

Section 3.6

Agricultural Resources

Introduction

The analysis of potential environmental impacts related to agricultural resources was based on the qualitative review and comparison of the type, distribution, and quality of agricultural lands in Monterey County and the potential effect of the proposed traffic improvements.

Methodology

Jones & Stokes reviewed the following sources of information to prepare the agricultural resources chapter of this document.

- Monterey County General Plan, Greater Monterey Peninsula Area Plan, and Carmel Valley Master Plan.
- *Crop Report for 2005* from the Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner's Office.
- *Important Farmland Data* and *Land Use Conversion Data* from the California Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resource Protection.
- Map of *Monterey County Williamson Act Lands 2005: Land Enrolled in Williamson Act and Farmland Security Zone Contracts as of 01-01-2005*, 1:150,000, from the California Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resource Protection.
- Monterey County economic profile, California Department of Finance.
- Interviews with Monterey County staff in the Assessor's Office, Agriculture Commissioner's Office, and Resource Management Agency - Planning Department.
- Websites for Carmel Valley Chamber of Commerce and local businesses and organizations.

Environmental Setting

Regional Setting

Agriculture is one of the primary economic bases of Monterey County. Over 300,000 acres of productive farmlands can be found in the County (Monterey County 1982). Agriculture comprises 21% of jobs (Monterey County Chamber of Commerce 2004a). In 2005, the gross production value for all agriculture in Monterey County was \$3,273,011,100 (Monterey County Agricultural Commissioner's Office 2006). The success of agriculture is due to rich soils, especially in Salinas Valley, and the long growing season, especially in the coastal region. Most of the agricultural land is concentrated in the North County, Greater Salinas, and Central Salinas Valley planning areas (Monterey County 1982).

Monterey County's most important crops are vegetables (68% of gross production value for 2005); fruits and nuts, including vineyards (21%); and nursery crops (9%). The remaining products are livestock and poultry, field crops, seed crops, and apiary products (Monterey County Agriculture Commissioner's Office 2006). In 2005, lettuce, strawberries, nursery items, grapes, and broccoli were top earning crops (Monterey County Agriculture Commissioner's Office 2006).

The productivity of farmlands is linked to its soils, which have been classified mapped by the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Department of Conservation (California Department of Conservation 2006a). The classifications in order of productivity are prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, unique farmland, and farmland of local importance (see *Farmland Quality* below for more details) (California Department of Conservation 2006a). Prime farmlands are scattered throughout the County, but are concentrated in the Salinas Valley (Monterey County 1982).

Important Farmland makes up 18% of the agricultural land in Monterey County, (California Department of Conservation 2006b). The majority of the Important Farmland in Monterey County is classified as Prime Farmland (70%) (California Department of Conservation 2006b). In 2004, Monterey County had the following acreages of farmland productivity types (California Department of Conservation 2006b).

- Prime farmland: 169,368 acres.
- Farmland of statewide importance: 44,544 acres.
- Unique farmland: 26,478 acres.
- Farmland of local importance: 0 acres.
- Grazing land: 1,066,539 acres.

Carmel Valley

Carmel Valley supports some limited small-scale agriculture—vineyards, row crops, orchards, nurseries, gardens, and grazing. A few small organic farms and olive groves produce goods for commercial consumption (Earthbound Farm 2006; Carmel Valley Chamber of Commerce n.d.). Most of the crops are grown in the areas between populated areas in the narrow valley, with some vineyards extending up the slopes. A few small vineyards and an olive grove lie along Laureles Grade. The land in Carmel Valley is particularly well suited to grape-growing because of the well drained, gravelly slopes coupled with warm days, cool nights, and long growing season (Monterey County Vintners and Growers Association 2006). Seven wineries have tasting rooms, and 252 acres are planted with vineyards¹ (Monterey Vintners and Growers Association 2006).

