

# CITY OF PALM DESERT STAFF REPORT

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MEETING DATE: June 12, 2025

PREPARED BY: Daniel Hurtado, Public Safety Analyst

SUBJECT: INTRODUCTION OF AN ORDINANCE ADOPTING THE FIRE HAZARD SEVERITY ZONES AS RECOMMENDED BY THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION PURSUANT TO GOVERNMENT CODE SECTION 51178

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## **RECOMMENDATION:**

1. Approve and adopt the updated Fire Hazard Severity Zone map released on March 24, 2025.
2. Introduce an Ordinance entitled "AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PALM DESERT, CALIFORNIA, ADOPTING FIRE HAZARD SEVERITY ZONES AS RECOMMENDED BY THE CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY AND FIRE PROTECTION PURSUANT TO GOVERNMENT CODE SECTION 51178."

## **BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS:**

The classification of Fire Hazard Severity Zones in Local Responsibility Areas was initiated by Assembly Bill 337, also known as the "Bates Bill," following the 1991 Oakland Hills Fire. This legislation required the State Fire Marshal to identify Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones in Local Responsibility Areas and recommend their formal adoption by local jurisdictions.

Between 2008 and 2011, CAL FIRE collaborated with local agencies to implement these designations through ordinance, allowing jurisdictions to adopt more stringent fire safety measures if necessary. Initially, only Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones designations were required. However, in 2021, Senate Bill 63 expanded the mandate to include Moderate and High zones, significantly broadening the scope of wildfire hazard assessments.

Assembly Bill 211, enacted in 2022, further strengthened these requirements by mandating that local agencies adopt all three classifications—Moderate, High, and Very High—within 120 days of receiving updated maps from the State Fire Marshal. Under California Government Code Section 51179 (b)(3), cities and counties may not decrease the level of hazard designated by the Office of the State Fire Marshal. However, local jurisdictions are permitted to increase the level or expand the area of designated Fire Hazard Severity Zones based on local knowledge or conditions. This flexibility allows local agencies to tailor fire safety measures to specific areas within their jurisdiction, considering factors like vegetation types, building density, and historical fire behavior.

Fire hazard severity zones are determined using long-term wildfire risk factors, including terrain, vegetation, weather, historic fire activity, and wind patterns. These zones predict fire behavior over a 30–50-year horizon and are a vital tool in mitigating wildfire impacts, particularly in the wildland-urban interface.

The original fire hazard severity zone maps were created in 2007 for State Responsibility Areas and later applied to local responsibility areas. These maps guided land use planning, building code enforcement, and fire mitigation strategies. Due to evolving wildfire behavior—driven by climate, drought, and wildland-urban interface development—updated maps were necessary to ensure accurate, data-driven risk assessments.

The updated fire hazard severity zone maps released by CAL FIRE on March 24, 2025, utilize advanced scientific models and climate data to better reflect current and projected wildfire hazards. Urban fringe (the area where the city meets the countryside) are particularly impacted due to their proximity to wildlands and associated ember exposure.

The adoption of the updated Fire Hazard Severity Zone maps by the State of California introduces new regulatory requirements for areas newly designated as wildfire-prone. While the majority of Palm Desert remains unaffected, a small portion within the city boundaries has now been classified as a “High” Fire Hazard Severity Zone.

As a result, properties within this designated area must comply with the following regulations:

- **Building Standards:** California Building Code Chapter 7A applies to new construction in High and Very High zones. This chapter is enforced by the State Fire Marshal and aims to improve building resilience to wildfires by establishing minimum standards for fire and smoke protection features.
- **Defensible Space:** Properties in designated zones must maintain a 100-foot defensible space per \*Government Code §51182. Defensible space is the buffer between your structure and the surrounding area.
- **Adequate defensible space** acts as a barrier to slow or halt the progress of fire that would otherwise engulf your property. It also helps ensure the safety of firefighters defending your home. Defensible space is the first line of defense for your home against wildfire
- **Planning Integration:** Fire hazard severity zones must be incorporated into General Plans, zoning regulations, and emergency preparedness strategies. Palm Desert will continue integrating these changes into its General Plan, zoning regulations, and emergency preparedness plans—a practice the City has historically maintained to align development with hazard mitigation strategies.
- **Real Estate Disclosures:** Sellers must disclose wildfire hazard zone status during property transactions.

*\*California Government Code Section 51182 outlines the responsibilities of property owners in very high fire hazard severity zones to create and maintain defensible space around their homes. This includes clearing flammable vegetation within a certain distance of the structure and other measures to reduce the risk of wildfire ignition*

In compliance with Government Code Section 51178, the City made the updated maps publicly available via its official website and scheduled this presentation to solicit input and ensure transparent community engagement in the adoption process.

**Legal Review:**

This report has been reviewed by the City Attorney’s Office.

**FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

There is no direct fiscal impact on the General Fund with this action.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Draft Ordinance
2. Palm Desert Fire Hazard Severity Zone Map
3. PowerPoint Presentation