

VINCE FONG

MEMBER FOR THE 32ND ASSEMBLY DISTRICT



FACT SHEET

AB 295 – Streamlining Highway Brush Clearing

IN BRIEF

A tire blew out causing the rim to scrape against the pavement and creating sparks that ignited dry vegetation along Highway 299 that caused the Carr Fire. 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 eight 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 requires the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) Division of Maintenance to start roadside maintenance projects within 90 days of the request of local governmental entities, fire departments, fire districts, fire safe councils, and tribal entities if the continued failure to complete these projects poses danger that requires action to prevent the loss or impairment of life, health, property, or essential public services.

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 prioritize Caltrans's efforts to implement defensible space maintenance projects by responding to local requests to start projects that prevent future wildfires and save lives.

SUPPORT

American Property Casualty Insurance Association
Associated Builders and Contractors of California
California Forestry Association
Humboldt Redwood Company LLC

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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>