The California Land Conservation Act provides a mechanism to protect agricultural lands from conversion to non-agricultural uses (see *Williamson Act Contract Lands* below). Two parcels in Carmel Valley are under Williamson Contract: a parcel of non-prime agricultural land under non-renewable contract in the Lower Valley near Highway 1, and a small parcel of prime agricultural land on the northern slope between Mid-Valley and Carmel Valley Village (California Department of Conservation 2006d) (see Figure 3.6-1).

There are 9,110 acres of agricultural lands² in Carmel Valley, or 0.01% of the total agricultural acreage of Monterey County (California Department of Conservation 2006e). Important farmland³ in Carmel Valley accounts for 349 acres (California Department of Conservation 2006e) (see Figure 3.6-1).

Regulatory Setting

Farmland Quality

Farmland quality refers to the ability of farmland to support various levels of crop or livestock production. Factors that affect farmland quality include the physical and chemical characteristics of a site's soils (i.e., soil quality), as well as climate, moisture supply, topography, and the quality and availability of irrigation water. The Land-Capability Classification System developed by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Storie Index Rating System developed by the University of California are two land classification systems that are commonly used throughout the country to evaluate and rate the suitability of a given tract of land for agricultural production or other types of land. In California, the farmland classification system developed by the California Department of Conservation's Important Farmland Mapping and

¹ Vineyards accounted for 34,287 acres in Monterey County overall in 2003 (Monterey Vintners and Growers Association 2006).

² Grazing, Prime, Statewide Importance, and Unique Farmlands.

³ Prime, Statewide Importance, and Unique Farmlands.

Monitoring Program (FMMP) is the primary system used to evaluate the quality and distribution of farmland in California. The FMMP prepares Important Farmland maps approximately every 2 years for most of the state's agricultural regions based on soil survey information and land inventory and monitoring criteria developed by the NRCS. The farmland classification system used by the FMMP consists of eight mapping categories: five categories of agricultural lands and three categories of nonagricultural lands. The characteristics of these categories are summarized below.

Agricultural Land

- *Prime Farmland.* Lands with the combination of physical and chemical features best able to sustain long-term production of agricultural crops. The land must be supported by a developed irrigation water supply that is dependable and of adequate quality during the growing season. For this classification, the land must have been used for the production of irrigated crops at some time during the 4 years before the mapping data were collected.
- *Farmland of Statewide Importance.* Lands with agricultural land use characteristics, irrigation water supplies, and physical characteristics similar to prime farmland but with minor shortcomings (e.g., steeper slopes or less ability to hold and store moisture).
- *Unique Farmland.* Lands with lesser-quality soils used for the production of California's leading agricultural cash crops. These lands are usually irrigated but may include nonirrigated orchards or vineyards as found in some of the state's climatic zones.
- *Farmland of Local Importance.* Lands of importance to the local agricultural economy, as determined by each county's board of supervisors and a local advisory committee. In Monterey County, there are no Farmlands of Local Importance.
- *Grazing Land.* Lands on which the existing vegetation is suited to the grazing of livestock.

Nonagricultural Land

- *Urban and Built-Up Land.* Land occupied by structures with a building density of at least 1 unit to 1.5 acres, or approximately 6 structures to a 10-acre parcel. This type of land is used for residential, industrial, commercial, construction, institutional, public administration, railroad and other transportation yards, cemeteries, airports, golf courses, sanitary landfills, sewage treatment, water control structures, and other developed purposes.
- *Other Land.* Land not included in any other mapping category. Common examples include low density rural developments; brush, timber, wetland, and riparian areas not suitable for livestock grazing; vacant and nonagricultural land surrounded on all sides by urban development; confined livestock, poultry or aquaculture facilities; strip mines, borrow pits; and water bodies smaller than forty acres.
- *Water.* Perennial water bodies with an extent of at least 40 acres.

State

Williamson Act Contract Lands

The California Land Conservation Act, better known as the Williamson Act, was enacted by the California State Legislature in 1965 to encourage the preservation of agricultural lands. The Williamson Act program permits property tax adjustments for landowners who contract with a city or county to keep their land in agricultural production or approved open space uses. Lands covered by Williamson Act contracts are assessed on the basis of their agricultural value instead of their potential market value under nonagricultural uses. In return for the preferential tax rate, the landowner is required to agree contractually not to develop the land for at least 10 years.

