

Stand firm on Zone 0 wildfire protections

By Eric Horne

California stands at a crossroads on wildfire safety.

Zone 0 — which requires a five-foot buffer around homes where combustible materials must be removed to prevent ignition — is one of the most effective tools available to keep houses from burning during wildfires. In fact, the use of Zone 0 alone can [increase the probability](#) of homes surviving a wildfire by 17%. Recognizing its importance, Governor Newsom issued an executive order to accelerate adoption and directed the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection to complete the Zone 0 rules by year's end. At Monday's subcommittee meeting, further research was presented that supports strict Zone 0 regulation, and tomorrow the Committee will present to the full Board of Forestry.

In the final stretch, the Board has [introduced new options](#) that risk weakening the rule through carve-outs for “historic” buildings, local opt-outs, and looser standards for what kinds of plants can occupy the most critical five-foot defensible space. Megafire Action supports Option 1 that the Board laid out because it preserves a strong Zone 0—the version that closely reflects the original draft rule broadly supported before October. It will provide the best chance for homes surviving fires; trees and potted plants are allowed in Zone 0 while all other flammable materials such as grass, shrubs, and mulch must be kept at least five feet from structures. At Monday's meeting, Yana Valachovic, a UC forest scientist and Zone 0 Committee advisor, explained that in a [recent experiment](#), hydrated and dry vegetation both ignited within 2-3 minutes, and neither provided more protection than having no plants at all. Thus, the other options, newly proposed, weaken this safeguard by allowing more vegetation within five feet of homes and undermine the clear standard that makes Zone 0 effective.

Some [local leaders are understandably anxious](#) about implementation—the costs of compliance and fears of intrusive property inspections are often top of mind. But these challenges can be solved in the three years before enforcement begins. California can adapt programs like GoGreen Home to help homeowners finance the work, and with app-based self-inspections from companies like Fire Aside, compliance can be verified quickly, fairly, and at minimal cost. Berkeley has already [shown this can work](#). Its new Zone 0 ordinance pairs clear standards with education, technical support, and financing to help homeowners comply.

Our firefighters already do the impossible, but even they have limits. It's easy to celebrate them after a fire; the real act of respect is giving them a fighting chance before the next one starts.

I've seen the difference that Zone 0 makes. During the Palisades Fire, embers showered the grounds of my mother's condominium complex, igniting trees and vegetation all over the property. But because there were several feet of clearance next to the buildings, the structures never caught fire. Hundreds of homes were saved. Zone 0 won't prevent every tragedy, but it likely saved my mom's.

The Board of Forestry meets November 5 to consider these rules. They deserve our support to finish the job without self-defeating carve-outs or compromises. A strong, consistent Zone 0 is the clearest step California can take to finally live safely with fire.

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