



Adoption of Urgency Ordinance for Vegetation Management and Defensible Space in Compliance with Government Code Section 51175

Fire Department

City Council
April 8, 2025



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BACKGROUND

Government Code Section 51175

- Establishes state commitment to mitigating wildfire risks in high-risk areas.
- Wildfires threaten public peace, health, safety, and local agency resources.
- Cross-jurisdictional issue requiring coordination among cities, counties, special districts, and state/federal agencies.

Purpose of Government Code 51175

- Facilitates fire prevention planning and wildfire mitigation strategies.
- Requires:
 - Defensible space requirements (PRC 4291)
 - Fire-resistant construction codes
 - Vegetation management mandates
- Ensures appropriate fire safety standards and land use policies in high-risk zones.
- Promotes agency collaboration to protect communities and natural resources.



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BACKGROUND

Increasing Wildfire Severity in California

- Factors: Climate change, prolonged droughts, vegetation buildup, development in fire-prone areas.

2024 Statistics:

- 8,024 wildfires, burning 1,050,012 acres.
- 1,716 structures destroyed; 1 fatality.
- Highest acreage burned since 2021.

January 2025 (Los Angeles County):

- Palisades & Eaton fires: 57,000+ acres burned.
- 18,000+ structures destroyed/damaged.
- 29 fatalities; 200,000+ evacuated.
- Insured losses: \$28 billion (one of the costliest wildfire events in U.S. history).



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BACKGROUND

Importance of Defensible Space

- Critical for reducing home loss during wildfires.
- Creating buffer zones around structures by:
 - Removing flammable vegetation.
 - Reducing fuel loads.
 - Implementing fire-resistant landscaping.

Proven Effectiveness

- Essential for improving resilience in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI).
- Homes with 100+ feet of defensible space have much higher survival rates.



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DISCUSSION

City of Riverside Defensible Space Ordinance - Key Provisions

Annual Defensible Space Requirements

- Maintain 100 feet of defensible space around structures in hazard zones.
- Remove flammable vegetation, overgrown brush, and combustible materials.
- Ensure fire-resistant landscaping and proper vegetation spacing.

Good Neighbor Rule

- Requires adjacent unimproved parcels to comply with defensible space requirements.
- 100 feet of clearance extends onto neighboring properties as needed.
- Coordinates vegetation management across property lines.



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DISCUSSION

Inspection and Enforcement Procedures

- Initial Inspections: Conducted 30 days after clearance notices are issued.
- Non-Compliance Citations: Violations reported with corrective action requirements.
- Fines & Forced Abatement: Persistent non-compliance results in fines and forced clearance.
- Nuisance Abatement: Costs recovered through property liens or tax assessments.

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Exemption

- Categorically Exempt (Class 4) for minor land alterations.
- Common sense exemption (14 CCR section 15061(b)(3)) - focuses on wildfire hazard mitigation.

Seasonal Public Nuisance Designation

- Properties with repeated violations classified as seasonal public nuisances.
- Allows automatic annual enforcement actions without additional hearings.



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DISCUSSION

Strategic Benefits of the Ordinance

- **Enhances Community Safety**
 - Reduces wildfire risks before fire season.
 - Provides firefighters with defensible space for better protection during incidents.
- **Improves Property Protection & Fire Insurance Accessibility**
 - Promotes fire-safe communities for potential insurance premium reductions.
 - Minimizes risk of property destruction, infrastructure damage, and economic loss.
- **Ensures Fiscal Responsibility**
 - Reduces City expenditures on wildfire response and recovery.
 - Implements cost-recovery mechanisms through fines and property liens.
- **Aligns with State Fire Protection Mandates**
 - Complies with Government Code Section 51182 and state wildfire mitigation laws.



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Defensible Space Workshop

The operational implementation of the proposed ordinance will be presented to the Mayor and City Council during a future workshop. During this workshop, the detailed plans for applying and implementing the ordinance will be shared for review and discussion.



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STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT

This item contributes to Strategic Priority Number 2: Community Well-Being and Goal 2.6 – Strengthen community preparedness for emergencies to ensure effective response and recovery.

Cross-Cutting Threads



Community Trust



Fiscal Responsibility



Sustainability & Resiliency



Equity



Innovation



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RECOMMENDATIONS

That the City Council:

1. Receive a report regarding a proposed Urgency Ordinance adopting vegetation management and defensible space regulations in compliance with Government Code Section 51175; and
2. With at least five affirmative votes, adopt the Urgency Ordinance amending the Riverside Municipal Code by adding Chapter 16.6 regarding vegetation management and defensible space.



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