

## 4.2 Fire Safety Regulations

The fire safety provisions denoted in the Safety Element should be prepared and adopted in conjunction with fire safety regulations issued by the State Board of Forestry (Irwin, 1989). Public Resources Code section 4290 requires minimum statewide fire safety standards pertaining to:

- Road standards for fire equipment access;
- Standards for signs identifying streets, roads, and buildings;
- Minimum private water supply reserves for emergency fire use;
- Fuel breaks and greenbelts.

With certain exceptions, all new construction after July 1, 1991 in potential wildland fire areas has been required to meet the statewide standards. The State requirements, however, do not supersede more restrictive local regulations.

As defined by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), wildland areas may contain substantial forest fire risks and hazards. These areas are also called "State Responsibility Areas" (SRAs). They consist of lands exclusive of cities, and Federal lands regardless of ownership. The primary financial responsibility for preventing and suppressing fires belongs to the State. However, it is not the State's responsibility to provide fire protection services to any building or structure located within the wildlands unless the CDF has entered into a cooperative agreement with a local agency for those purposes pursuant to Section 4142 of the Public Resources Code. Wildland areas require disclosure for real estate transactions, and owners of properties in wildland areas are subject to the maintenance requirements of Section 4291 of the Public Resources Code.

Every fifth year beginning July 1, 1991, the CDF must provide maps identifying the boundaries of lands classified as SRAs to the Riverside County assessor. The CDF is also required to notify Riverside County of any changes to SRAs within the County resulting from periodic boundary modifications approved by the CDF.

Government Code Section 51178 specifies that the Director of the CDF, in cooperation with local fire authorities, shall identify areas that are Very High Fire Hazard Severity Zones (VHFHSZ) in Local Responsibility Areas (LRAs), based on consistent statewide criteria and the expected severity of fire hazard. This requirement is based on the Bates Bill (Assembly Bill 337, adopted September 29, 1992) that was initiated following the 1991 Oakland Hills "Tunnel" fire (Table 4-1). VHFHSZ consider fuel loading, slope, fire weather and other relevant factors. Under Assembly Bill 3819, passed in 1994 (AB 3819 – Willie Brown), "Class A" roofing, minimum clearances of 30 feet around structures, and other fire defense improvements are required for these zones.

Per Government Code Section 51178, a local agency may, at its discretion, exclude from the requirements of Section 51182 an area within its jurisdiction that has been identified as a VHFHSZ, if it provides substantial evidence in the record that the requirements of Section 51182 are not necessary for effective fire protection within the area. Alternatively, local agencies like Riverside County may include areas not identified as VHFHSZ by the CDF, following a finding supported by substantial evidence in the record that the requirements of Section 51182 are necessary for effective fire protection within the new area. According to Section 51182, such changes made by a local agency shall be final and shall not be rebuttable by the CDF.

During adoption of the 1997 Uniform Fire Code, the County of Riverside Board of Supervisors (1999) found that additional requirements and standards of fire hazard reduction were needed to properly protect the health, safety, and welfare of the existing and future residents and workers of Riverside County. They based these finding on:

- ***Climate:*** Generally, Riverside County is arid. Annual rainfall varies from three inches in Blythe to over thirty inches in Pine Cove. Hot, dry Santa Ana winds are common and necessitate increased fire protection. Added protection includes but is not limited to, on-site protection such as sprinklers. On-site protection supplements normal Fire Department response, and provides immediate fire protection for life and safety of multiple-occupancy structures.
- ***Geography and Topography:*** Riverside County includes deserts, mountains, brush-covered wildlands, and agricultural lands. Elevations range from three hundred feet below sea level (Salton Sea) to ten thousand feet above it. In areas of habitable land, slopes range from flat to 25% (*Slope measures variation from the horizontal. A flat terrain is 0% and a vertical cliff is a 100% slope.*). Traffic and congestion in urban areas, and great travel distances in rural and wildland areas, often hinder Fire Department response time. Thus, enhanced on-site protection for property occupants is necessary.
- ***Geology and Societal Realities:*** Several major earthquake faults bisect the County, including the San Andreas, the San Jacinto and the Elsinore. Numerous minor active faults add to the hazard. There are many areas within Riverside County at risk from landslides, wind erosion, blowing sand, flooding, and wildfires. Most of these disasters can also be triggered by earthquakes. Placement of multiple-occupancy buildings, location of arterial roads, and State revenue limits all complicate fire department efforts. Locations of fire stations and numbers of staff may be insufficient to control fires in multiple locations simultaneously. Thus, enhanced on-site, built-in protection is necessary.