

City of El Cerrito Fire Hazard Reduction Program

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose of Vegetation Management Standards

California communities have experienced devastating fire loss because of the severity of fires which occur in the wildland interface areas. These areas exist in the community of El Cerrito. In these areas the risk of conflagration is increased further by homeowners who create or do not maintain landscaping on their properties. Homes are threatened by fire every year in California largely because of heavy vegetation fuel load very near structures.

Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones (VHFHSZ) have been identified within the El Cerrito community by the El Cerrito Fire Department and CAL Fire. As specified by State Law AB 337, property owners within the VHFHSZ must take special precautions with their property, including vegetation management, to reduce the risk of fire. All El Cerrito property owners must comply with the City's Fire Hazard Reduction standards.

The buildup of unmanaged vegetation, whether native or non-native, steep hillsides with canyons, draws, and periods of extremely hot, dry weather all combine to create in El Cerrito the potential for catastrophic fire behavior. Catastrophic fires can destroy large numbers of homes, threaten public safety and severely damage the natural areas which contribute to our high quality of living.

A key goal of El Cerrito's community fire protection planning is to reduce the level of fire hazards throughout the community and particularly in the VHFHSZ. While it is not possible to eliminate all threats of catastrophic wildfire, fire hazards can be reduced to acceptable levels and still allow a "green" community.

Vegetation management planning in the VHFHS Zone focuses on areas where fire poses the greatest risk to life and property. Fires will continue to be a part of California urban living. By implementing vegetation management standards, El Cerrito residents can significantly reduce the potential a small fire will grow into a catastrophic event. An important component of reducing the community's fire risk requires vegetation management to be practiced by all property owners.

No person shall be prosecuted criminally under the provisions of Section 8.30.040 of the El Cerrito Municipal Code until that person has received written notice of how that property violates these standards and until that person has had the reasonable opportunity to meet with City staff concerning the procedures set forth in Chapter 8.34 or Chapter 16.26 of the El Cerrito Municipal Code. Civil procedures for fire hazard abatement include providing the property owner with (1) written notice on how the property violates these guidelines, (2) reasonable opportunity to comply with the guidelines and (3) opportunity to be heard before the City Council.

II. FIRE HAZARD REDUCTION GUIDELINES

Many factors combine to create a fire hazard on any specific property. It is difficult to single out a specific vegetation species or configuration to declare it either fire hazardous or completely fire safe in all situations. The Fire Department has developed guidelines conforming to State Law and National Fire Protection Standards which address most situations found on private property within El Cerrito.

