



ADMINISTRATIVE RULING 26-803

APPLICABILITY of the VCWUIC and VCFD STANDARD 515

APPROVED BY:

Joe Morelli
FIRE MARSHAL

Subject:

2025 Ventura County Wildland-Urban Interface Code (VCWUIC), Sections 604.6 and 604.7. Installation, maintenance and spacing of plants, trees and other vegetation within required defensible space and fuel modification zones; VCFD Standard 515.

Code Requirements:

Ventura County Wildland-Urban Interface Code (VCWUIC) and State Codes: Public Resource Code (PRC) 4291, Government Code (GC) 51182, & California Fire Code (CFC), require a minimum 100-foot defensible space zone around buildings.

The codes specify that the amount of vegetation clearance needs to be such that it will not form a means of rapidly transmitting fire from other nearby vegetation to a structure or vice versa. The Codes also state fuels (vegetation) shall be maintained and spaced. The Ventura County Fire Department is required to enforce, at a minimum, the CAL FIRE and State Fire Marshal requirements within defensible space zones.

Discussion:

The intent of Standard 515 is to provide spacing specifications for design, installation and maintenance of plants, trees, and vegetation. Fuel mosaic spacing requirements were first introduced under VCFPD Ordinance 27, January 1, 2011, and carried forward in all subsequent ordinances that adopted California Code of Regulations (CCR) Title 24 provisions.

Review of defensible space zones that did not have any spacing between plants, trees and vegetation, or were using the size and spacing under previous ordinances, indicated too much dead understory and material within the landscaped and mosaic area. The concern is the amount of heat and ember production this would create. Additional review was conducted of the recent fires within Ventura County and Los Angeles County over the past several years. Areas that did not have any spacing and/or where too large of a fuel mosaic existed, had the fire burn completely through the defensible space zone exposing homes to greater heat, flames and embers.

Additionally, over the past years, other fire agencies, including CAL FIRE, have issued plant and tree spacing requirements for defensible space zones.

To address the concerns regarding excessive fuel loading within defensible space zones, including fuel mosaic requirements, and to protect life and property, a new VCFD Standard 515 *Defensible Space and Fuel Modification Zones* was originally issued on April 19, 2019, to specify spacing requirements for plants, trees and vegetation within a defensible space zone. The standard has been revised over the years to provide better clarity of the requirements. This Administrative Ruling addresses the applicability of the VCWUIC and Standard 515 as it relates to existing defensible space zones with landscaping installed prior to April 19, 2019. Prior tree, plant and fuel mosaic requirements of Ordinance 30 Sections W105.1.1 and W105.1.2 were repealed on April 19, 2019, and replaced with Standard 515 under the previous version of Administrative Ruling 17-806 issued on April 19, 2019.

Requirements:

The VCWUIC and Standard 515 are applicable to all new and replanted species in required defensible space and fuel modification zones (FMZ).

VCWUIC, Section 604.3.1 and VCFD Standard 515, Chapter 4, have retrofit provisions for defensible space and FMZ in existence prior to April 19, 2019. Upon notification by the fire department, there is a four (4) year period in which to bring the existing installation into reasonable compliance with the VCWUIC and Standard 515. It is not the intent of the VCFD to require indiscriminate removal of trees and vegetation, but to reduce the risk of fire exposure to persons and buildings by thinning, reducing and possible removal of vegetative fuels within the defensible space / FMZ to provide reasonable compliance with the VCWUIC and Standard 515.

Retrofit Process:

The VCFD Community Wildfire Preparedness (CWP) Division will notify property owners (or their representative) that the defensible space / FMZ on their property is subject to retrofit under the VCWUIC and Standard 515. The CWP Division will meet on-site with the owner to conduct a survey of the defensible space / FMZ to determine how the requirements of the VCWUIC and Standard 515 will apply to the existing area, identify priority areas, and answer any questions that may arise. For larger properties, such as HOA common area, government owned open space parcel, etc., a plan and a timetable may be required to be submitted for review and approval by the CWP Division.

For additional information or for questions regarding this Administrative Ruling, please contact the Community Wildfire Preparedness Division Manager at (805) 389-9759 or email fhpr@venturacounty.gov