



County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors

Agenda Item Submittal

From: General Services Department

Subject: Uncodified Ordinance Designating Fire Hazard Severity Zones for Local Responsibility Areas within the Jurisdiction of the Santa Cruz County Fire Department.

Meeting Date: May 20, 2025

Formal Title: Consider approving in concept “An Uncodified Ordinance Designating Fire Hazard Severity Zones Within the Unincorporated Areas of County Service Areas 4 (CSA 4) and 48 (CSA 48) Under the Jurisdiction of the Santa Cruz County Fire Department”, confirm the proposal is exempt from requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act, and take related actions

Recommended Actions

1. Approve in concept an “Uncodified Ordinance Designating Fire Hazard Severity Zones Within the Unincorporated Areas of County Service Areas 4 (CSA 4) and 48 (CSA 48) Under the Jurisdiction of the Santa Cruz County Fire Department”, and approve the CEQA Notice of Exemption;
2. Schedule the ordinance for a second reading and final adoption on June 10, 2025;
3. Direct the Clerk of the Board to publish the Notice of Proposed Ordinance Summary in a newspaper of general circulation at least five days prior to the scheduled second reading and final adoption, no later than June 5, 2025, pursuant to Government Code Section 25124; and
4. Direct the Director of General Services Department to transmit a copy of the adopted ordinance to the State Board of Forestry and Fire Protection within 30 days of adoption, pursuant to Government Code section 51179 subdivision (c).

Executive Summary

On February 24, 2025, the Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) released updated Fire Hazard Severity Zone (FHSZ) designations for Local Responsibility Areas (LRAs) within the County of Santa Cruz. Pursuant to Government Code section 51179, subdivision (a), the County is required to adopt an ordinance designating moderate, high, and very high Fire Hazard Severity Zones within its LRAs no later than 120 days after receiving the State Fire Marshal's recommendations, with the ordinance required to be adopted by June 24, 2025

Discussion

Background

In response to major wildfires, including the 1980 Panorama Fire and the 1991 Oakland Hills Fire, the State Legislature established requirements for identifying and designating fire hazard severity zones. These zones are based on physical conditions and expected

fire behavior over a 50-year period. The State classifies zones as Moderate, High, or Very High.

The Fire Hazard Severity Zone program was expanded through Assembly Bill 642 and Senate Bill 63 (2022), which directed CAL FIRE to update and map hazard zones in LRAs. CAL FIRE's updated maps for Santa Cruz County were released on February 24, 2025, and include new Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone designations in LRAs for the first time.

The Santa Cruz County Fire Department provides fire protection services in County Service Areas 4 (Pajaro Dunes) and 48, both located in LRAs. Under Government Code section 51179, local agencies may not reduce the hazard severity designations proposed by the State Fire Marshal but may expand them. Staff recommends adopting the maps as presented, which reflect appropriate designations for local conditions.

Fire Hazard Severity Zones Review

In the prior review of fire hazard severity zones in LRAs in 2007, CAL FIRE determined that Santa Cruz County did not have any Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones in Local Responsibility Areas, and as a result, no map was issued for the County. Advances in technology, new scientific data, and updated modeling have prompted an update to these maps in 2025. It is important to note that these maps measure hazard and not risk:

- Hazard is based on the physical conditions that create the likelihood and expected fire behavior over a 50-year period without considering mitigation measures, such as home hardening, recent wildfire, or fuel management efforts.
- Risk is the potential damage a fire can cause to the area under existing conditions, counting for any mitigation such as fuel management, defensible space, and ignition resistant building construction.

In compliance with Government Code Section 51178.5, the Santa Cruz County Fire Department updated its website to include an FHSZ LRA webpage within 30 days of the State Fire Marshal's release of updated Fire Hazard Severity Zone designations, making the information available for public review and comment, and meeting the posting requirements.

<https://countyfire.santacruzcountyca.gov/FireResources/OSFM2025FireHazardSeverityZones.aspx>

Under Government Code Section 51179, local agencies cannot decrease the severity of fire hazard severity zone designations made by the State Fire Marshal but may increase or expand them where appropriate. Staff recommends that the Board adopt the fire hazard severity zone maps as recommended by the State Fire Marshal without any additional designations. This recommendation reflects Santa Cruz County Fire's review of the maps and determination that the State designations are appropriate for the local conditions within County Service Areas 4 (CSA 4) and 48 (CSA 48).

Local Agency Requirements

Adopting the updated FHSZ maps ensures the County complies with state law and supports strategic wildfire prevention. These designations guide building code

requirements, defensible space standards, and mitigation efforts. No alternative actions were considered, as the County may not reduce State-assigned hazard levels.

Per Government Code section 51179, local agencies must:

- Make maps publicly available within 30 days of receiving them.
- Adopt an ordinance designating zones within 120 days.
- Submit adopted maps and documentation to the Board of Forestry within 30 days of adoption.

The proposed ordinance conforms with the State Fire Marshal's model ordinance, per California Fire Code section 4911. Additionally, the proposed ordinance is exempt from CEQA as a ministerial action required by law.

The designation of Fire Hazard Severity Zones represents a vital measure in California's broader strategy to reduce wildfire risk and protect communities in areas most vulnerable to destructive fires. By adopting the updated maps as recommended by the State Fire Marshal, the County reinforces its commitment to proactive fire prevention, land use planning, and public safety. The Fire Hazard Severity Zone map will guide defensible space standards, building requirements, and mitigation efforts across identified zones. Adoption of these updated designations ensures compliance with state law and supports the County's long-term goals for safety and sustainability.

Financial Impact

This action has minimal financial impact. Costs related to public noticing and staff time are absorbed within existing departmental budgets.

Strategic Initiatives

Climate Action - Wildfire Prevention

Submitted By:

Michael Beaton, General Services Director

Recommended By:

Carlos J. Palacios, County Executive Officer

Artificial Intelligence Acknowledgment:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Chat GPT-4o was used to assist in drafting and formatting this agenda item in accordance with County AI Use policy.