A. Hazard Zones

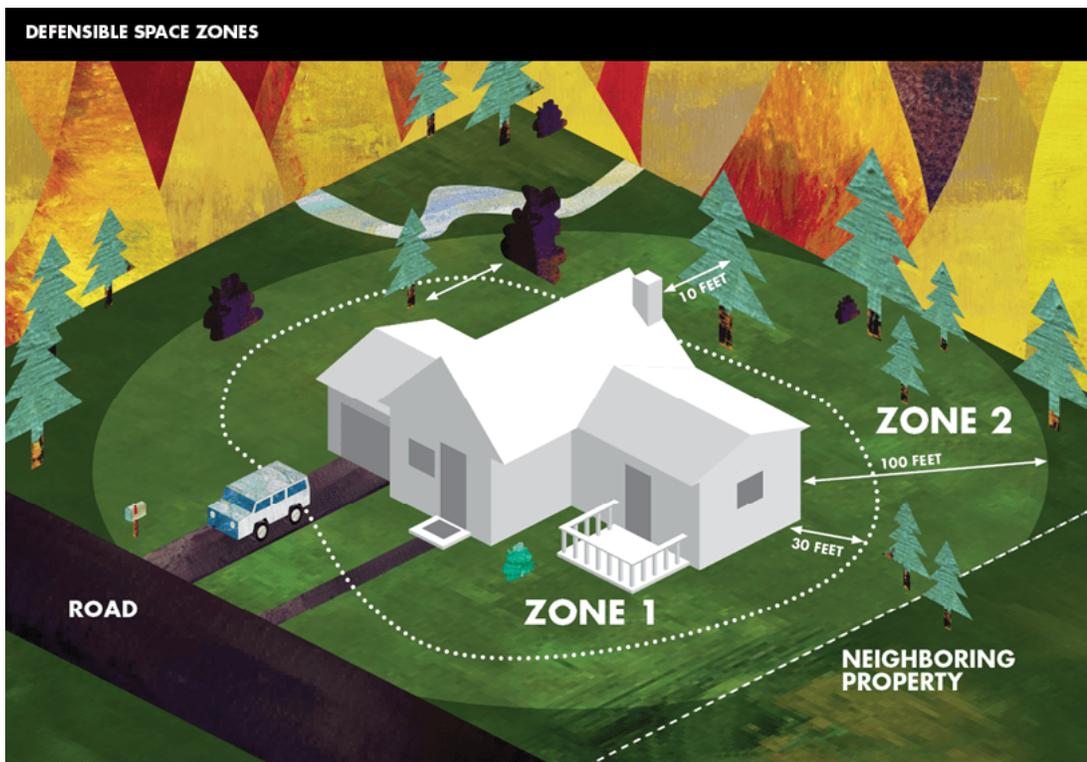
Portions of the City of El Cerrito lie adjacent or near to large wildland areas containing steep slopes and naturally growing vegetation. Every year under certain critical weather conditions, the neighborhoods near these wildland areas are at heightened risk of seasonal wildfire sweeping into the City and burning homes. These areas at heightened risk of wildfire have been designated as Very High Fire Hazard Severity (VHFHS) Zones as designated by CalFire. The rest of the City faces a lesser risk of wildfire. Fire hazard reduction measures common to the entire City are required on both vacant and developed lots.

B. Defensible Space

Defensible space is essential to improve your home's chance of surviving a wildfire. It is the buffer you create between a building on your property and the grass, trees, shrubs, or any wildland area that surround it. This space is needed to slow or stop the spread of wildfire and it helps protect your home from catching fire—either from direct flame contact or radiant heat. Defensible space is also important for the protection of the firefighters defending your home.

Defensible Space Zones

Two zones make up the required 100 feet of defensible space.



Zone 1

Zone 1 extends 30 feet from buildings, structures, decks, etc. in all portions within the City of El Cerrito including the designated Very High Fire Hazard Severity (VHFHS) Zones. Vacant lots in Zone 1 shall be maintained to be 10 feet wide along the property line.

- Remove all dead plants, grass and weeds (vegetation).
- Remove dead or dry leaves and pine needles from your yard, roof and rain gutters.
- Trees shall be maintained so that no portion is closer than 10 feet from any chimney opening.
- Trees, shrubs, bushes or other vegetation adjacent to or overhanging any structure shall be maintained free of dead limbs and other combustible matter such as vines and loose papery bark.
- On mature trees, limbs should be removed up to 10' above the ground. Smaller trees should be limbed to 1/3rd of their height up to 6' above the ground, but in no case less than 18 inches from the ground.
- Relocate wood piles to Zone 2 if applicable.
- Remove or prune flammable plants and shrubs near windows.
- Remove vegetation and items that could catch fire from around and under decks.
- Create a minimum 6-foot separation between trees, shrubs or vegetation and combustible materials.

Zone 2

Zone 2 extends from 30 feet to 100 feet out from buildings, structures, decks, etc. in only those areas within the City of El Cerrito designated as the Very High Fire Hazard Severity (VHFHS) Zones. Vacant lots in Zone 2 shall be maintained to be 30 feet wide along the property line. NOTE: All Zone 1 requirements shall be followed in addition to the following Zone 2 requirements:

- Cut or mow weeds and grass shall be cleared to a maximum height of 6 inches.
- All fire hazardous vegetation except for weeds and grass shall be cleared and maintained to a height no greater than 18 inches above the ground.

