

Wildfire Preparedness



Objective

Is the City of Austin effectively working to prevent wildfires and adequately prepared to respond to wildfires?

Background

City plans list wildfire as a significant risk to the region. In May 2016, City Council established a goal of zero wildfire-related fatalities and outlined steps to reach that goal.

In the City, many departments are involved in some aspect of wildfire preparedness. The Austin Fire Department's (AFD) Wildfire Division acts as the primary resource addressing these issues. The City created the Wildfire Division in 2012 to identify and proactively reduce wildfire risk.

National best practices name three primary elements necessary to reduce the destructive impacts of wildfire which are: restoring and maintaining resilient landscapes, creating fire-adapted communities, and responding to wildfires.

Managing landscapes is a key step in reducing wildfire risk. Austin Water and the Parks and Recreation Department manage the most City land by acreage. Another way to reduce wildfire risk is to require construction that is resistant to fire in areas where humans share a boundary with wildland areas. These areas are called the wildland-urban interface, or WUI (see Exhibit 1 for additional detail).

What We Found

The City of Austin has taken steps to address the destructive impacts of wildfire through efforts that align with the three elements outlined in a national best practices framework. The Wildfire Division and other City departments have taken actions that align with this framework, as shown below. Together, these actions improve the City's preparedness for the threat of wildfire. Austin also has opportunities to improve proactive efforts to reduce wildfire threats. These include adopting a Wildland-Urban Interface code, drafting land management plans for at-risk City properties, and defining consistent guidance for the prescribed burn permitting process.

| Element 1 | Restoring and Maintaining Landscapes |
|---------------|---|
| Actions | + AFD efforts to reduce wildfire fuels focused in high-risk areas + Austin Water staff uses land management plans that address wildfire risks |
| Opportunities | - Create land management plans for Parks and Recreation Department high-risk properties - Create rules for prescribed burn permits to meet land management goals |
| Element 2 | Creating Fire-Adapted Communities |
| Actions | + Community outreach, education, and involvement + Austin Energy increasing area cleared when trimming trees near power lines |
| Opportunities | - Propose a WUI code for adoption to make new homes and buildings more resistant to fire (the code needs to include key safety elements and all cost impacts need to be identified and communicated, see Exhibit 2) |
| Element 3 | Responding to Wildfires |
| Actions | + Firefighter training and experience with actual wildfires + Cooperation among City departments on evacuation planning |

What We Recommend

To address improvement opportunities meant to reduce the threat of wildfire, the Fire Chief should ensure the Austin Fire Department:

- proposes a WUI code that includes key safety elements and all cost impacts are identified and clearly communicated during the code adoption process; and
- creates policies and procedures for the prescribed burn permitting process, issues permits according to these policies, and creates and shares guidance related to this process with its partners.

To address land management opportunities, the Director of the Parks and Recreation Department should ensure that land management plans exist for high-risk properties, address wildfire risk areas, and are implemented to reduce the threat of wildfire.

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Exhibit 1: The Austin Fire Department Identified the Wildland-Urban Interface Area in Austin and Classified it by Hazard Severity Zone

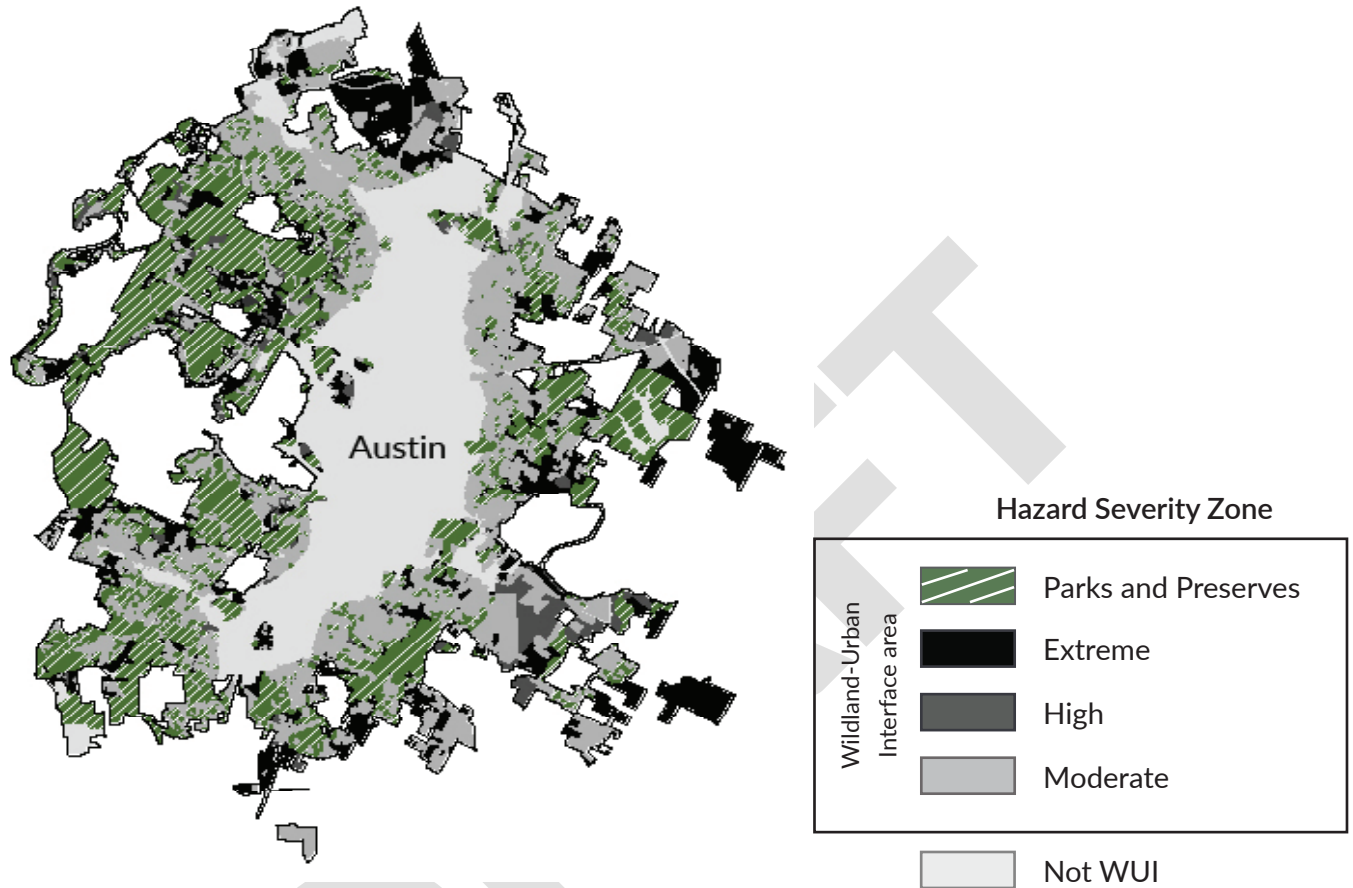


Exhibit 2: Adjustments to Austin's Draft WUI Code Lowered the Impact of Estimated Housing Construction Cost Increases

