

Mercantile Occupancy - Group M

2025 California Building Code §309 - Retail and merchandise sales

Purpose. Group M covers buildings and spaces used for the display and sale of merchandise where the public has access, including the stock of goods incidental to the sales use.

1. Typical Group M Uses

- Department stores, drug stores, markets and general retail stores.
- Retail or wholesale stores and sales rooms with public access.
- Greenhouses used for display and sale of plants where the public enters the greenhouse.
- Motor fuel-dispensing facilities, subject to additional special-use requirements.

Code reference: 2025 CBC §309.1

2. Important Classification Boundaries

- A warehouse or stock area that is not merely incidental to sales can require Group S classification.
- Manufacturing, repair or processing areas can require Group F classification.
- Restaurants or food/drink assembly areas can be Group A-2 rather than Group M.
- Hazardous-material displays and storage are limited by special mercantile/control-area quantity provisions; exceeding permitted quantities can change the hazard classification.
- Motor fuel-dispensing facilities must also comply with CBC §406.7 and applicable California Fire Code fuel requirements.

Code reference: 2025 CBC §§309.2-309.3, 307 and 414.2.5

3. Common Fire Inspection / Plan Review Items

- Exit access aisles and merchandise displays that maintain required egress width.
- High-piled or rack storage in retail backrooms and sales floors.
- Combustible storage height and clearance below sprinklers.
- Portable fire extinguisher placement and fire alarm/sprinkler system access.
- Hazardous-material/flammable-liquid retail displays and maximum allowable quantities.
- Seasonal decorations, temporary displays and extension-cord/power-strip use.

4. Fire & Life-Safety Review Considerations

- Verify the actual use of each room, tenant space and outdoor/rooftop area; a building can contain more than one occupancy group.
- Determine occupant load and means-of-egress requirements under CBC Chapter 10.
- Evaluate automatic sprinkler and fire alarm requirements under CBC/CFC Chapter 9.
- Check allowable building height/area, construction type and occupancy separation requirements under CBC Chapters 5 through 7.
- Maintain required fire department access, water supply, addressing, key-box access and fire protection equipment access as applicable.
- Changes in use or occupancy can trigger a new code analysis even when little or no construction work is proposed.

Code reference: 2025 CBC Chapters 5-10; 2025 CFC Chapters 5, 9 and applicable occupancy/hazard chapters

Primary References

References: 2025 California Building Code §309 - Mercantile Group M; 2025 California Fire Code §203.8 - Mercantile Group M; 2025 CBC §414.2.5 - hazardous materials in Group M and S; 2024 International Building Code Chapter 3

Final requirements depend on the actual use, occupant load, building size and construction, mixed occupancies, hazardous materials and fire-protection systems. The fire/building code official makes the final occupancy-classification determination.