FACT SHEET:

Fire Hazard Severity Zone Model
A Non-technical Primer

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
Office of the State Fire Marshal

Most of the highest wildfire losses take place during hot, windy days or nights when flames spread so fast that many buildings catch fire and overwhelm available firefighting forces. Many buildings ignite when burning embers land on wood roofs, blow in through vents, pile up in cracks, or become lodged under boards. By constructing buildings in a way that reduces the ability of embers to intrude, a major cause of structure ignition is reduced.

Recently adopted building codes reduce the risk of burning embers igniting buildings. Standards are already in effect for roofs and attic vents. Application of roofing standards depends on the Fire Hazard Severity Zone of a property. New building codes for California, will require siding, exterior doors, decking, windows, eaves, wall vents and enclosed overhanging decks, to meet new test standards. These standards apply throughout areas where the State has financial responsibility for wildland fire protection and for local responsibility areas zoned as very high fire hazard severity.

While all of California is subject to some degree of fire hazard, there are specific features that make some areas more hazardous. California law requires CAL FIRE to identify the severity of fire hazard statewide. These fire zones, called Fire Hazard Severity Zones are based on factors such as fuel, slope of the land and fire weather. There are three zones, based on increasing fire hazard: medium, high and very high.

Model Behind Fire Hazard Severity Zone Mapping

The zone designation for each specific parcel is initially assigned by a computer model. The model is based both on existing fire behavior modeling techniques used by fire scientists throughout the United States and on new methodologies and data developed by the Fire Center at the University of California in Berkeley.

The model evaluates land area using characteristics that affect the probability that the area will burn and the potential fire behavior that is expected should the area burn in a wildfire. Many factors are considered such as fire history, existing and potential fuel, flame length, blowing embers, terrain, and typical weather for the area.

Hazard Versus Risk

As required by law, the model evaluates "hazard" not "risk." *Hazard* refers to physical conditions that cause damage. "Hazard" as calculated in the model is based on the physical conditions that give a likelihood that an area will burn in the future, the heat produced when it does burn, and a prediction of the embers that spread the fire. It is based on the potential vegetation that will grow in the area over the next 30 – 50 years.

Risk, on the other hand, is the potential damage a fire can do to values at risk in the area under existing and future conditions. Risk does consider modifications that affect susceptibility of property to damage,

such as defensible space, irrigation and sprinklers, and building construction that reduces the risk of burning embers igniting buildings. Hazard does not equal risk, but is an important factor in determining risk.

Zones and Parcels

Mapping an area as large as California requires the creation of spatial units called zones. Zones are areas that form the spatial building blocks for constructing a map. They are akin to the pieces in a jig-saw puzzle.

Zones are created by computer from areas of similar terrain, vegetation, and fuel types. They are areas that have relatively similar burn probabilities and fire behavior characteristics. The zone size varies from 20 acres and larger in urbanized areas to 200 acres and larger in wildland areas. Urban areas are treated differently in mapping due to the significant changes in both fuel conditions and burn probability that happen as areas become urbanized.

Wildland zones are areas of similar terrain and fuel conditions created by using computer techniques to build the boundaries. Areas dominated by brush lands on steep slopes will generally occur in different zones than flat grassland areas.

Urban zones are delineated based on minimum area and average parcel size. They must be at least 20 acres in size, and contain average parcel sizes that are less than two acres per parcel. In most counties, urban zones were developed using parcel data. Where such data was not available parcel density was interpreted using 2000 census data and statewide vegetation map data. In practice, the majority of areas mapped as urban zones have parcel sizes less than one acre, with highly developed infrastructure and ornamental vegetation.

Fundamental to understanding the map is that hazard zones do not exist at scales smaller than those used to create the zones. Thus when looking at the map, one needs to know how information is averaged across the zone to derive the final hazard ranking. The zones will have smaller areas within them of different hazard characteristics. This detail is lost when scores are averaged over the entire area of the zone to obtain a zone-wide description of hazard

Focus on Characterizing Fire Behavior and Fire Hazard to Buildings

Since new building standards seek to reduce the chance that buildings will ignite in a wildfire, the model focuses on those descriptions of fire behavior that influence structure ignition. The model uses fire behavior characteristics that describe the intensity of both radiation and convection from nearby flame sources (using flame length as a measure) and mass transport of firebrands due to convection lifting and wind).

