



# INTERNATIONAL RESIDENTIAL CODE FIRE SPRINKLER COALITION

## FACT SHEET

### Water Supplies for Home Fire Sprinkler Systems

This document has been developed to dispel myths by providing factual information about water supply requirements for home fire sprinkler systems.

**MYTH:** *Home fire sprinkler systems require expensive upgrades to a new home's water supply system.*

**FACTS:** Home fire sprinkler systems have become so efficient that they can often be designed to use the same or even less water than a new home's plumbing system.

- Fire sprinklers typically require only 7 pounds-per-square-inch (psi) to operate, which is less than the minimum required pressure for residential plumbing fixtures.  
Plumbing systems require:
  - 8 psi minimum pressure for any plumbing fixture.<sup>1</sup>
  - 20 psi minimum pressure for temperature controlled shower valves (these are mandatory in new homes).<sup>2</sup>
  - 40 psi minimum pressure for the main supply connection (applies to all homes with indoor plumbing, even those supplied by wells).<sup>3</sup>
- A single fire sprinkler can use as little as 8 gallons-per-minute (gpm). With home fire sprinkler systems typically designed to accommodate two simultaneously flowing sprinklers, 16 gpm may be all that's needed to supply fire sprinklers. This is actually less than the 18 gpm minimum that would be required by the Plumbing Code to supply plumbing fixtures in a typical entry-level home with 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms and 2 outdoor hose connections.<sup>4</sup>
- Fire sprinklers will typically require more water in larger, more expensive homes, but such homes tend to have more plumbing fixtures, which require an increased water supply for plumbing as well. One or two sprinklers must flow for a minimum of 7-10 minutes, which can be provided by a well and/or a small tank when sprinklers are not supplied by a water distribution system.

**MYTH:** *Home fire sprinkler systems require big, expensive water meters.*

**FACTS:** When a fire sprinkler system is supplied by a water distribution system, water meter size is based on the required pressure and flow, which as stated above, may actually be greater for plumbing than for fire sprinklers. Fire sprinklers won't lead to increased meter or tap fees when the sprinkler system is able to be supplied by the same size meter that serves household plumbing.

A typical 5/8-inch meter will flow up to 20 gpm, which is adequate to operate a fire sprinkler system in many homes.<sup>5</sup> A 3/4-inch meter, which will flow well over 30 gpm, is capable of handling just about any home fire sprinkler system. Most often, the size of underground pipe leading to a house is much more limiting than the meter itself. Upsizing the underground piping

<sup>1</sup> International Residential Code (IRC) Table P2903.1

<sup>2</sup> IRC Section P2708

<sup>3</sup> IRC Section P2903.3

<sup>4</sup> IRC Table P2903.6 [17.5 fixture units: 2 bathroom groups, 1 kitchen group, 1 laundry group and 2 hose bibs], and IRC Table P2903.6(1)

<sup>5</sup> IRC Table P2904.6.2(2) [This is the prescriptive allowance for any meter. When a meter of known flow characteristics flows more, the higher flow may be used.]

between the meter and the house is an easy and inexpensive way to improve pressure and flow for all plumbing, including fire sprinklers, without a larger meter.

It's important to note some meter manufacturers' literature specify lesser flow limits, focusing on the range over which a meter will accurately measure continuous flow. With respect to supplying home fire sprinklers, meter flow limits should be evaluated based on the maximum flow rate rather than continuous flow accuracy limits. Water authorities should recognize that sprinklers will always use less water than fire hoses connected to unmetered fire hydrants that would otherwise be needed to put out a fire, so there is no legitimate value in requiring accurate measurement of sprinkler flow in the event of a fire

**MYTH: Fire sprinkler systems require expensive backflow preventers.**

**FACTS:** National plumbing codes never require backflow protection for home fire sprinkler systems fabricated with materials approved for household plumbing, such as CPVC, PEX or copper.<sup>6</sup> Occasionally, a local plumbing authority may nevertheless request a backflow preventer, not recognizing that fire sprinkler systems can be safely connected directly to a potable water supply.

Where backflow prevention is an issue because of a local requirement, there are several options whereby additional backflow controls for fire sprinklers can be avoided.

- Fire sprinklers can be incorporated as part of a multipurpose plumbing system that feeds both sprinklers and plumbing fixtures from a home's cold water plumbing pipes.
- Fire sprinklers can be supplied by a separate water connection, with a toilet connected to the end of sprinkler piping to ensure that the piping is occasionally purged by flushing the toilet to prevent stagnant water. This arrangement is referred to as "passive purge."
- Where a yard irrigation system is installed, backflow prevention will be required because such systems are subject to backflow of non-potable water. Fire sprinklers can share the irrigation backflow preventer; thereby, eliminating the need for an additional device.

**MYTH: Rural water distribution systems and wells don't have enough water to supply home fire sprinklers.**

**FACTS:** As indicated above, if the water distribution system or well provides enough water to supply household plumbing needs, the supply may be adequate for fire sprinklers. In some cases a larger pump or tank may be needed for sprinklers, but standard, off-the-shelf pumps and tanks suitable for plumbing systems are permitted. When such upgrades are provided, they actually benefit the owner on a daily basis beyond fire protection, because the home's plumbing system will be more robust. Additional water storage can also be invaluable for emergency use in the event of a natural disaster that interrupts utilities.

It should also be noted that, were a rural water distribution system found to be inadequate to supplying 16 gpm for fire sprinklers, it would probably fall short of the minimum code-required plumbing demand, and it would surely fall far short of the 1,000+ gpm needed from fire hydrants to support a fire department extinguishing a fire in an unsprinklered home.

**About IRC Fire Sprinkler Coalition**

Founded in 2007, the IRC Fire Sprinkler Coalition has grown to include more than 100 international, national and regional public safety organizations, including associations representing 45 states, all of whom support the mission of promoting residential fire sprinkler systems in new home construction. More information can be found at [www.IRCFireSprinkler.org](http://www.IRCFireSprinkler.org).

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<sup>6</sup> IRC Section P2904.1

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