

SB 571 – Wildfire Evacuation Standards

SENATOR BEN ALLEN

Fact Sheet

SUMMARY

California is at a confluence of crises: a severe housing shortage and the most destructive wildfire seasons in state history. As climate change continues to increase the threat of further destruction, new developments must be designed with clear-eyed objectivity regarding the risks. Our need for increased housing will necessitate continued development across the state, including in areas of heightened risk for wildfires, unfortunately. SB 571 ensures that these imperiled communities be designed with the reality of a potential wildfire emergency in mind by requiring a robust evacuation plan created in coordination with the relevant emergency authorities charged with evacuation.

BACKGROUND

As climate change continues its advance, California's seasonal hazards grow in intensity, frequency, and destructiveness. According to CAL FIRE, six of the seven largest wildfires in California history have occurred since the 2020 season. Nearly every structure in the community of Greenville was destroyed by the Dixie fire in 2021, and the 2020 Bear Fire swept the community of Berry Creek off the map along with the lives of 12 people.

Failed evacuation planning is at the heart of how wildfires lead to loss of life. This is displayed clearly upon review of the 2018 Camp Fire and the destruction of the town of Paradise. Despite the decision to abandon firefighting efforts in the first hour of the blaze to prioritize evacuation, 84 residents were unable to evacuate quickly enough. Twenty-six of those residents – including Rose Farrell, 99, Evva Holt, 85, and Andrew Burt, 36 – were trapped despite their efforts to evacuate, efforts that included pleas to family members for help.

These tragedies were preventable. A 2005 state fire management plan and a 2008 Butte County Grand Jury had specifically raised concerns about the inadequacy of evacuation routes in the case of a wildfire in the area. Paradise's main evacuation route, Skyway, had been narrowed in an attempt to reduce accidents – a decision that led to deadly gridlock during the fire and lack of access for emergency vehicles.

Ninety-three percent of the State Responsibility Area of Los Angeles County is seated within a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone, yet developments in the area and others like it lack metrics to clearly identify how to get individuals to safety in the likely event of a wildfire. The consequences of exponential growth without thoughtful emergency planning are far too important; our communities must be designed to protect lives.

SOLUTION

SB 571 requires that, during the planning and approval process of new developments in at-risk areas, proponents must create a thorough evacuation plan with efficient ingress and egress routes based on specified metrics along with necessary safeguards. Specifically, SB 571 requires that proponents of qualifying developments identify safe routes for evacuation, conduct a transportation engineering study along proposed routes, display fire modeling possibilities through a wildfire behavior study, and identify areas of safe refuge in the event evacuation becomes unsafe or impossible. Additionally, before any person occupies a new development, SB 571 charges local governments with making plans electronically available to the public.

Finally, those responsible for getting people out in a wildfire emergency – relevant fire and law enforcement entities – have a right to be involved in the planning process. For that reason, SB 571 requires sign-off from these entities, allowing for expert input and better assurance of first responder safety.

SUPPORT

Planning and Conservation League (Sponsor)

CONTACT

Dylan Elliott
Office of Senator Ben Allen
(916) 651-4024
Dylan.Elliott@sen.ca.gov

