Zone 0 Guidelines

for Existing Structures

San Diego Fire-Rescue
Community Risk Reduction Division

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Attachments

1. Background

The prevention of wildland fires is not a municipal affair but is instead a matter of statewide concern. Wildfires are extremely costly, not only for property owners and residents but also for local agencies. The wildfire front is not the only source of risk since embers, or firebrands, travel far beyond the area impacted by the front and pose a risk of ignition to a structure or fuel on a site for a longer time.

Since fires ignore civil boundaries, it is necessary that cities, counties, special districts, state agencies, and federal agencies work together to bring raging fires under control. Preventive measures are therefore needed to ensure the preservation of the public peace, health, and safety.

Wind-driven embers are responsible for most home ignitions during wildfires. Accumulated vegetative debris and combustible materials on or immediately adjacent to structures are highly susceptible to ember ignition. Wildfire risk is reduced based on its associated risks by removing or modifying vegetation or other materials that are likely to ignite, including leaf litter, pine needles, dead vegetation, and stored combustible items, including attachments such as gates and fences.

Other combustible items that are likely to be ignited by embers or that may contribute to fire spread include firewood, window boxes, trellises, and petroleum-based trash containers, patio furniture, cushions, mats, and rugs. During Red Flag Warning Days issued by the National Weather Service, trash containers should be temporarily moved into a garage, and other loose materials should be brought inside.

2. Purpose

The purpose of these guidelines is to interpret and implement the "Zone 0" defensible space requirements affecting the area within 5 feet of structures, promulgated by AB3074, the California Wildland Urban Interface (CWUI) Code and local amendments incorporated into San Diego Municipal Code (SDMC) §512.0604, also known as the San Diego Wildland Urban Interface (SDWUI) Code.

The mission of the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department's Community Risk Reduction Division is *"to be the best at saving lives and property through our community risk reduction programs and services."* As part of our mission, these requirements establish the minimum (baseline) state and local laws to bring fires under control. Our focus is on education and progress, not on violations. However, we should also understand that Insurance companies regulated by the Department of Insurance can impose sticker requirements.

Where this flame symbol appears throughout this document, it indicates that your insurance provider may impose a stricter requirement. It may also be a minimum requirement to qualify as a Wildfire Prepared Home through the Institute of Business and Home Safety (IBHS).

3. Scope

These requirements apply to all structures located in a Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone within the City of San Diego. Zone 0 applied to all New Structures on February 28, 2026. It applies to Existing Structures beginning February 28, 2027, and is subject to change at the discretion of the Fire Code Official.

On April 17, 2026, the Board of Forestry and Fire Protection released its updated draft of proposed Zone 0 Defensible Space Regulations. They also allow local fire agencies to implement alternative approaches provided they achieve equivalent fire safety outcomes.

These guidelines have been prepared specifically for existing homeowners to provide guidance on the City of San Diego Fire-Rescue Department's requirements and to establish risk mitigation measures for the accumulation of vegetative debris or combustible materials that are likely to be ignited by embers in our jurisdiction.

Property owners are not required to take any action now, and these guidelines do not require home hardening retrofits. They are being released to help property owners understand what to expect, the time to prepare and how to take voluntary, actionable steps to mitigate risk from wind-driven embers, which are responsible for most home ignitions during wildfires.

4. Zone 0 Requirements

Zone 0 is intended to function as a non-combustible ember-resistant area. Accessory buildings and other structures, such as outbuildings, must be non-combustible or ignition-resistant construction in Zone 0.

Vegetation and other combustible materials within 5 feet of a structure are prohibited unless specifically allowed under the following limited conditions.

