



STAFF REPORT
5/14/2025

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council Members

FROM: Kohl Hetrick, Deputy Fire Marshal

SUBJECT: Ordinance No. 1224 Adopting the Fire Hazard Severity Zones as Recommended by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Pursuant to Government Code Section 51178 (First Reading)

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Adopt Ordinance No. 1224 Adopting the Fire Hazard Severity Zones as Recommended by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Pursuant to Government Code Section 51178 (First Reading).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

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/ANALYSIS:

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.

General Plan Alignment:

Items contributing to Section 08 Safety, strengthen community preparedness for emergencies to ensure effective response and recovery.

This project aligns with Our Community's Goals subsection of Section 08 Safety of the City's General Plan as follows:

1. Fire hazards are negligible, the result of effective fire suppression, mitigation and response measures. Vegetation fires in the Coachella area have historically been small. With the increased encroachment of development into the hillside areas, however, wildland fire may increase in the future, unless effective programs are implemented. These measures include vegetation control, fireresistant construction and educational programs for homeowners, business owners and motorists. Strengthening of the gas and water distribution systems will limit the potential for devastating fires after an earthquake.
2. Goal 4. Fire hazards. A community that is minimally affected by wildland and structure fires
 - a. Policy 4.1 Vegetation control. Require the use of vegetation control methods to reduce the hazard of wildland fire.
 - b. Policy 4.2 Construction materials. Require the use of fire-resistant building construction materials to reduce the hazard of structure fires, within the developed areas of the City and at the urban-wildland interface.
3. Goal 8. Disaster Preparedness. A community that has planned for emergency response and recovery from natural disasters, especially from earthquakes, flooding, and fire, and from civil unrest that may occur following a natural disaster.
 - a. Policy 8.11 Changing fire hazards. When reviewing fire hazards, consider the increasing risk of wildfires and consider requiring enhanced fire protection measures.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact associated with this report.

RECOMMENDED ALTERNATIVE(S):

1. Presentation
2. Maps
3. Ordinance