

Special Events, Tents & Canopies

2025 California Fire Code — Chapter 31 | Related Chapters 10, 41 & 61 | California Title 19

Purpose. This handout summarizes commonly applicable fire and life-safety requirements for outdoor assembly events, temporary tents, fabric shelters commonly called canopies, membrane structures, temporary special event structures, cooking booths, generators and related event operations. Project-specific permit conditions and other agency approvals may also apply.

1. Code Terminology — Tents, Canopies & Special Event Structures

The code classification depends on how the temporary structure is constructed and used. A common event “pop-up canopy” made of fabric or pliable material can meet the California Fire Code definition of a tent, while other canopies or stages may fall under the temporary special event structure provisions.

- Tent: a structure, enclosure, umbrella structure or shelter, with or without sidewalls or drops, constructed of fabric or pliable material and supported in a manner other than by air or the contents it protects.
- Temporary special event structure: a temporary ground-supported structure, platform, stage, stage scaffolding or rigging, canopy, audio/visual tower or similar structure not otherwise regulated within the scope of the California Building Code.
- A rigid architectural canopy has a separate code definition. The actual construction and use determine whether Chapter 31 tent provisions, temporary special event structure provisions, California Building Code requirements, or a combination applies.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§202 and 3102; 2025 CBC §3105 for permanent/architectural awnings and canopies.

2. When a Fire Department Permit Is Required

ACTIVITY / CONDITION	2025 CFC PERMIT REQUIREMENT
Tent / temporary membrane structure / temporary special event structure	Operational permit when area exceeds 400 sq. ft.; a corresponding construction permit is required to erect the structure when §105.5.51 applies.
Open-sided tent exception	No §105.5.51 operational permit solely under this threshold when an individual open-sided tent is 700 sq. ft. or less, multiple side-by-side tents total 700 sq. ft. or less without a 12-ft fire break, and at least 12 ft separates the tent(s) from structures and other tents.
Outdoor assembly event	Operational permit when planned attendance exceeds 1,000 persons.
Carnival or fair	Operational permit required.
Temporary heating or cooking in a tent / membrane structure	Operational permit required.
Open flames / candles in assembly or dining areas	Operational permit required under §105.5.38 when applicable.
Pyrotechnic special effects / fireworks	Separate permits and California fireworks law requirements apply.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§105.5.5, 105.5.38, 105.5.40, 105.5.44, 105.5.51, 105.5.55 and 105.6.25.

3. Plans, Site Layout & Use Period

- Tents and membrane structures requiring a permit may not be erected, operated or maintained before permit approval by the fire code official.
- For tents or membrane structures with an occupant load of 50 or more, the permit application must include a detailed site and floor plan showing means of egress, seating capacity and arrangement, and the location and type of heating and electrical equipment. A structural-stability analysis is also required.
- Temporary tents, air-supported, air-inflated and tensioned membrane structures are limited to not more than 180 days within a 12-month period on a single premises.
- Temporary special event structures erected under ANSI E1.21 are limited to six consecutive weeks and require approval from both the fire code official and building official when a permit is required.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§3103.2–3103.6 and 3105.1–3105.4.

4. Location, Separation & Fire Apparatus Access

- Approved fire apparatus access must be provided in accordance with CFC §503 and kept unobstructed throughout the event.
- Temporary tents or membrane structures must generally be at least 20 ft from lot lines, buildings, other tents or membrane structures, parked vehicles and internal-combustion engines. Support ropes and guy wires count as part of the tent for measuring separation.
- The 20-ft separation between tents is not required for tents not used for cooking when the combined floor area does not exceed 15,000 sq. ft., subject to the other conditions and exceptions in §3103.7.2.
- A tent or membrane structure 15,000 sq. ft. or larger must generally be at least 50 ft from another tent or structure unless joined by a compliant corridor.
- Maintain an unobstructed fire-break passageway or fire road at least 12 ft wide around all sides of tents and membrane structures unless otherwise approved.
- Temporary special event structures must not interfere with building egress or encroach on fire apparatus access roads.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§3103.7.1–3103.7.6, 3105.7 and 503.