4.1 Existing Structures without Ignition-Resistant Construction Features

Combustible materials are prohibited. Individual potted plants and in-ground plants/vegetation are permitted where all the following conditions are met:

1. Combustible mulch is prohibited.
2. All plants shall be Fire-Smart or Herbaceous.
3. All plantings must be maintained in a healthy condition, well-maintained, irrigated and free of dead material.
4. Plant containers shall not exceed a 5-gallon capacity.
5. Plant containers must be non-combustible and placed on the ground or balcony floor.
6. The maximum height of in-ground plants or plants in containers shall not exceed eighteen (18) inches as measured from the soil to the top of the plant.
7. In-ground plants and plant containers shall not be located beneath or in front of windows and a minimum of 2 feet from openings in the structure.
8. In-ground plants and plant containers shall be spaced at least 1.5 times the height of the plant from each other, and 1 foot from decks and stairs.
9. Artificial turf and grass lawns shall maintain a minimum of 2 feet from decks, stairs and the structure walls.
10. The maximum height of grass lawns shall not exceed (3) inches.
11. All plants, plant containers, artificial turf, and grass must be maintained and shall not create horizontal or vertical fuel continuity to adjacent plantings or to the structure.
12. In-ground plants and plant containers shall be spaced at least 1 foot from the structure walls.

The number of individual potted plants may be restricted by your insurance provider and/or the IBHS.

4.2 Existing Structures with Ignition-Resistant Construction Features or are Considered Non-Combustible

Combustible materials are prohibited. Where structures have ignition-resistant construction features or are considered non-combustible, including type I, II or IV construction:

1. Individual potted plants and in-ground plants/vegetation are permitted in accordance with section 4.1, items 1-12.
2. In-ground plants and plant containers do not require a separation distance from the structure walls.

Your insurance provider and/or the IBHS may not allow in-ground vegetation of any kind or artificial turf.

4.3 New Structures

Zone 0 requirements apply to all new structures applying for a building permit on or after February 28, 2026.

See Standard D-2 Zone 0 Requirements for New Structures.

4.4 Historic Structures

Historic Structures may utilize Alternative Compliance mitigation measures that must provide equivalent or greater fire protection via a technical report or may sign an affidavit acknowledging that the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department has identified a condition posed by combustible materials that are likely to be ignited by embers, when strict application would conflict with preservation requirements, provided that substantially similar fire-protection outcomes are achieved.

4.5 Trees Within Zone 0 For Existing and Historic Structures

Trees can contribute to the risk of fire spreading to a structure if they are too close or not properly maintained. To reduce the risk of fire spread, maintenance will be required to minimize ember accumulation and prevent direct flame or radiant heat exposure to the structure.

Trees within Zone 0 will have to meet the following criteria:

1. Existing trees (pre-2026) located within 5 feet of a structure may remain in place if the following conditions apply:
   a. Shall be free of dead, dying, or diseased branches.
   b. No branches or foliage shall be in direct contact with the side of any building or exterior wall of a structure, deck, balcony, or other projections such as wall-mounted HVAC units, light fixtures, window canopies, corbels, roof overhangs, eaves, attic, or dryer vents.
   c. All portions of a tree and branches other than the trunk that extend within 10 feet of a roofline/eaves or chimney stovepipe(s) shall be pruned to maintain clearance.
   d. Leaf litter and vegetative debris beneath the tree shall be regularly removed.
   e. Ladder fuels beneath or adjacent to the tree shall be eliminated to prevent vertical fire spread.
   f. Trees on a slope with greater that 20% may require additional considerations as determined by your Fire Department representative.
2. No separation distance may be required where structures are considered non-combustible, including Type I, II or IV construction, where branches are maintained a minimum of 5 feet from building openings.

   Your insurance provider and/or the IBHS may have stricter requirements for separation distances.

3. As part of an approved Compliance Plan provided by San Diego Fire-Rescue, removal of an existing tree within 5 feet of a structure may be required if the tree presents an unreasonable fire risk due to species, condition, or fuel accumulation.
4. New trees shall be planted and maintained so that the tree's drip line at maturity is a minimum of 10 feet from any combustible structure. This is consistent for all new buildings applying for a building permit as of February 28, 2026.

4.6 Fences and Gates

Where an existing fence or gate is attached and extends out perpendicular from the structure, a minimum 5-foot non-combustible transitional span is required. For fences outside of Zone 0, there are no changes or new requirements.

Where parallel combustible fencing (parallel to the structure) within Zone 0 creates a continuous fuel pathway and is capable of transmitting fire to a structure, it shall be prohibited.

Examples of existing parallel combustible fencing are a single parallel combustible fence between two property owners, or a pair of parallel combustible fences, with each property owner having their own fence.

