

CITY OF SCOTTSDALE

Environmentally Sensitive Lands (ESLO) & Natural Area Open Space (NAOS) — Resident Summary

This document summarizes the ESLO and NAOS rules that apply to properties in northern Scottsdale. The original City of Scottsdale ESLO Citizens Guide and NAOS Guide are the legally binding documents. For questions specific to your property, contact the Planning Department at (480) 312-7800 or PlanningInfo@ScottsdaleAZ.gov.

Part 1: Environmentally Sensitive Lands Ordinance (ESLO)

What Is the ESLO?

The ESLO is a set of zoning rules adopted in 1991 (updated 2001, 2003, and 2004) that governs development across roughly 134 square miles of desert and mountain land in northern Scottsdale — generally north and east of the Central Arizona Project canal.

Think of it as an extra layer of rules on top of your regular zoning. Where the two conflict, the ESLO wins.

Why Does It Exist?

- Protect unique desert features: mountains, hills, rock formations, native plants, archaeological sites, and washes
- Encourage buildings that blend into the desert landscape
- Keep residents safe from flooding, erosion, and unstable terrain
- Reduce the cost of public infrastructure in challenging terrain

The ESLO is not meant to prevent all development — it guides development to happen in ways that respect the desert environment.

The Three Land Types (Landforms)

Most ESLO rules depend on which of three landform areas your property falls in:

Landform	Typical Slopes	Key Characteristics
Lower Desert	Less than 5%	Flat valley floors, fine soils, sparse vegetation, scattered shallow washes
Upper Desert	5% – 35%	Bajada (mountain base) and pediment (rolling plains) areas; dense desert vegetation
Hillside	15% – 50%+	Peaks, mountains, buttes — McDowell Mtns, Pinnacle Peak, Troon Mtn, etc. Shallow soils and rock outcrops

Special restrictions also apply near protected Peaks & Ridges (skyline features) and Boulder Features.

Land Slope

Slope is measured as the vertical rise over horizontal distance, expressed as a percentage. Example: a 15-foot rise over 100 feet = 15% slope. The steeper your land, the stricter the rules — especially around how much open space you must preserve and how many homes can be built.

Washes (Watercourses)

Scottsdale has no year-round streams, but many seasonal washes carry stormwater. These are protected because they support native vegetation and provide wildlife habitat. There are two categories:

Category	Storm Flow	Key Rule
Major Watercourse	750+ cubic ft/sec (100-yr storm)	No buildings within the 100-year flood plain
Minor Watercourse	50–750 cubic ft/sec (100-yr storm)	No buildings within the 100-year flood plain

Washes must be left in their natural state wherever possible. No walls may cross a watercourse.

Hillside Density — How Many Homes Can Be Built?

In the Lower and Upper Desert, density follows your base zoning. In the Hillside landform, steeper slopes mean fewer allowed homes:

Hillside Slope	Maximum Density Allowed
Less than 25%	1 home per 5 acres
25% – 35%	1 home per 20 acres
Greater than 35%	1 home per 40 acres

Natural Area Open Space (NAOS) Requirements

Every property in the ESLO area must permanently preserve a percentage of land as natural desert (NAOS). The required amount depends on your landform and slope:

Slope	Lower Desert	Upper Desert	Hillside
0 – 2%	20%	25%	50%
2% – 5%	25%	25%	50%
5% – 10%	30%	35%	50%
10% – 15%	30%	45%	50%
15% – 25%	30%	45%	65%
Over 25%	30%	45%	80%
Minimum after reductions	15%	20%	40%

In subdivisions, NAOS can be pooled across the whole project, but no individual lot can have less than 15% NAOS. For lots under 22,000 sq ft, NAOS must be in common tracts, not on individual lots.

Any single NAOS area must be at least 4,000 sq ft and at least 30 feet wide (or 20 ft if next to a street).

Where Should NAOS Be Located?

