



STANDARD 517

APPLICATION OF MULCH AND CHIPS IN DEFENSIBLE SPACE

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Please note that the Fire Department assumes no liability for any damages incurred directly or indirectly as a result of any errors, omissions, or discrepancies between this standard and any applicable law. It is the sole responsibility of the person or persons conducting any work pursuant to this standard to ensure the work complies with any and all applicable codes, ordinances, and regulations.

CHAPTER 1 – ADMINISTRATION

1.1 Purpose. This standard addresses the concerns and issues associated with fires starting within or spreading from combustible mulch and wood chips that have been spread within the defensible space around structures. These fires pose hazards to emergency responders, the surrounding communities, and the wildland area. This standard is intended to provide basic fire safety measures that should limit exposure of structures to fire and fire-spread within the defensible space zone. For questions regarding this standard, please contact the Fire Hazard Reduction Program Unit (FHRP) at fhrp@ventura.org or 805-389-9759.

1.2 Scope. This standard provides the requirements of the Fire Department, under Ventura County Fire Code (VCFC). This standard applies to the application of combustible mulch and wood chips in defensible-space zones. This standard, as applicable, shall also be used in conjunction with Ventura County Resource Management Agency (RMA) (Planning & Environmental Health Divisions), Ventura County Agricultural Commissioner, VCFC, Ventura County Ordinance Code (VCOC), and other applicable laws and regulations in effect in incorporated cities. Where any conflict occurs with the requirements of this standard and other laws, regulations, rules, and codes, the most restrictive application shall apply, unless prohibited by law.

1.3 Applicability. Any parcel owner(s) who spread combustible mulch and/or wood chips in any required defensible space are subject to the requirements of the VCFC and this standard.

1.4 Permits. No additional permits or plans are required to spread mulch and/or wood chips within the defensible space.

1.5 Modifications. Increases in the limitations of this standard may be considered on a case-by-case basis. A written request and justification prepared by a qualified expert, acceptable to the Fire Prevention Bureau, that is based upon site-specific conditions shall be submitted and approved prior

to land application. Such written requests shall be made by the property owner of record. Additional measures to prevent the ignition and spread of fire shall be provided as approved by the Fire Prevention Bureau.

CHAPTER 2 – DEFINITIONS

Compost and Compostable Material. Any organic material that when accumulated is capable of rapid decomposition and generating temperatures of at least 122°F.

Contaminants. Pieces of non-compostable solid waste that includes, but not limited to, paper, plastics, metals, glass, clothing, painted or treated wood, plywood, and other similar materials.

Disposal. The final deposition of solid waste onto property. Disposal includes, but is not limited to, the following activities:

- a) Application of mulch exceeding an average of 12 inches in total depth, except as provided for in Section 4704 of the Ventura County Ordinance Code.
- b) Mulch containing contaminants exceeding 0.1% of the total volume at the time of application.
- c) Storing or stockpiling of compostable material on land for a combined period of time greater than six (6) months, or agricultural and green material for 12 months on prime agricultural land as defined in Government Code Section 51201, unless the Regional Water Quality Control Board, in consultation with the Resource Management Agency's Environmental Health Division, makes a written finding that the material may remain within the operations area for a period of time greater than specified.

Hazardous Fire Area (HFA). Land which is covered with grass, grain, brush, or forest, whether privately or publicly owned, which is so situated or is of such inaccessible location that a fire originating upon such land would present an abnormally difficult job of suppression or would result in great and unusual damage through fire or resulting erosion and includes any location within 500 feet of a forest or brush, grass, or grain covered land, exclusive of small individual lots or parcels of land located outside of a brush, forest, grass, or grain covered area. Such areas are designated by the Fire Code Official. The Fire Code Official is authorized to utilize, as references, the definition of Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Area, State SRA maps, Local Agency Fire Hazard Severity Zone Maps designated pursuant to California Government Code, Sections 51175 through 51189, and the International Wildland-Urban Interface Code. Areas classified as a Hazardous Fire Area are designated as a Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) area.

Invasive Species. A non-indigenous species that adversely affect the habitats they invade economically, environmentally, or ecologically. An inventory of invasive plants is maintained by the California Invasive Plant Council (<https://www.cal-ipc.org/plants/inventory>).

Organic Mulch. A compostable material limited to landscape waste and crop production byproducts consisting of leaves, yard trimmings, wood waste, branches and stumps, and whole plants/trees that have been mechanically reduced in size and have been composted prior to application.

Wood Chips. Shall be from trees only. No hazardous brush, including but not limited to sage, coyote brush, or chamise is allowed. Chips should average two (2) to four (4) inches in length. Wood chips are not required to be composted prior to applications.

CHAPTER 3 – GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

3.1 Type of Material. Combustible mulch and wood chips consisting of invasive species, hazardous trees, non-native vegetation, pine needles, leaves, grass, and inorganic materials, such as shredded rubber, are not allowed within the required defensible space zone. Finely grounded or stringy types of material which can ignite faster and burn more readily shall not be used. These materials include, but are not limited to, Gorilla Hair (shredded redwood or western red cedar) and coconut fiber.

3.2 Land Application Specifications. The land application of combustible mulch and wood chips shall not exceed three (3) inches in depth within the required defensible space. Keep combustible mulch 12-inches away from any tree trunk or combustible fences.

3.3 Composted Material. Organic mulch shall be clean and already composted.

3.4 Contaminants. Organic mulch and wood chips shall be free of any contaminants.

3.5 Delivery for Land Application. Organic mulch and wood chips delivered to a parcel for land application shall be applied within seven (7) days of delivery or placed into piles complying with VCFD Standard 516. At no time shall any pile exceed six (6) feet in height.

3.6 Limitations. Land application within the required defensible space shall be in accordance with Table 3.6. Land application outside the required defensible space shall be in accordance with Ventura County Ordinance Code and VCFD Standard-516, as applicable.

Table 3.6 – Land Application Limitations within Defensible Space of a Structure

Zone	Distance from Structure	Requirement of Application
0	0 - 5 feet	Land application of combustible mulch is prohibited per VCFC. Non-combustible materials, such as gravel and decompose granite (DG) may be used.
1	>5 - 30 feet	Limited non-continuous use of organic mulch is allowed. Wood chips are not allowed. Use a mosaic (non-uniform) pattern with a maximum application area of 20 feet x 20 feet and a minimum 5-foot separation between application areas.
2	>30 - 100 feet	Organic mulch and wood chips are allowed. There is no limitation on application areas.
3	>100 - 200 feet	If additional defensible space is required for the parcel beyond 100 feet, the requirements will be the same as Zone 2, or as determined by the Fire Prevention Bureau.