Your insurance provider and/or the IBHS may require at least one non-combustible fence where a pair of parallel fences is present.

As part of an approved compliance plan provided by San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, all existing fences and gates within 5 feet of the structure must be made of non-combustible material unless they meet these exceptions:

1. Existing Vinyl and fencing without combustible reinforcement may be located within 5 feet of a structure, provided that:
   a. It runs parallel to the structure walls.
   b. The fence is no less than 4 feet from the structure.
   c. It doesn't present an unreasonable fire risk due to Its condition, height or fuel accumulation.
   d. It is maintained free of debris.
   e. No vegetation exists between the fence and the structure.

Existing wood fencing and vegetation may be permitted where it does not create a continuous fuel pathway or increase the potential for ember ignition and fire spread, as determined by the fire code official.

2. New parallel wood fencing is permitted if it is Fire Retardant Treated Wood (FRTW) and complies with all requirements for vinyl fencing, and it is on the California Office of the State Fire Marshal's Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) Products Handbook and approved for exterior use.

Your insurance provider and/or the IBHS may not allow vinyl or FRTW within 5 feet of a structure.

4.7 Decks and Attached Structures

Attached combustible decks and other structures, such as balconies and stairs, do not require replacement because they are considered part of the existing structure. Zone 0 only applies to combustible materials located on or beneath attached horizontal surfaces of decks, balconies, and stairs, which include:

1. Within 5 feet of exterior walls on deck surfaces, items such as firewood, combustible storage, combustible planters, or combustible outdoor furniture are prohibited.
2. The area beneath decks shall remain free of combustible storage and vegetative debris. An 1/8" non-combustible mesh is required to prevent the accumulation of debris for decks 4 feet or less in height.

   An 1/8" non-combustible mesh may also be required by your insurance provider and/or IBHS.
3. Plants in pots may be located on decks or balcony levels of buildings where such plants are maintained at least 5 feet from the adjacent exterior walls of the structure and away from building openings.

4.8 Outdoor Storage and Vehicles

Outdoor storage and vehicles within the 5-foot ember-resistant zone contribute to fire spread due to the potential for flammable and combustible materials. The following examples are prohibited within 5 feet of a structure:

- Long-term storage (extended periods or in place permanently) of flammable or combustible materials.
- Garbage and recycling containers, except on collection days and moved away from homes or into the garage on Red Flag Warning Days issued by the National Weather Service.

- Boats, Recreational Vehicles (RVs), and trailers.
- Temporary vehicle parking is permitted, provided vehicles are operational and not used for combustible storage.

5. Compliance Framework and Implementation

Zone 0 requirements apply to all new structures applying for a building permit on or after February 28, 2026, and will apply to existing structures one year thereafter.

The City of San Diego will prioritize education and voluntary compliance during the first year of implementation, with enforcement beginning on or after February 28, 2027. An individual compliance plan may be established to allow property owners sufficient time to fully comply with these regulations where a specific violation has been observed at their property. A generalized citywide compliance plan on page 14 outlines a phased enforcement approach.

If compliance cannot be achieved, homeowners may be given the option to sign an affidavit acknowledging that the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department has identified a condition posed by materials likely to be ignited by embers.

5.1 Phased Compliance Plan

San Diego Fire-Rescue understands there will be a cost impact on property owners to comply with the State-mandated Zone 0 program. Therefore, a plan to achieve compliance will be phased over a (3) year period until February 28, 2029.

1. Year 0 (beginning Feb 28, 2026) – Education
    a. Proactive door-to-door public education
    b. Community outreach
2. Year 1 (beginning Feb 28, 2027) - Maintenance
    a. Removal of dead vegetation and accumulation of debris
    b. Relocation of firewood piles, trash bins, and other stored combustible materials
    c. Relocation of under-deck storage
    d. Removal of any items or vegetation that creates a significant fire hazard as determined by the fire code official

3. Year 2 (beginning Feb 28, 2028) – Vegetation Removal
    a. Continued focus on the removal of vegetation that does not fully comply with these guidelines
    b. Replacement of existing vegetation with Fire-Smart vegetation
4. Year 3 (beginning Feb 28, 2029) – Full Compliance
    a. Homeowners should attempt to achieve full compliance with Zone 0 regulations by February 28, 2029. This includes replacing fences and gates that do not comply with the provisions of this guidance document.
    b. For detached non-habitable structures like pergolas, gazebos, outbuildings, and unique situations such as historic trees and structures, a longer term Compliance Plan beyond 2029 will be offered to achieve full compliance. If compliance cannot be achieved, homeowners may be given the option to sign an affidavit acknowledging that the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department has identified a condition posed by materials likely to be ignited by embers.