C. Additional Considerations for Vegetation Management

1. The Fire Hazard Abatement Program is intended to promote community fire safety by reducing the combustible vegetation fuel mass on private properties. Clearing vegetation by heavy construction methods, such as grading, discing, trenching or dozing shall require special permits from the City. **Disposal by burning is not permitted.**
2. Any parcel where slope stability will be threatened by removal of plants may be exempt from treatment requirements or subject to alternate treatments. The property owner must submit a report documenting the probability of slope failure due to vegetation removal, prepared by a licensed civil, geotechnical or soils engineer. The report shall propose alternative treatment methods to address fire hazards. The report will be reviewed by city staff. Review and acceptance by the City of alternative treatment will supersede other requirements.
3. Any parcel or lot which includes plant or animal species that are rare, endangered or of special concern may qualify for alternative plant treatment and spacing requirements. The property owner must submit a report from a qualified resource biologist or landscape architect describing the species, actions required to preserve its environmental value, and proposed alternative measures to address fire hazards. The report will be reviewed by the City. Review and acceptance by the City of alternative treatment will supersede other requirements.

D. Planting Considerations

Any plant will burn if the conditions are right. Some plants are considered to be extremely flammable while other plants are considered to have some resistance to fire. Verifiable tests of fire exposure characteristics for all specific ornamental landscaping plants are not available.

The Vegetation Management Standards for El Cerrito utilizes available information from the Diablo Firesafe Council at <http://diablofiresafe.org/tolerance.html> under Table 1 Plants with a Favorable Fire performance Rating in 3 or More References.

At the base of trees and shrubs, replace flammable vegetation with bark, mulch, rock, gravel or low-growing or more fire-resistant ground covers. This cover reduces the fire danger and minimizes weeds.

Avoid placing medium-sized shrubs beneath trees or taller shrubs. By breaking up the available fuel mass in ornamental landscaping, a fire will be kept at lower intensity, flame lengths will be shorter and fire will be less likely to form a continuous line or front.

E. Structural Fire Safety

The City's roofing and vegetation management standards are designed to reduce the amount of airborne burning material, limiting fire spread. Once a fire starts, it is often accelerated by wind-borne burning material. Burning embers or brands are the main source of fire spread in mixed urban-wildland fires. The roof of a house is most vulnerable to this type of ignition followed by openings such as vents. Spark arresters

with a maximum of ½ inch openings in the mesh are required over the outlet of every chimney. Class A is the top rating for fire resistive roofing, followed by Classes B and C. The City of El Cerrito requires that all roofing be Class B or better, and wood shake shingle roofing materials are prohibited in new construction or replacement of more than 50% of the roof. It is recommended to cover vent openings with ¼ inch openings in the mesh to prevent flying embers from entering the structure.

III. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The following terms are used to describe the vegetation management standards in California State Law and in the City of El Cerrito's Fire Hazard Reduction Program.

Very High Fire Hazard Severity (VHFHS) Zones: Any geographic area designated per Government Code Section 51178 to contain the type and condition of vegetation, topography, weather and structure density to potentially increase the possibility of wildland conflagration fires. As a community adjacent to extensive wildland areas, the City of El Cerrito contains several VHFHS zones. A CAL Fire interactive map of these zones is available at <https://egis.fire.ca.gov/FHSZ/>. Fire hazard reduction standards are more extensive for properties located within VHFHS zones.

Defensible Space: A concept in landscape design for homes which provides a band of managed vegetation around a home that slows movement of fire by reducing or denying fuel and provides a space for firefighters to take a stand to protect the house.