Priority order for NAOS placement (highest first):

1. Along washes and watercourses — most important for habitat connectivity
2. Along the edge of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve
3. Along major roads and scenic corridors
4. Around boulder features
5. Along neighborhood connected pathways
6. Along steep or hazardous slopes

NAOS cannot be placed in front yards less than 40 feet deep. NAOS areas should not be hidden from neighboring properties or streets.

Building Design Rules

- Maximum building height: 24 feet in single-family residential zones
- Height is measured from the original (natural) ground level, not from graded fill
- No mirror-like or highly reflective exterior materials; color brightness limited to 35% Light Reflective Value (LRV)
- Outdoor lighting must be restrained — no light spill onto neighboring properties
- Non-native plants only in enclosed yard areas; none exceeding 20 feet in height
- Subdivision perimeter walls are discouraged
- Side and rear walls on larger lots must be set back from property lines to allow wildlife movement and stormwater flow
- No walls may cross washes
- No buildings or structures within the 100-year flood plain of any watercourse

Special Development Techniques

Developers can use these tools to protect sensitive areas while still building at allowed density:

Technique	What It Means
Density Transfer	Move development off sensitive areas (mountains, washes) onto flatter land. The sensitive area becomes a permanent Conservation Area.
Clustering	Concentrate homes on the least sensitive parts of the property. Sensitive areas become open space. Lot sizes may shrink, but overall allowed homes stay the same.
Amended Development Standards	Adjust setbacks, lot sizes, and widths to fit around washes, slopes, and boulders. Changes ≤25% need Development Review Board approval; larger changes need City Council.

Hardship Exemptions

If current ESLO standards create a significant hardship for your property, you can apply to City Council for an exemption to follow an earlier version of the ordinance. All four criteria must be met:

7. The current standards cause a substantial hardship on the property
8. The exemption is still consistent with the ESLO's intent and purpose
9. Applying the current standards would not provide significant environmental benefit

10. The proposal follows a previously adopted version of the ordinance

Common Situations — Quick Reference

Situation	What Applies
Property platted before annexation into Scottsdale	Must follow current ESLO (Hardship process available)
Adding to an existing home (in a recorded subdivision)	May follow the amended development standards already in place
Accessory buildings (sheds, guesthouses, etc.)	ESLO applies to all permitted structures
Model homes / standard plan homes	ESLO applies; some interim allowances for parking and partial reviews
Buildings permitted before May 21, 2004	One-time exemption — no redesign required
Lots with 35,000+ sq ft	Subject to “Individual Lot Walls” exemption provisions

Penalties for Violations

During construction: re-inspections, required corrections, plan re-submittals, or a Stop Work Order.

For completed properties: treated as a Zoning Ordinance violation — notices, citations, court proceedings, and fines.

Part 2: Natural Area Open Space (NAOS) — Homeowner Guide

What Is NAOS?

A NAOS easement is a legal restriction on a piece of land requiring it to remain as undisturbed natural desert. It applies regardless of who owns the land — the easement stays with the property even when it is sold.

NAOS areas are held in common tracts within a subdivision (usually managed by the HOA) or directly on individual lots (managed by that property owner).

Although the City mandates NAOS, the land itself is private property — owned by the HOA or individual homeowner. The easement acts like a permanent deed restriction.

Do I Have NAOS on My Property?

Check your property’s title report under Schedule B, or look at your subdivision plat. You can also use Scottsdale’s Parcel Information Maps at www.ScottsdaleAZ.gov (search “parcel information maps”).

Who Is Responsible for Maintenance?

- HOA-managed NAOS (in common tracts): the homeowners association is responsible
- NAOS dedicated on an individual lot: that property owner is responsible

Consult your subdivision plat or original dedication document to confirm responsibility on your specific property. Maintenance is minimal by design.