5.2 Steps Property Owners Can Take

1. Keeping roofs, gutters, and the area within 5 feet of a home free of leaves and needles.
2. Removing combustible materials such as firewood near buildings.
3. Ensure that fences and gates attached to buildings are made of non-combustible materials for the first 5 feet.
4. Ensuring that outbuildings within 5 feet are built entirely of non-combustible materials.

6. Definitions (A)

Alternative Compliance. The CWUIC allows homeowners to use materials or construction methods that are not specifically listed in the code if they provide the same level of fire resistance. If a product or design can be shown—through testing or reliable documentation—to resist embers, heat, and flames as well as the approved method, it may be accepted by the Fire Code Official.

Defensible Space. The buffer that a responsible person is required to create or maintain on a property between a structure that could ignite in the event of a fire.

Drip Line. The line on the ground formed by the outermost circumference of a tree's canopy, where water drips from the leaf tips. The drip line of a structure is the outermost edge of the eave that extends beyond the structure, where water drips to the ground.

Fire Code Official. The Fire Rescue Chief of the City of San Diego, or any member of the Fire-Rescue Department designated by the Fire-Rescue Chief to carry out the provisions of the San Diego Fire Code and the San Diego Wildland Urban Interface Code.

Fire-Smart Vegetation. Plants, shrubs, trees, and other vegetation that exhibit properties, such as high moisture content, little accumulation of dead vegetation, and low sap or resin content, that make them less likely to ignite or contribute heat or spread flame in a fire. Fire-Smart vegetation may include both native and ornamental species when their growth characteristics and maintenance reduce ignition potential.

Fuel Modification Zone. A strip of land where combustible vegetation has been thinned or modified, or both, and may be partially or totally replaced with approved Fire-Smart or irrigated plants or both, to provide an acceptable level of risk from vegetation fires. Fuel modification reduces the radiant and convective heat on a structure and provides valuable defensible space for firefighters to make an effective stand against an approaching fire front.

Hazardous Fire Area. Any land which is covered with native and naturalized vegetation, including grass, grain, brush, or forest, whether privately or publicly owned, or which is so situated or is of such inaccessible location that a fire

originating upon such land would result in an abnormally difficult job of suppression or would result in great and unusual damage through fire or resulting in erosion.

Historic Structure. A building designated under the National Register of Historic Places, California Register of Historical Resources, local historic ordinance, or subject to a Mills Act agreement.

Ignition Resistant Construction Features. Building design and materials that comply with Chapter 5 of the California Wildland-Urban Interface Code (previously Ch. 7A of the CBC and R337 of the CRC), which establishes ignition-resistant standards for structures located in Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) areas. These provisions are intended to reduce the likelihood that wind-driven embers ignite a structure during a wildfire.

1. Ignition-resistant exterior walls and siding capable of withstanding flame contact and radiant heat. **IBHS and/or the insurance provider may require non-combustible.**
2. Class A fire-rated roofing assemblies to prevent ember intrusion and surface ignition. **IBHS and/or the insurance provider may require non-combustible with covers.**
3. Ember-resistant vents that limit flame and ember entry into attics and crawl spaces.
4. Protected boxed/enclosed eaves and soffits to reduce ember accumulation in vulnerable areas. **IBHS and/or the insurance provider may require eaves to be closed with non-combustible materials.**
5. Tempered or multi-pane glazing in exterior windows to resist breakage from heat exposure. **IBHS and/or the insurance provider may require dual paned with both tempered.**
6. Fire-resistant decking and attached structures where required. **IBHS and/or the insurance provider may require non-combustible construction.**

Likely to be Ignited by Embers. Combustible materials that can easily catch fire when exposed to small burning embers (firebrands) produced during a wildfire. These materials typically ignite because they are dry, fine, loosely arranged, or capable of trapping embers and allowing them to smolder until flames develop.

