

VINCE FONG

MEMBER FOR THE 32ND ASSEMBLY DISTRICT



FACT SHEET

AB 295 – Streamlining Highway Brush Clearing

IN BRIEF

At the intersection of Highway 299 and Carr Powerhouse Road, a tire blew out causing the rim to scrape against the pavement and creating sparks that ignited dry vegetation along the highway. The Carr Fire was the 13th largest wildfire in California history, burning 229,651 acres, destroying 1,614 structures, causing \$1.6 billion in damages, and killing 8 people.^{1,2}

Assembly Bill 295 will prevent disastrous wildfires from starting along the state's highways by accelerating the implementation of defensible space maintenance projects along roadsides.

Specifically, the bill will allow the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) to enter into agreements with local governmental entities, fire departments, fire districts, fire safe councils, and tribal entities to perform brush clearing and roadside maintenance projects.

BACKGROUND & ISSUE

California has over 5,000 miles of state highways across forests, chaparrals, and grasslands. Inactive forest management has created unhealthy and dense trees and vegetation, increasing the frequency and severity of wildfires when combined with drought conditions in California. Defensible space is crucial to creating fuel breaks or fire breaks which can slow or stop the spread of a wildfire. Highway corridors and roadways can serve as fire breaks or be potential sources of fire depending on whether the adjacent fuel loads are properly managed.

Caltrans has the authority to manage the state's highways and perform a variety of roadside

resiliency projects. According to the Department's 2021 State Highway System Management Plan, nearly 73 percent of the 33,997 acres of roadway infrastructure identified in their Roadside Rehabilitation Objective are in poor condition, and there is a nearly \$4 billion funding gap to meet this objective over the next five years.³ The Department has also identified defensible space maintenance projects on an additional 120,000 acres of naturally occurring roadside to improve fire resiliency adjacent to the highway system. This area is larger than the acreage identified in the department's Roadside Rehabilitation objective and will not be maintained with existing resources.

SOLUTION

AB 295 will help accelerate Caltrans's efforts to implement defensible space maintenance projects by leveraging local resources and streamlining prevention practices. By implementing defensible space maintenance and fire prevention projects, California can prevent future wildfires and save lives.

SUPPORT

Pending

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¹ <https://www.nps.gov/whis/learn/news/national-park-service-releases-investigation-report-for-2018-carr-fire.htm>

² https://www.fire.ca.gov/media/4jandlhh/top20_acres.pdf

³ <https://dot.ca.gov/-/media/dot-media/programs/asset-management/documents/2021-shsmp-final-10-06-21-a11y.pdf>