozen local entities or jurisdictions regularly submit data to the common reporting platform.

Proposed Law: This bill would extend the sunsets on CalFire's statewide program to support its defensible space and home hardening assessment and education efforts, including its training program for volunteers for five years to January 1, 2031, as provided.

Related Legislation:

SB 653 (Cortese, 2025) would define environmentally sensitive vegetation management for the purposes of certain wildfire-related grant programs in Proposition 4.

SB 514 (Cabaldon, 2025) would remove the sunset entirely on the two provisions in this bill, among other provisions.

SB 375 (Grove, 2025) would establish a process to facilitate the approval of an incidental take permit, if any, needed by a local agency to undertake wildfire

preparedness activities, and exempt from CEQA requirements and coastal development permit requirements, projects for the reduction of fuels in MFHSZ, HFHSZ, and VHFHSZ, as provided.

SB 326 (Becker, 2025) would require the Deputy Director of Community Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation to prepare a Wildfire Risk Mitigation Planning Framework every three years to quantitatively evaluate wildfire risk mitigation actions, a Wildfire Risk Baseline and Forecast every three years for the state delineated on a statewide level and by county, and a Wildfire Mitigation Scenarios Report every year, as provided.

AB 1457 (Bryan, 2025) would remove the sunset entirely on the two provisions in this bill, among other provisions.

AB 846 (Connolly, 2025) would establish a process to facilitate the approval of an incidental take permit, if any, needed by a local agency to undertaken wildfire preparedness activities, among other provisions.

AB 441 (Hadwick, 2025) would extend the sunset on the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development at CalFire, and the sunset on the Office of Emergency Services and CalFire comprehensive wildfire mitigation program.

SB 1014 (Dodd, 2024) would have required the Deputy Director of Community Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation to prepare a Wildfire Risk Mitigation Planning Framework every three years to quantitatively evaluate wildfire risk mitigation actions, a Wildfire Risk Baseline and Forecast every three years for the state delineated on a statewide level and by county, and a Wildfire Mitigation Scenarios Report every year. (This bill was held on suspense in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.)

AB 2330 (Holden, 2024) would have established a process to facilitate the approval of an incidental take permit, if any, needed by a local agency to undertaken wildfire preparedness activities, among other provisions, as provided. (This bill was vetoed by Governor Newsom.)

SB 436 (Dodd, 2023) would have required the Deputy Director of Community Wildfire Preparedness and Mitigation to prepare a Wildfire Risk Mitigation Planning Framework every three years to quantitatively evaluate wildfire risk mitigation actions, a Wildfire Risk Baseline and Forecast every three years for the state delineated on a statewide level and by county, and a Wildfire Mitigation Scenarios Report every year. (This bill was held on suspense in the Senate Appropriations Committee.)

SB 456 (Laird, Chapter 387, Statutes of 2021) required the Wildfire and Forest Resilience Task Force to develop a comprehensive strategy to track implementation of its Action Plan. This strategy must address, among others, strengthening the protection of communities and reducing their fire risk, including a statewide framework to support local and regional community fire risk reduction and adaptation programs and projects.

SB 109 (Dodd, Chapter 239, Statutes of 2021) established the Office of Wildfire Technology Research and Development within CalFire, and the Wildfire Technology Research and Development Review Advisory Board to conduct research and testing on emerging technologies to prevent, predict, and fight wildfires, as provided.

SB 63 (Stern, Chapter 382, Statutes of 2021) made multiple changes to state law to enhance CalFire's fire prevention efforts, including, among other things, improved vegetation management, and expanding the areas where enhanced fire safety building standards apply.

AB 9 (Wood, Chapter 225, Statutes of 2021) codified the Regional Forest and Fire Capacity Program, created the deputy director role within the Office of the State Fire Marshal, and transferred certain duties related to fire safety and wildfire prevention from CalFire to the Office of the State Fire Marshal.

AB 642 (Friedman, Chapter 375, Statutes of 2021), among other things, directed CalFire, on or before July 1, 2023, to make recommendations on how to understand and model wildfire risk for a community and specific parcels within the LRA or SRA through the input of mitigating factors.

AB 3074 (Friedman, Chapter 259, Statutes of 2020) created an ember-resistant zone within five feet of a structure as part of the defensible space requirements for structures located in specified high fire hazard areas.

SB 209 (Dodd, Chapter 405, Statutes of 2019) required the Office of Emergency Services and CalFire to jointly establish and lead the Wildfire Forecast and Threat Intelligence Integration Center, as specified.

AB 38 (Wood, Chapter 391, Statutes of 2019) required the Office of Emergency Services to enter into a joint powers agreement with CalFire to administer a comprehensive wildfire mitigation program to encourage cost-effective structure hardening and facilitate vegetation management.

SB 901 (Dodd, Chapter 626, Statutes of 2018) addresses numerous issues concerning wildfire prevention, response, and recovery, including funding for mutual aid, fuel reduction and forestry policies, wildfire mitigation plans by electric utilities, and cost recovery by electric corporations of wildfire-related damages.

Staff Comments: In 2023, three training classes were held, and in 2024 10 training classes were held certifying over 200 participants. Regardless of recent increases in CalFire staffing, there continues to be a role for volunteers in the community in performing defensible space and home hardening assessments, and, importantly, public education and outreach. While the total number of assessments is relatively low – given the number needed to be performed annually – it is a positive development, and more data will be needed to more fully evaluate the program. The CalFire public dashboard for defensible space helps to provide consistency in how assessment and inspection data are reported, although it is not yet in widespread use for assessments and inspections in the LRA.

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