Intrinsic to hazard, consequently, is the estimation of probability, or chance. Further, the conditions that give rise to hazard for an area are not solely a function of conditions in that particular area. Firebrands landing in an area may be produced some distance away, and hence the hazard for an area is influenced by hazards off-site

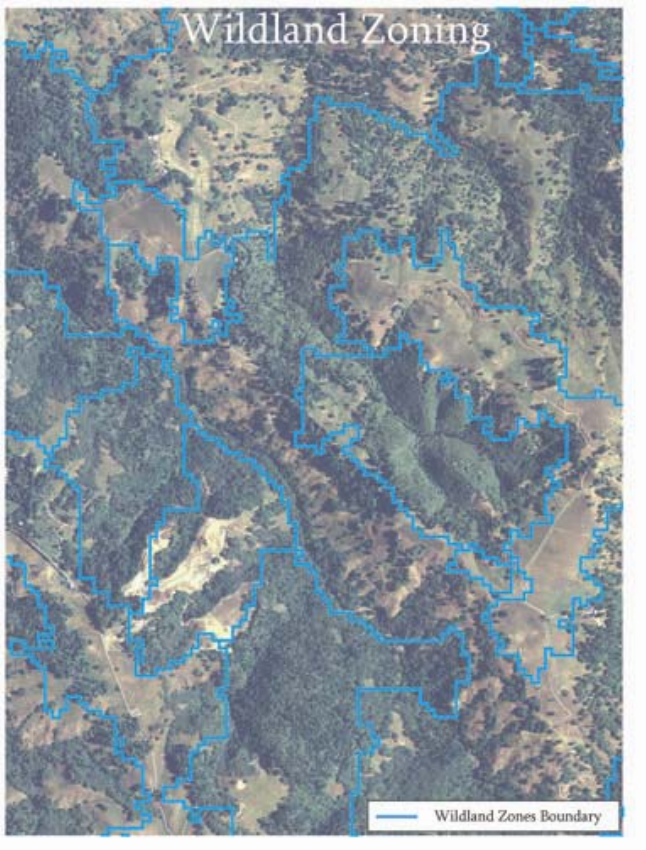
Terms Used

Fire Hazard Severity has two key components: probability of burning and expected fire behavior. The factors considered in determining hazard are: 1) how often an area will burn; and 2) when it does burn, what characteristics might lead to buildings being ignited?

Fire behavior refers to the physical characteristics of the fire – examples include rate of spread, length of flames, and the ability to produce firebrands or embers.

Burn probability describes the average chance of a fire burning an area in any given year. It is based on the fire records spanning the last 55 years. Some areas of the state have much higher chances of burning, and this is reflected in the hazard zones.

Zoning and Scoring



The model uses building blocks to derive FHSZ classes based on a two-step process: Zoning and Scoring (See Figure 1). Urban areas are treated differently from wildlands due to the significant changes in both fuel conditions and burn probability that happen as areas become urbanized

Each wildland zone gets scores that tie together the burn probability with the expected flame sizes predicted by fuels, slope, and expected fire weather. Since it describes potential hazard to buildings, the model characterizes the fuel potential of the area over a 30-50 year period and the maximum expected hazard value is used.

While some areas may have recently been treated and currently have only moderate hazard, buildings in that area will be exposed to increasing hazards as these vegetation fuels develop, hence the use of "climax" or fuel potential in the model. As with the chance of fire, expected flame size varies significantly from one fuel type to the next.

Areas also receive a score for the amount of firebrands (burning embers transported by the wind) that are expected to land on an area. In the model, firebrands are produced based on fuel types and a model describing the distribution of firebrands transported from the source area. The firebrand score is a function of the number of brands that are expected to land on a given area, and are consequently influenced by areas around them where the embers are produced.

Each wildland zone gets an area-averaged classification for flaming and firebrands, which together determine the final hazard ranking for the zone: moderate, high or very high.

Urban zones are scored based on their proximity to wildland zones and the flame score for that wildland zone, the number of firebrands being produced in the wildlands and received in the urban area, and the amount of vegetation fuels present in the urban zone. Urban areas immediately next to wildland zones typically have the highest hazard, and areas more removed from the wildlands have lower hazards.

The influence of wildland fire hazard into urban areas can range from only about 200 feet in low hazard conditions, to nearly a mile in very high hazard areas. The nature and depth of the zones are a function of both how likely a flame front will penetrate, and how many firebrands are expected to land in the urbanized areas.

Results of the Model

Results of the model lead to revised maps of fire hazard severity. To summarize, classification of a zone as moderate, high or very high fire hazard is based on the severity of fire behavior that leads to building

ignition. Each area of the map gets a score for flame length, embers, and the likelihood of the area burning. Scores are averaged over the zone areas. Final FHSZ class (moderate, high and very high) is determined based on the averaged scores for the zone.

Model results were tested and validated in four counties with very different conditions: Butte, Calaveras, Sonoma, and San Diego. Further, draft maps have been reviewed by the 21 CAL FIRE units and six contract counties; their recommendations for changes were evaluated and incorporated when appropriate.

Updated information and support documents for FHSZ are available on CAL FIRE's Fire and Resource Assessment Program's website at http://frap.cdf.ca.gov/fhsz/review.html.

Figure 1: FIRE HAZARD SEVERITY ZONING MODEL STRUCTURE