5. Structural Stability, Anchorage & Weather

- Tents and membrane structures and their appurtenances must be designed and installed to withstand weather and prevent collapse; structural-stability documentation must be furnished to the fire code official.
- Water-filled vessels may be used for anchorage only when approved and used in accordance with the manufacturer's load specifications and instructions.
- Tents or membrane structures that exceed one story, exceed 7,500 sq. ft., or have an occupant capacity greater than 1,000 must comply with the applicable California Building Code structural load provisions cited by §3103.8.
- Outdoor assembly events may be required to designate a qualified weather-monitoring person responsible for initiating mitigation, suspension, cancellation or evacuation under the approved public safety plan.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§3103.8–3103.9 and 3107.4.2; 2025 CBC §§1606–1609 as referenced.

6. Flame Resistance, Labels & Documentation

- All tent fabrics and interior decorative fabrics or materials must be flame resistant in accordance with California Title 19, Division 1, Chapter 8.
- Tent tops and sidewalls must be made from approved flame-resistant treated fabric or inherently flame-resistant fabric approved and listed by the California State Fire Marshal.
- Before permit approval, required registration/documentation must verify testing by a California State Fire Marshal-approved testing laboratory, or approved flame-retardant treatment, as applicable.
- Tents and membrane structures must have required permanent labeling identifying the material, manufacturer and flame-resistance compliance; treatment information is required when the fabric has been treated.
- Certificates of Flame Resistance or other documentation must be available upon request of the enforcing authority.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§3104.2–3104.4; CCR Title 19, Div. 1, §§315, 332–335 and Ch. 8.

7. Means of Egress From Temporary Tents

Exits must be distributed at approximately equal intervals around the perimeter, and all points within the tent or membrane structure must be 100 ft or less from an exit. The minimum number and width of exits are determined by occupant load.

OCCUPANT LOAD	MIN. EXITS	MIN. WIDTH EACH — TENT	MIN. WIDTH EACH — MEMBRANE
10–199	2	72 in.	36 in.
200–499	3	72 in.	72 in.
500–999	4	96 in.	72 in.
1,000–1,999	5	120 in.	96 in.
2,000–2,999	6	120 in.	96 in.
Over 3,000	7*	120 in.	96 in.

* When occupant load exceeds 3,000, total means-of-egress width must also satisfy the 0.2-inch-per-person calculation in CFC §3103.11.2.

- Exit openings from tents must remain open unless covered by a compliant flame-resistant curtain. Curtain supports must be at least 80 in. above floor level and arranged so the open curtain does not obstruct the exit.
- Exit doors must swing in the direction of exit travel.

- Public aisles without fixed seating must be smooth, unobstructed and at least 44 in. wide, then increased as necessary based on the number of persons served.
- Exit signs are required at required exit doorways and where needed to identify the egress direction when an exit serves an occupant load of 50 or more.
- Means of egress must be illuminated to at least 1 foot-candle at floor level while occupied. Required exit-sign/emergency power arrangements depend on occupant load.
- Exits, aisles and passageways must remain clear to a public way; guy ropes or support members may not cross a means of egress below 8 ft.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§3103.11.1–3103.11.8 and Chapter 10.

8. Portable Fire Extinguishers & Fire Protection

- A Class 2-A extinguisher is required in every tent between 500 and 1,000 sq. ft., plus one 2-A extinguisher in each auxiliary adjacent tent.
- Provide one additional 2-A extinguisher for each additional 2,000 sq. ft. or fraction thereof.
- Provide at least one 10-B:C extinguisher with each generator or transformer.
- Provide at least one 10-B:C extinguisher in kitchen and dining areas and at locations where flammable or combustible liquids or flammable gases are used, stored or dispensed.
- Outdoor assembly events must have approved portable extinguishers complying with CFC §906 at locations approved by the fire code official.
- Tents with a capacity of 1,000 or more persons must be protected on each long side by fire hose lines at least 1-1/2 in. inside diameter and long enough to reach either end of the tent. The water supply must be from public mains or a tank of at least 500 gal., with at least 65 psi flowing pressure at the nozzle using a 1/2-in. tip. The enforcing authority may modify or waive these Title 19 requirements where permitted.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§3107.4.4, 3108.9–3108.10 and 906; CCR Title 19, Div. 1, §319.