Fire Resistant Plants: A relative term used to describe plants that are "more resistant" or "less resistant" than other plants to fire. Given enough heat, all vegetation will burn. Yet plants in fact differ in how fast they burn, how high a flame they produce and their ability to survive fire. Fire resistance is enhanced by higher amounts of moisture within twigs and foliage. Fire-resistant plants can lose this quality altogether if not properly maintained and irrigated. The Vegetation Management Standards for El Cerrito utilizes available information from the Diablo Firesafe Council at <http://diablofiresafe.org/tolerance.html> under Table 1 Plants with a Favorable Fire performance Rating in 3 or More References.

Fire Hazardous Vegetation: Plants which can burn easily because they generate dry undergrowth, contain flammable oils or produce significant quantities of dead or dying material. Hazardous vegetation is fuel which must be removed or strictly maintained so as not to constitute a fire hazard by igniting easily and then contributing to rapid fire spread. Seasonally dry grass, weeds, brush, and unmaintained and unirrigated trees and ornamental vegetation are examples of fire hazardous vegetation. Properly chipped, mulched and disbursed material does not constitute fire hazardous vegetation. Fire hazardous vegetation is also known as **flammable vegetation and combustible growth.**

Ornamental Landscaping: Decorative plants growing within a tended garden or yard which are appropriately irrigated, maintained and located to provide aesthetic decoration and functional utility, such as privacy screening, shade, weed suppression and erosion control. The use of fire-resistant plants and the removal of fire hazardous vegetation will enhance fire safety.

Zone 1: Extends 30 feet from buildings, structures, decks, etc. in all portions within the City of El Cerrito including the designated Very High Fire Hazard Severity (VHFHS) Zones. In Zone 1 vacant lots shall be maintained to be 10 feet wide along the property line.

Zone 2: Extends from 30 feet to 100 feet out from buildings, structures, decks, etc. in only those areas within the City of El Cerrito designated as the Very High Fire Hazard Severity (VHFHS) Zones. In Zone 2 vacant lots shall be maintained to be 30 feet wide along the property line. For properties within Zone 2, all Zone 1 requirements shall be enforced in addition to Zone 2 requirements.



Fire Hazard Reduction Checklist



Zone 1 Requirements

Definition: Zone 1 extends 30 feet from buildings, structures, decks, etc. in all portions within the City of El Cerrito including the designated Very High Fire Hazard Severity (VHFHS) Zones

- Remove all dead plants, grass and weeds within 30 feet of buildings, structures, decks, etc.
- Remove dead or dry leaves and pine needles from your yard, roof and rain gutters
- Trees shall be maintained so that no portion is closer than 10 feet from any chimney opening
- Trees, shrubs, bushes or other vegetation adjacent to or overhanging any structure shall be maintained free of dead limbs and other combustible matter such as vines and loose papery bark
- On mature trees, limbs should be removed up to 10' above the ground. Smaller trees should be limbed to 1/3rd of their height up to 6' above the ground, but in no case less than 18" from the ground
- Relocate wood piles to Zone 2 if applicable
- Remove or prune flammable plants and shrubs near windows
- Remove vegetation and items that could catch fire from around and under decks
- Create a minimum 6-foot separation between trees, shrubs or vegetation and combustible materials
- Vacant lots in Zone 1 shall be maintained to be 10 feet wide along the property line

Zone 2 Requirements

Definition: Zone 2 extends from 30 feet to 100 feet out from buildings, structures, decks, etc. in only those areas within the City of El Cerrito designated as the Very High Fire Hazard Severity (VHFHS) Zones. NOTE: All Zone 1 requirements shall be followed in addition to the following Zone 2 requirements

- Cut or mow weeds and grass shall be cleared to a maximum height of 6 inches
- All fire hazardous vegetation except for weeds and grass shall be cleared and maintained to a height no greater than 18 inches above the ground
- Vacant lots in Zone 2 shall be maintained to be 30 feet wide along the property line

To find out if your property is located within the Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zone, go to <https://egis.fire.ca.gov/FHSZ/> On the upper left hand side, click on the bottom icon for Address Search.