Non-Combustible. Non-combustible as applied to building construction material means a material which, in the form in which it is used, is either one of the following:

1. Material of which no part will ignite and burn when subjected to fire. Any material passing ASTM E136 shall be considered non-combustible.
2. Material having a structural base of non-combustible material as defined in Item 1 above, with a surfacing material not over 1/8 inch (3.2 mm) thick which has a flame-spread index of 50 or less.

"Non-combustible" does not apply to surface finish materials. Material required to be non-combustible for reduced clearances to flues, heating appliances or other sources of high temperature shall refer to material conforming to Item 1. No material shall be classed as non-combustible which is subject to increase in combustibility or flame-spread index, beyond the limits herein established, through the effects of age, moisture or other atmospheric condition.

Parallel Combustible Fencing. Two combustible fence assemblies installed adjacent to one another and aligned in the same direction, creating a narrow gap between them that can intensify wind-driven fire spread, flame height, and ember production compared to a single fence.

Responsible Person. Any person or entity who owns or is legally obligated to maintain a structure.

Structure. Any habitable building designed primarily for human occupancy, including for residential, commercial, educational, and industrial uses and accessory buildings adjacent thereto that form a means of transmitting fire to the habitable building.

For the purposes of this guidance document, the term *Structure* is being used to establish the 5 feet of non-combustible zone from the primary home or habitable structure. Non-habitable structures that are not attached to the home (habitable

structure), such as gazebos, pergolas and sheds, in Zone 0, must be non-combustible.

- **Existing Structure.** A structure that was in existence prior to February 28, 2026.
- **New Structure.** A structure applying for a building permit on or after February 28, 2026.

Vegetation. All plants, including trees, shrubs, grass, and perennial or annual plants.

Wildfire. An uncontrolled fire spreading through vegetative fuels that threatens to destroy life property or resources.

Wildland. An area in which development is essentially nonexistent, except for roads, railroads, powerlines and similar facilities.

Wildland Urban Interface. A geographical area identified by the State as a "Fire Hazard Severity Zone" or other areas designated by the City of San Diego Fire-Rescue Department to be at significant risk from wildfires.

Zone 0 (Ember Resistant Zone). The area immediately adjacent to the exterior wall surface, attached deck, stairs or pergola, extending 5 feet on a horizontal plane, or to the property line, whichever comes first.

7. Items Likely to be Ignited by Embers (B)

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Likely to be Ignited by Embers

Vegetation and Organic Materials

- Dry leaves or pine needles
- Bark mulch or shredded wood mulch
- Dead grass or weeds
- Dry plant material or unmaintained vegetation
- Accumulated leaf litter in landscape beds

Stored Combustible Materials

- Firewood or lumber
- Wood chips or compost piles
- Cardboard or paper products
- Stored building materials

Combustible Landscape Features

- Wood planters or planter boxes
- Wooden landscape edging
- Timber retaining walls
- Trellises or wood lattice near the structure

Common Locations of Ember Ignition

- Landscape beds next to exterior walls
- Under decks or stairs
- Against fences attached to the structure
- In corners where debris accumulates
- In roof gutters or the base of walls

8. Fire-Smart Vegetation (C)

All plants will burn under extreme fire weather conditions, such as drought. However, plants burn at different intensities and rates of consumption. Fire-smart plants burn at a relatively low intensity, slow rates of spread and with short flame lengths. The following are characteristics of fire-smart vegetation:


Little or No Accumulation of Dead Vegetation


Nonresinous Plants (Willow, Poplar or Tulip Trees)


Low Volume of Total Vegetation


Plants with High Live Fuel Moisture


Drought-Tolerant Plants


Stands Without Ladder Fuels


Plants Requiring Little Maintenance


Fire-Resistant Woody Stems (Hard to ignite)

9. Tree Guidance (D)

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Guidance on Trees

Research from the National Institute of Standards and Technology (Technical Note 2205) shows that most home fires are caused by wind-driven embers, not by flames from nearby trees. When trees are well maintained—pruned, free of dead material, and not touching the home—they are unlikely to produce enough heat to start a fire.