9. Smoking, Open Flames, Fireworks & Combustibles

- Smoking is prohibited in tents and membrane structures. Approved “No Smoking” signs must be conspicuously posted.
- Open flame, devices emitting flame/fire/heat, flammable or combustible liquids, gas, charcoal and other unapproved devices are not permitted inside or within 10 ft of a tent or membrane structure while open to the public unless approved. Cooking devices are governed separately.
- Fireworks are prohibited within 100 ft of tents or membrane structures, in addition to all other fireworks permit/law requirements.
- Hay, straw, shavings and similar combustibles are restricted inside assembly tents; combustible materials are prohibited under stands or seats.
- California Title 19 requires flammable vegetation within 50 ft of a tent to be removed, unless modified by the enforcing authority where permitted.
- Combustible waste may not accumulate; the tent floor and surrounding grounds must be kept free of combustible waste and materials that create a fire hazard.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§3108.2–3108.5 and 3108.17–3108.18; CCR Title 19, Div. 1, §§316–317 and 326.

10. Cooking, Heating & Food Booths

- Temporary heating and cooking equipment in tents or membrane structures requires an operational permit and must comply with CFC Chapter 41.
- Heating and cooking equipment, tanks, piping, hoses, fittings, valves and related components must be installed as required by the applicable fuel-gas/mechanical provisions and approved by the fire code official.
- Cooking and heating equipment must not be located within 10 ft of exits or combustible materials.
- Vented fuel-burning equipment must vent outdoors. Where a flue or vent is used, the tent or membrane material must be at least 12 in. from the flue or vent.
- At outdoor assembly concession booths, cooking equipment using combustible oils or solids must have a noncombustible lid sized to cover the cooking well, must be placed on a noncombustible surface, and must have an approved extinguisher suitable for the cooking-grease hazard.
- LP-gas use must comply with CFC Chapter 61. The approved event plan should show cylinder locations, securing, hose/piping arrangements and separation from ignition sources/public access as applicable.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§105.5.55, 3107.5, 3108.12 and Chapter 41; Chapter 61 for LP-gas.

11. Flammable Liquids, Refueling & Generators

- Flammable-liquid-fueled equipment may not be used inside tents or membrane structures.
- Flammable and combustible liquids must be stored outside in an approved manner at least 50 ft from tents or membrane structures and in accordance with Chapter 57.

- Refueling must occur in an approved location at least 20 ft from tents or membrane structures.
- For tents/membrane structures, generators and other internal-combustion power sources must be at least 20 ft from the tent and isolated from public contact by fencing, enclosure or another approved means.
- For outdoor assembly event concession areas, generators must be at least 10 ft from combustible materials and isolated from the public by a guard, fence or enclosure located at least 3 ft from the internal-combustion source.
- Electrical equipment and temporary wiring at outdoor events must comply with the California Electrical Code, and equipment used outdoors must be listed and labeled for outdoor use.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§3107.6 and 3108.13–3108.15; Chapters 57 and 603; California Electrical Code.

12. Outdoor Assembly Events

Outdoor assembly events are regulated even when no tent is present. The fire code official must approve the event, and a separate operational permit is required when planned attendance exceeds 1,000 persons.

- Provide an approved means of fire apparatus access and maintain unobstructed access to hydrants, drafting sources and other fire-protection features.
- The fire code official establishes the event-site occupant load and approves the number and location of emergency egress and escape routes. Those routes must remain clear at all times.
- A public safety plan must be prepared when required by CFC §403.11.2 and submitted with the operational permit application when applicable.
- Where required, designate a qualified weather-monitoring person to continuously monitor forecasts and conditions and implement event mitigation, suspension, cancellation or evacuation.
- For gatherings of more than 1,000 people, trained crowd managers are required in accordance with CFC §403.11.3.
- Smoking is limited to designated areas; other areas require approved “No Smoking” signs.
- Combustible vegetation creating a fire hazard must be removed from the event area, and combustible refuse must be stored in suitable containers and removed frequently enough to prevent unsafe accumulation.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§105.5.40, 3107.1–3107.6 and 403.11.

