



STAFF REPORT – CITY COUNCIL MEETING

TO: Honorable Mayor and City Council Members

FROM: Emily Sinkhorn, Director of Environmental Services

PREPARER: Emily Sinkhorn, Director of Environmental Services

DATE: July 16, 2025

TITLE: **Adopt Ordinance No. 1580, An Ordinance of the City Council of the City of Arcata, Adding Section 3200 to Designate Fire Hazard Severity Zones to Chapter 1, Fire Prevention and Fire Protection, Of Title III, Public Safety, of the Arcata Municipal Code.**

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the Council adopt Ordinance No. 1580, An Ordinance of the City Council of the City of Arcata, Adding Section 3200 to Designate Fire Hazard Severity Zones to Chapter 1, Fire Prevention and Fire Protection, Of Title III, Public Safety, of the Arcata Municipal Code.

INTRODUCTION:

CalFire is legislatively required to evaluate fire hazard severity in local responsibility areas (e.g. incorporated cities, urban regions and agricultural lands where a local government is responsible for wildfire protection). CalFire regularly updates fire hazard severity zone (FHSZ) maps for local responsibility areas, but in 2025 it became a requirement for local agencies with Moderate and/or High FHSZs to adopt CalFire's FHSZ maps for their jurisdiction with an ordinance.

City staff have reviewed both the information from CalFire and the California Building Code to ensure that adoption of an FHSZ map for Arcata with a significant portion of the city mapped as a Moderate FHSZ would not have any unintended consequences for property owners. The City will continue to encourage property owners in the Moderate FHSZ to utilize best practices for new construction for fire hardening the exterior of homes and properties.

On June 18, 2025, the City Council voted to introduce Ordinance No. 1580. On July 16, 2025, the City Council voted to adopt the ordinance; however, the Exhibit A Fire Severity Zones Map was not included with the agenda item, so it is recommended to adopt Ordinance No. 1580 with the attachment included.

BACKGROUND:

The latest mapping by CalFire of FHSZs within Humboldt County was released in late February 2025. CalFire's FHSZ map for Arcata designates much of Arcata east of Highway 101 as a Moderate FHSZ including much of the Sunny Brae neighborhood and Cal Poly Humboldt campus as well as the Arcata Community Forest Tract and Sunny Brae Forest Tract. The majority of the City's Jacoby Creek Forest Tract is mapped as a Moderate FHSZ though a sliver is designated as High

FHSZ. FHSZs maps evaluate “hazard” not “risk,” and hazard is mapped from physical conditions on the ground that may create expected fire behavior over a 50-year period.

The current Arcata Municipal Code Title III Public Safety Chapter 1 Fire Prevention and Fire Protection details that all fire protection and prevention duties within the City of Arcata are the responsibility of the Arcata Fire Protection District. Adoption of Ordinance No. 1580 would amend this chapter to add a new section which designates FHSZs in Arcata as mapped by CalFire.

DISCUSSION:

The requirement for a local responsibility area (i.e. fire services provided by a local district/agency, such as Arcata Fire, and not provided by CalFire) with moderate fire severity is to adopt CalFire’s FHSZ maps so community members are informed of the hazard. There are additional requirements for local responsibility areas mapped as high fire severity (such as hazard disclosures and additional requirements in the California Building Code); however, the small portion of the Jacoby Creek Forest Tract mapped as high severity is public property zoned “Nature Resource” for which required hazard disclosures and building code requirements are not relevant.

City staff have reviewed both the information from CalFire and the California Building Code to ensure that adoption of a FHSZ map for Arcata with a significant portion of the city mapped as a moderate FHSZ would not have any unintended consequences for property owners.

The adoption of this FHSZ map will not impact insurance availability or rates as insurance companies use risk models which differ from hazard models. Additionally, FHSZ maps for local responsibility areas such as Arcata have been published by CalFire for decades; however, this is the first year that CalFire is requiring local jurisdictions to formally adopt CalFire’s mapping if a Moderate or High FHSZ is mapped within the jurisdiction. (Previously only Very High FHSZs were required for adoption within Local Responsibility Areas.)

The City made the Fire Hazard Severity Zone (FHSZ) map available for public review and comment in March 2025 (<https://www.cityofarcata.org/322/MapsGIS>). This topic was also agendaized by the Forest Management Committee at its March 13, 2025, meeting. The Forest Management Committee did not make any further recommendations to the City Council.

While members of the public can comment on the maps, per CalFire “a local agency may only increase the level of fire hazard severity . . . Fire hazard severity cannot be decreased.”

As stated in the City’s General Plan policies, the City will continue to encourage property owners in the Moderate FHSZ to utilize best practices for fire hardening the exterior of homes and properties.

Staff recommend adopting the FHSZ map for Arcata as designated by CalFire.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS:

This adopted ordinance will bring the City into compliance with state regulations that local jurisdictions with Moderate, High and/or Very High FHSZs adopt the designation via local ordinance and submit the adopted ordinance to the state.

The City's General Plan Public Safety Element has two policies relevant to this ordinance – PS-5d Management of wildland fire hazards and PS-5e Wildland fire risk reduction and defensible space around homes. The adoption of the FHSZ map is in line with these policies and is another tool to encourage property owners in the Moderate FHSZ to follow best practices for fire hardening the exterior of homes and properties.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW (CEQA):

The adoption of the Fire Hazard Severity Zone Map is not considered a "Project" under CEQA. Pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 21065, a "project" is defined as a "whole action" subject to a public agency's discretionary funding or approval that has the potential to either (1) cause a direct physical change in the environment or (2) cause a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment. The adoption of the Fire Hazard Severity Zone Map is therefore not subject to CEQA.

BUDGET/FISCAL IMPACT:

This ordinance will have a minimal impact on the City's budget. City GIS staff can ensure the FHSZ map on the City website and GIS portal remain up to date if updated by CalFire.

RECOMMENDED COUNCIL ACTION:

Motion to adopt Ordinance No. 1580, An Ordinance of the City Council of the City of Arcata, Adding Section 3200 to Designate Fire Hazard Severity Zones to Chapter 1, Fire Prevention and Fire Protection, Of Title III, Public Safety, of the Arcata Municipal Code. Consent Calendar vote.

ATTACHMENTS:

- A. Ordinance No. 1580
- B. Ordinance No. 1580 Local Responsibility Area, Fire Severity Zones Map