"Can I keep my tree?"

- My tree is healthy
- No contact with structure
- 10ft clearance from the roof and chimney
- No fuel build-up beneath the tree

"Why do trees become fire risks?"

- Embers collect in leaves and debris
- Flames climb from the ground (ladder fuels) into the canopy
- Branches touching homes = direct fire path
- Radiant heat from dense vegetation ignites structures

Maintains 10ft clearance from roof and chimney

Branches extend within 10ft at roofline and chimney
Dead and unmaintained branches present
Leaf litter and debris accumulation below tree

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Guidance on Trees

Right Tree, Right Place, Well Maintained!

Select trees that fit the space and allow room for full growth. Keep them trimmed away from your home and clear of debris underneath. Proper placement and care will help reduce wildfire risk over time.

When is tree removal required?

- High risk species (resinous, heavy ember production)
- Poor conditions (dead/diseased)
- Inability to maintain clearance
- Excessive fuel accumulation

How do I maintain my tree?

- Prune: Remove dead/dying branches
- Separate: Keep branches off structures
- Clear: Remove leaves/debris underneath
- Thin: Remove ladder fuels (shrubs, low branches, minimum 6' or 1/3 the height of the tree)

10. Phased Compliance Timeline (E)

11. Voluntary Home Hardening Features (F)

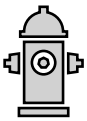
The following items should be considered in hardening a home against wildfire:

1. When it is time to replace your roof, replace it with roof assembly classified as Class A when tested in accordance with ASTM E108 or UL 790.
2. Block any spaces at the eaves between your roof covering and sheathing with noncombustible materials (bird stops).
3. Install a noncombustible rain gutter and downspouts. Install rain gutter covers to prevent the accumulation of leaves and debris in the gutters.
4. Cover your chimney and stovepipe outlets with a noncombustible, corrosion-resistant metal mesh screen (spark arrestor), with 3/8-inch to 1/2-inch openings.
5. Install ember- and flame-resistant vents. Choose products that have been approved and labeled as OSFM Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Products. A temporary solution is to cover the vent openings with non-combustible and corrosion-resistant mesh with 1/16-inch to 1/8-inch openings.
6. Caulk and plug gaps greater than 1/8 inch around exposed rafters and blocking to prevent ember intrusion into the attic or other enclosed spaces.
7. Inspect exterior siding for dry rot, gaps, cracks and warping. Caulk or plug gaps greater than 1/8 inch in siding and replace any damaged boards, including those with dry rot.
8. Install weather stripping to fill gaps greater than 1/8 inches between garage doors and door frames to prevent ember intrusion. The weather stripping must be compliant with UL Standard 10C.
9. When it's time to replace your windows, replace them with multipaned windows that have at least one pane of tempered glass. Choose products that have been approved and labeled as OSFM Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Products.
10. When it's time to replace your siding or deck, use noncombustible, ignition-resistant, or other OSFM-approved Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Products.
11. Cover openings to operable skylights with noncombustible metal mesh screen with openings in the screen not to exceed 1/8 inch.

12. Install a minimum 6-inch metal flashing, applied vertically on the exterior of the wall at the deck-to-wall intersection to protect the combustible siding material.
13. Enclose openings beneath decks or cantilevered construction with one of the materials. Openings beneath decks which are four feet or less above grade can be covered with a noncombustible and corrosion- resistant mesh with 1/16-inch to 1/8-inch openings.
14. Remove or replace combustible fences within 5 feet of the structure. Detached fences that are located within 5 feet of the structure should be replaced with noncombustible or ignition-resistant building materials.

These guidelines are not enforceable until February 28, 2027, and are subject to change. They are being provided to allow homeowners time to prepare until these guidelines are finalized. If you would like to request a Home Risk Assessment, click on the Blue Fire Hydrant.

If you have any questions about these guidelines, please click on the Red Fire Hydrant and share them with us so we can develop a comprehensive Frequently Asked Questions for property owners.



To stay informed about this and other Community Risk Reduction Programs and Services, you can click on the Silver Fire Hydrant and subscribe to our notifications system.