13. Fire Safety Personnel & Crowd Managers for Tents

- When required by the fire code official, qualified standby personnel must remain on duty while an assembly tent or other congregate use is open to the public.
- California Title 19 requires at least one qualified fire safety person in an assembly tent with a capacity of 500 persons, plus one additional qualified person for each additional 1,000 persons or fraction thereof, unless the enforcing authority waives or modifies the requirement.
- Fire safety personnel must be familiar with fire/panic safety regulations and proficient in the use of fire extinguishers and related equipment.
- CFC §3108.16.2 requires trained crowd managers or crowd supervisors at a ratio of one for every 250 occupants, as approved.

Code references: 2025 CFC §3108.16; CCR Title 19, Div. 1, §320.

14. Temporary Stages, Platforms, Rigging & Event Structures

- Temporary special event structures must comply with CFC §3105 and ANSI E1.21.
- Required structures may not be erected or operated until approved and permitted by both the fire code official and building official.
- Required documentation must be submitted for review, and the means of egress must comply with Chapter 10.
- The structure must be located to accommodate guy wires, cross-bracing, ground anchors or ballast without interfering with building egress or fire apparatus access.
- Portable fire extinguishers must be provided as required by CFC §906.

Code references: 2025 CFC §§3105.1–3105.8; ANSI E1.21.

15. Pre-Event Fire & Life-Safety Checklist

- ☐ All required fire department, building, event, cooking, open-flame and other permits have been obtained.
- ☐ Site plan identifies tents/canopies, stages, cooking, LP-gas, generators, exits, fire lanes, hydrants and emergency access.
- ☐ Permit-size thresholds and open-sided-tent exceptions have been correctly applied.
- ☐ Tents and temporary structures maintain required separation from buildings, vehicles, engines and other tents.
- ☐ Required 12-ft fire-break/access passageways remain unobstructed.
- ☐ Tent anchorage follows approved design/manufacture requirements; structural documentation is available where required.
- ☐ California flame-resistance registration/certificates and required tent labels are available.
- ☐ Occupant load, number of exits, exit widths, exit signs, egress lighting and aisles comply with the approved plan.

- ☐ Exits, aisles, passageways and fire apparatus access remain unobstructed throughout the event.
- ☐ Required extinguishers are installed, accessible, properly rated and serviced.
- ☐ No-smoking signs are posted and prohibited flame/heat sources are controlled.
- ☐ Cooking equipment is separated from exits and combustibles and has required grease-fire protection.
- ☐ LP-gas cylinders/equipment comply with Chapter 61 and the approved event layout.
- ☐ Generators satisfy required separations and are protected from public contact.
- ☐ Flammable/combustible liquid storage and refueling locations satisfy required setbacks.
- ☐ Combustible vegetation and waste have been removed/controlled.
- ☐ Required fire safety personnel, crowd managers, public safety plan and weather monitoring are in place.

Applicable Code References

- 2025 California Fire Code, Title 24, Part 9 with January 2026 Errata — Chapter 31
- 2025 CFC §105 — Operational and Construction Permits
- 2025 CFC Chapter 10 — Means of Egress
- 2025 CFC Chapter 41 — Temporary Heating and Cooking Operations
- 2025 CFC Chapter 57 — Flammable and Combustible Liquids
- 2025 CFC Chapter 61 — Liquefied Petroleum Gases
- California Code of Regulations, Title 19, Division 1 — Tent and flame-resistance provisions incorporated into Chapter 31
- 2025 California Building Code — temporary structures and applicable structural/accessibility provisions
- ANSI E1.21 — Temporary Structures Used for Technical Production of Outdoor Entertainment Events

This handout summarizes commonly applicable requirements for public information. The adopted code, referenced standards, approved plans, permit conditions, local amendments and determinations of the fire code official or building official govern where a conflict or project-specific condition exists. Other event, health, electrical, building, accessibility or land-use approvals may also be required.