

## **Understanding Brush Clearance and Defensible Space**

### **LAFD vs. Los Angeles County Fire Department (LACoFD)**

Wildfires are a serious concern throughout Los Angeles. Dry vegetation, hot weather, and strong winds can allow fires to spread quickly through neighborhoods and hillsides. Because of this risk, local fire departments require property owners to clear hazardous vegetation and maintain defensible space around homes and structures.

In the Los Angeles area, two different fire agencies enforce these rules: the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD) and the Los Angeles County Fire Department (LACoFD). While both agencies have similar goals and follow California wildfire safety laws, there are some differences in how the programs are managed depending on where your property is located.

This guide explains those differences and helps residents understand what they need to do to stay compliant and keep their property safer from wildfire.

### **Who Enforces Brush Clearance?**

The first thing to understand is which fire department is responsible for your property.

#### **Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD)**

LAFD is responsible for brush clearance within the City of Los Angeles. The department enforces these rules under the Los Angeles Municipal Code.

LAFD firefighters and inspectors conduct brush clearance inspections in designated fire zones. If a property does not meet clearance requirements, the owner may receive a notice asking them to correct the problem. If the issue is not fixed, the City may issue fines or hire a contractor to clear the vegetation. The property owner is then billed for the work.

#### **Los Angeles County Fire Department (LACoFD)**

LACoFD oversees brush clearance in unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County and cities that contract with the County for fire protection services.

These rules are enforced under the Los Angeles County Fire Code and other county ordinances. LACoFD also works with the County Agricultural Commissioner's Weed Abatement Program when vegetation hazards are involved.

If a property owner does not comply with brush clearance requirements, the County may issue citations or clear the vegetation and add the cost to the owner's property tax bill.

### **What Is Defensible Space?**

Both fire departments follow California Public Resources Code Section 4291, which requires 100 feet of defensible space around structures in wildfire-prone areas.

Defensible space is the area around a building where vegetation and combustible materials are managed to reduce fire risk. This space helps slow or stop the spread of wildfire and gives firefighters a safer area to defend homes.

If your property is smaller than 100 feet, the requirement usually extends to the property line.

### **Brush Clearance Requirements**

Although the programs are slightly different, both departments require similar vegetation management.

#### **In the City of Los Angeles (LAFD)**

LAFD typically requires property owners to:

- Maintain 100 feet of defensible space around structures.
- Remove dry grass, weeds, and brush.
- Maintain spacing between shrubs and trees.
- Trim tree branches so they do not touch or hang close to structures.
- Remove dead or dying vegetation.
- Clear vegetation near roofs, chimneys, fences, and decks.
- Reduce combustible materials near homes.

LAFD may refer to this area as a fuel modification zone, which must be maintained throughout the fire season.

#### **In Los Angeles County (LACoFD)**

LACoFD requires similar vegetation management, including:

- Maintaining 100 feet of defensible space around structures.
- Cutting grass to a maximum height (typically around 3 inches).
- Removing dry weeds, dead vegetation, and combustible debris.
- Maintaining spacing between plants and trees.
- Clearing vegetation around structures and along roadways for emergency access.

The County operates an Annual Defensible Space Inspection Program, where inspectors check properties located in fire hazard areas.

### **Inspections and Notices**

#### **LAFD Inspections**

In the City of Los Angeles, LAFD conducts inspections in designated fire zones. If violations are found, the department sends a notice to the property owner describing what needs to be corrected.

If the issues are not resolved within the required time, the City may hire contractors to perform the work and charge the property owner.

#### **LACoFD Inspections**

LACoFD runs a countywide inspection program each year. Property owners receive annual mailed notices explaining brush clearance requirements and deadlines.

If inspectors find violations, follow-up inspections may occur. If the problems are not corrected, the County may clear the vegetation and add the cost to the property owner's tax bill.

