



City Council Memorandum

City of Arts & Innovation

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TO: HONORABLE MAYOR AND CITY COUNCIL DATE: APRIL 8, 2025

FROM: FIRE DEPARTMENT WARDS: ALL

SUBJECT: PUBLIC REVIEW AND COMMENT: FIRE HAZARD SEVERITY ZONES IN LOCAL RESPONSIBILITY AREAS

ISSUE:

The California State Fire Marshal has transmitted updated Fire Hazard Severity Zone (FHSZ) designations pursuant to Section 51178 of the Government Code. Within 30 days of receipt, the City is required to make this information available for public review and comment.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the City Council:

1. Receive and review the updated FHSZ maps released by the Office of the State Fire Marshall (OSFM) on 3/24/2025;
2. Make the maps publicly available; and
3. Solicit public comment.

LEGISLATIVE HISTORY:

The establishment of FHSZ classifications in Local Responsibility Areas (LRA) was initially prompted by Assembly Bill (AB) 337, also known as the "Bates Bill," which was enacted in response to the devastating 1991 Oakland Hills Fire. This legislation required the OSFM to identify Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones (VHFHSZ) in LRAs and provide recommendations to local governments for formal adoption.

From 2008 to 2011, CAL FIRE worked with local jurisdictions to designate areas as Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones within LRAs. Local governments were required to adopt these designations by ordinance while maintaining the ability to impose more restrictive fire safety measures if deemed necessary.

For many years, only Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones were required to be mapped and adopted in LRAs. However, in 2021, Senate Bill (SB) 63 expanded the scope of FHSZ classifications by mandating the identification of Moderate and High Fire Hazard Severity Zones in addition to the existing Very High designation. This marked a significant policy shift by requiring a more comprehensive evaluation of wildfire hazards across all jurisdictions.

In 2022, Assembly Bill (AB) 211 further reinforced these mandates by requiring local agencies to formally designate, by ordinance, all three classifications—Moderate, High, and Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones—within 120 days of receiving recommendations from the State Fire Marshal. Additionally, while local governments are allowed to increase the severity classification of a given area, they are not permitted to downgrade the hazard level established by the OSFM.

BACKGROUND:

The classification of FHSZ in California has evolved significantly over the past several decades in response to the increasing threat of wildfires. The State of California, through the Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) and in collaboration with local jurisdictions, has developed a systematic approach to identifying and classifying areas based on their wildfire hazard potential.

Fire Hazard Severity Zones are designated based on the likelihood of fire occurring and its expected behavior over a 30 to 50-year period. These zones are determined using factors such as fuel loading, terrain, fire weather conditions, historical fire activity, and wind patterns.

The previous FHSZ maps in California were developed and adopted by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) to identify areas at significant risk of wildfires. These maps, which classify zones as moderate, high, or very high fire hazard severity, were originally created using fire history, topography, vegetation, and climate data. They were first implemented in 2007 for State Responsibility Areas (SRA), where CAL FIRE has primary jurisdiction, and later incorporated into Local Responsibility Areas (LRA) through local government planning and building regulations. The adoption of these maps played a crucial role in guiding land-use decisions, establishing building codes, and informing mitigation efforts to reduce wildfire risks. However, as fire behavior has evolved due to climate change, prolonged drought, and increased development in wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas, the need for updated maps has become evident to ensure accurate risk assessments and effective fire prevention strategies.

DISCUSSION:

The most recent updates to the FHSZ maps integrate new scientific models, climate data, and wildfire assessment methodologies to more accurately reflect fire hazards. These updates are particularly important for urban areas adjacent to wildlands, where ember transport and vegetation density contribute to wildfire risks.

For local governments, these classifications have significant implications, including:

- **Building Code Requirements:** California's Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) building codes (CBC Chapter 7A) apply to new construction within designated High and Very High FHSZs.
- **Defensible Space Standards:** Properties within these zones must maintain 100 feet of defensible space around structures, per Government Code Section 51182.
- **Land Use and Planning Considerations:** Local agencies must incorporate FHSZ designations into their general plans, zoning ordinances, and emergency response strategies.
- **Real Estate Disclosures:** Property owners within these zones are required to provide wildfire hazard disclosures during property transactions.

The designation of FHSZ under Government Code Section 51178 requires local agencies to engage in a transparent and participatory process to ensure that affected communities have

access to updated wildfire hazard information. The updated FHSZ maps were released on March 24, 2025, triggering the requirement for local agencies to make this information available for public review and comment within 30 days of receipt.

In compliance with this requirement, these maps have been posted on the City's website for public access and review. Additionally, they are being presented before you today during this presentation to facilitate discussion, provide clarification, and gather input from both the City Council and the community. This ensures transparency and encourages informed community engagement in the wildfire hazard designation process.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

Items contributing to the Strategic Priority No. 2 Community Well-Being and Goal No. 2.6 - Strengthen community preparedness for emergencies to ensure effective response and recovery.

This project aligns with the Cross-Cutting Threads of the City's Strategic Plan as follows:

1. **Community Trust** – By complying with Government Code Section 51178, the City demonstrates its commitment to investing in public safety through transparent wildfire hazard mapping and public engagement. Posting the updated FHSZ maps on the City's website and presenting them in this public forum reinforces the City's accountability to residents.
2. **Equity** – The Fire Department is dedicated to delivering equitable fire and life safety services to all Riverside residents. Ensuring that all communities have access to wildfire hazard information allows for informed decision-making, proactive fire prevention efforts, and enhanced emergency preparedness across all neighborhoods.
3. **Fiscal Responsibility** – The City is committed to financial transparency and accountability in all public safety initiatives. Compliance with Government Code Section 51178 ensures that wildfire hazard mapping is conducted systematically and in alignment with state mandates, preventing unnecessary expenditures on redundant or outdated assessments. Additionally, by integrating updated Fire Hazard Severity Zone (FHSZ) data into emergency planning and resource allocation, the City can make informed, cost-effective decisions that enhance fire prevention efforts while optimizing budget efficiency.
4. **Innovation** – Utilizing advanced wildfire modeling and GIS-based hazard mapping ensures the City remains at the forefront of fire science and risk assessment. The integration of updated FHSZ maps enhances emergency planning, firefighter deployment strategies, and community awareness efforts.
5. **Sustainability & Resiliency** – The identification of Moderate, High, and Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones strengthens the City's ability to mitigate wildfire risks, promote defensible space initiatives, and encourage fire-resilient building practices. Proactively addressing wildfire hazards through public engagement and adherence to state mandates ensures long-term sustainability and resilience against future fire threats.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact associated with this report.

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Attachment:

1. Presentation
2. Maps