What You Can and Cannot Do in NAOS

ALLOWED in NAOS	NOT ALLOWED in NAOS
Remove man-made debris	Grading, filling, excavating, or clearing land
Remove invasive plants (e.g., desert broom)	Building structures — walls, pools, BBQs, sheds
Remove wash obstructions	Adding decomposed granite or mulch of any kind
Remove parasitic growth if threatening the host plant	Pruning or shearing trees/shrubs (except for fire safety)
Create defensible space within 30 ft of home (Fire Dept. guidance)	Removing native plants — all are protected by ordinance
Trim shrubs/grasses for fire safety	Pesticides, chemicals, or traps of any kind
Leave fallen dead plants (they serve as animal habitat)	Non-native plants of any kind
Add native plants in sparsely vegetated areas — with City approval	Vegetation “walls” or unnatural plant densities

NAOS areas are not meant to appear manicured. Regular raking, pruning, and thinning should not occur.

Fire Safety — Defensible Space

With Scottsdale Fire Department approval, you may maintain a defensible zone within 30 feet of any habitable structure:

Action	Near Homes	Near Walls & Streets
Trim live vegetation	15 feet	5 feet
Remove dead vegetation	15 feet	15 feet
Total defensible zone	30 feet	20 feet

Contact the Scottsdale Fire Department at (480) 312-FIRE before doing any vegetation management work in NAOS.

Can NAOS Be Reconfigured?

Yes, in limited cases — for example, if you want to build a pool or guest house that would extend into NAOS. You must apply for a Release of Easement. Requirements:

11. An equal amount of natural desert must be dedicated as replacement NAOS
12. The property must still meet all NAOS requirements after the reconfiguration
13. The Release of Easement process must be completed before submitting any other permits

Visit www.ScottsdaleAZ.gov and search “release of easement” for forms and instructions.

Revegetated NAOS — When Temporary Disturbance Is Allowed

A small portion of NAOS may be temporarily disturbed during construction if designated as “Revegetated NAOS” on City-approved plans. Once construction is complete, the area must be fully restored:

- Contour land to match nearby natural desert

- Plant native species matching the surrounding desert — salvaged plants are preferred
- Use temporary irrigation until plants are established
- No non-native plants; no decomposed granite or mulch

Best practice: inventory and salvage existing plants (shrubs, cacti) before any disturbance. Native plants survive better and restore faster than new transplants.

Adding Plants to NAOS

For sparsely vegetated NAOS areas (due to past disturbance), you may add plants after obtaining City approval. Submit a plan showing the proposed planting area, species to be planted (must naturally occur in the region), access points, and irrigation methods.

For the City's Indigenous Plant List, visit www.ScottsdaleAZ.gov and search "ESL indigenous plant list".

Mistletoe, Invasive Plants & Dead Plants

Subject	What To Know	Action Allowed?
Mistletoe	Parasitic plant in Palo Verde and Ironwood trees. Produces berries that feed wildlife — actually beneficial.	Remove only if threatening the health of the host tree
Invasive plants	Non-native species (e.g., desert broom) that crowd out native vegetation.	Yes — can and should be removed
Dead native plants	Fallen saguaros and dead plants serve as animal habitat.	Leave in place unless a confirmed health or safety hazard

To report a possible NAOS violation in your neighborhood, contact Code Enforcement at (480) 312-2546 with the address and a description of the issue.

Contact Information

Department	Phone	What They Handle
Customer Relations / Planning Info	(480) 312-7800	General ESLO & NAOS questions; PlanningInfo@ScottsdaleAZ.gov
Current Planning Services	(480) 312-7000	Development request review
Plan Review	(480) 312-7080	Final plan review for construction
Permit Services	(480) 312-2500	Permits and plan submittals
Inspections & Land Survey	(480) 312-5750	Field inspections, building code compliance
Records	(480) 312-2356	Recorded documents, plat information
Code Enforcement (violations)	(480) 312-2546	Report NAOS or ESLO violations
Fire Department (defensible space)	(480) 312-FIRE	Fire safety guidance for NAOS areas

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