### **Why the Rules May Look Different**

Both departments follow the same California wildfire safety laws, but local governments may add additional requirements based on conditions in their area.

These differences may depend on factors such as:

- Local wildfire history
- Hillside terrain and vegetation
- Population density
- Fire Hazard Severity Zone classifications

Because of this, residents may see different inspection schedules, notices, or enforcement processes depending on whether they live in the City of Los Angeles or unincorporated Los Angeles County.

### **What Property Owners Should Do**

Property owners can take several steps to stay compliant and reduce wildfire risk.

1. Confirm your jurisdiction (City of Los Angeles or Los Angeles County).
2. Review any brush clearance notices you receive.

3. Maintain 100 feet of defensible space, or to your property line.
4. Regularly remove dead vegetation and dry debris.
5. Address violations quickly to avoid penalties.

If you are unsure which fire department oversees your property, you can:

- Check your property tax statement
- Contact LAFD or LACoFD
- Review Fire Hazard Severity Zone maps from CAL FIRE

### **Slope Requirements (Hillsides)**

Properties located on slopes require special attention when it comes to brush clearance and defensible space. Wildfires behave differently on hillsides than on flat ground. Because heat rises, fires tend to move faster and more intensely uphill, preheating vegetation above them and making it easier for flames to spread. As a result, homes built on or near slopes are often at a greater risk during a wildfire.

For this reason, both LAFD and LACoFD may require additional vegetation clearance and spacing on slopes, especially on the downhill side of structures.

### **Vegetation Management on Slopes**

In addition to increasing clearance distances, vegetation on slopes must be properly spaced and maintained to reduce fire risk. This includes:

- **Horizontal spacing:** Shrubs and plants should be spaced farther apart on steeper slopes to prevent fire from spreading across vegetation.
- **Vertical spacing:** There should be enough space between the ground, shrubs, and tree branches to prevent fire from climbing upward. This helps eliminate what are known as ladder fuels.
- **Ladder fuel removal:** Ladder fuels are plants or branches that allow fire to move from low vegetation into trees. These should be removed or trimmed to reduce fire intensity.
- **Tree maintenance:** Tree branches should be trimmed so they do not hang too close to the ground or to other vegetation. Trees should also be spaced apart to prevent fire from moving between them.
- **Dead vegetation removal:** Dry grass, dead plants, and fallen debris must be cleared regularly, as they can easily ignite and spread fire.

### **Why These Requirements Matter**

On slopes, even a small fire can quickly become dangerous because it gains speed and intensity as it moves uphill. Without proper clearance:

- Flames can reach structures more quickly
- Fire can spread from plant to plant and into trees
- Heat and embers can ignite roofs, decks, and nearby materials

Creating additional defensible space on slopes helps slow the fire down, reduce its intensity, and give firefighters a better chance to protect the structure.

### **Inspections and Site-Specific Requirements**

Both LAFD and LACoFD recognize that every property is different. Because of this, inspectors may apply site specific requirements based on:

- The steepness of the slope
- The type and density of vegetation
- The location of the structure on the hillside
- Fire Hazard Severity Zone classification

Property owners may receive specific instructions in their inspection notices if additional clearance or vegetation management is required.

### **What Property Owners Should Do**

If your property is on a slope, you should:

- Pay close attention to vegetation below your structure, especially on downhill areas
- Increase spacing between plants and trees as the slope becomes steeper
- Regularly remove dry grass, weeds, and dead vegetation
- Trim trees and remove ladder fuels
- Follow any additional requirements provided by inspectors

**Conclusion**

Both the Los Angeles Fire Department and the Los Angeles County Fire Department work toward the same goal: protecting homes, lives, and communities from wildfire.

Although their inspection programs and enforcement procedures may differ slightly, the main requirement remains the same maintaining defensible space and removing hazardous vegetation around structures.

By staying informed and maintaining their property, residents play an important role in reducing wildfire risk and helping protect their communities.

## Citations

### **Official LAFD Sources**

Los Angeles Fire Department — Brush Clearance Requirements

<https://lafd.org/fire-prevention/brush/brush-clearance-requirements>

Los Angeles Fire Department — Brush Program Overview

<https://lafd.org/fire-prevention/brush>

Los Angeles Fire Department — Brush Clearance Tips for Homeowners

<https://lafd.com/fire-prevention/brush/introduction/brush-clearance-tips-homeowners>

Los Angeles Fire Department — Brush Introduction & FAQs

<https://lafd.org/fire-prevention/brush/introduction>

Los Angeles Fire Department — Inspection Process

<https://lafd.org/fire-prevention/brush/inspection-process>

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### **Official LACoFD Sources**

Los Angeles County Fire Department — Fire Hazard Reduction Programs (Defensible Space)

<https://fire.lacounty.gov/fire-hazard-reduction-programs/>

Los Angeles County Fire Department — Annual Defensible Space Notice (2025)

<https://fire.lacounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Annual-Defensible-Space-Notice-2025-English-Spanish-03072025.pdf>

Los Angeles County Fire Department — Defensible Space Inspection Program Details (2025)

<https://fire.lacounty.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Annual-Defensible-Space-Inspection-Program-Details-2025-02182025.pdf>

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### **Statewide / Regulatory Context**

California Public Resources Code Section 4291 — Defensible Space (State Law)

*General State Law Text (PRC 4291)* — California Public Law

[https://california.public.law/codes/public\\_resources\\_code\\_section\\_4291](https://california.public.law/codes/public_resources_code_section_4291)

California Public Resources Code Section 4291 — Legislative Information

[https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=PRC&sectionNum=4291](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=PRC&sectionNum=4291)

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### **Local Ordinances & Municipal Code**

Los Angeles Municipal Code — Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone Requirements

[https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/los\\_angeles/latest/lamc/0-0-0-349903](https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/los_angeles/latest/lamc/0-0-0-349903)

Los Angeles Municipal Code — Defensible Space Requirements Section

[https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/los\\_angeles/latest/lamc/0-0-0-363244](https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/los_angeles/latest/lamc/0-0-0-363244)

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### **County Codes & Weed Abatement**

Los Angeles County Municipal Code — Ordinances (General Code Library — for Weed Abatement & Fire Hazard Laws)

[https://library.municode.com/ca/los\\_angeles\\_county/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances](https://library.municode.com/ca/los_angeles_county/codes/code_of_ordinances)

Los Angeles County Agricultural Commissioner — Weed Abatement Program

<https://acwm.lacounty.gov/all-about-weed-abatement/>

Los Angeles County — Property Owner Responsibilities (Weed Abatement / Vegetation Clearance)

<https://acwm.lacounty.gov/property-owner-responsibility/>

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**State & Wildfire Preparedness Context**

CAL FIRE Defensible Space Guidance <https://www.fire.ca.gov/dspace>

CAL FIRE — 2025 Local Responsibility Area Fire Hazard Severity Zone Maps

<https://lcf.ca.gov/cal-fire-releases-2025-local-responsibility-area-fire-hazard-severity-zone-maps-for-los-angeles-county/>

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**Slope & Fire Behavior (Supporting Sources)**

<https://www.readyforwildfire.org/prepare-for-wildfire/defensible-space/>

University of California Agriculture & Natural Resources (UC ANR)

<https://ucanr.edu/blogs/blogcore/postdetail.cfm?postnum=25268>

Fire Safe Marin – Topography & Fire Behavior

<https://firesafemarin.org/create-a-fire-smart-yard/topography/>

City of Santa Cruz — Defensible Space Guidelines

<https://www.santacruzca.gov/files/assets/city/v/1/oes/documents/general-guidelines-for-creating-defensible-space.pdf>

National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) — Firewise USA

<https://www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/wildfire/firewise-usa>