Williamson Act contracts are renewed annually for 10 years unless a party to the contract files for nonrenewal. If a landowner files a nonrenewal application, the automatic annual extension of a contract ends and a 9-year phase-out of the contract begins. During the phase-out period, the land remains restricted to agricultural and open-space uses, but property taxes gradually return to levels associated with the market value of the land. At the end of the 9-year nonrenewal process, the contract expires and the owner's uses of the land is restricted only by applicable local zoning. Under extraordinary circumstances, Williamson Act contracts can be cancelled without completing the term nonrenewal process.

The Williamson Act defines compatible use of contracted lands as any use determined by the county or city that administers the agricultural preserve to be compatible with the agricultural, recreational, or open-space use of land within the preserve and subject to contract (California Government Code, Section 51202[e]). However, uses deemed compatible by a county or city government must be consistent with the principles of compatibility set forth in California Government Code Section 51238.1.

Local

Monterey County designates three types of agricultural lands in its Land Use Plan: Permanent Grazing, Agricultural Conservation, and Agricultural Preservation.

Monterey County General Plan

Policy 3.2.3. Lands having a high erosion potential as identified in the Soil Survey shall require adequate erosion control methods for agricultural uses.

Policy 4.1.3. All farmlands designated as prime, of statewide importance, unique, or of local importance shall be protected from incompatible uses on adjacent lands.

Policy 30.0.1. The County shall prevent non-agricultural uses which could interfere with the potential of normal agricultural operations on viable farmlands designated as prime, of statewide importance, unique, or of local importance.

Policy 30.0.2. The County shall require that permanent, well- defined buffer areas be provided as part of new non-agricultural development proposals which are located adjacent to agricultural land uses on viable farm lands designated as prime, of statewide importance, unique, or of local importance. These buffer areas shall be dedicated in perpetuity, shall be of sufficient size to protect agriculture from the impacts of incompatible development and to mitigate against the effects of agricultural operations on adjacent land uses, and shall be credited as open space.

Policy 30.0.3. The County shall allow division of viable farmland designated as prime, of statewide importance, unique, or of local importance only for exclusive agricultural purposes, when demonstrated not to be detrimental to the agricultural viability of adjoining parcels.

Policy 39.4.1. Priority shall be given to the improvement of highways and arterial roads that carry a significant amount of goods movement, particularly agricultural goods.

Greater Monterey Peninsula Area Plan

Policy 26.1.6.1. Development proposals should include compatible open space uses located between other developed areas in order to maintain a rural atmosphere and to protect scenic resources.

Carmel Valley Master Plan

Policy 4.2.4. Development adjacent to agricultural lands shall be planned to minimize adverse effects on the productivity of the agricultural soils.

Criteria for Determining Significance

In accordance with State CEQA Guidelines, applicable federal and state regulations, and local plans and policies, the proposed program would be considered to result in a significant impact if it would:

A. Convert Farmland to Nonagricultural Use

Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, or Farmland of Local Importance, as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the FMMP, to nonagricultural use.

Involve other changes in the existing environment that, because of their location or nature, could result in the conversion of farmland to nonagricultural use.

B. Conflict with Existing Use or Legal Status

Conflict with existing Williamson Act contracts.

Conflict with adjacent uses in a manner that induces those lands to be converted to nonagricultural uses.

Impacts and Mitigation Measures

A. Convert Farmland to Nonagricultural Use

Impact AG-1: Direct Conversion of Important Farmland to Nonagricultural Use (Significant and Unavoidable)

There are several parcels of prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance in Carmel Valley, many of which are located immediately adjacent to Carmel Valley Road. The proposed roadway improvements have the potential to result in the conversion of some Important Farmland to nonagricultural uses. Expansion of roadways under the proposed improvements requires taking lands for use as new right-of-way. This impact is considered potentially significant. Implementation of the following mitigation measure would reduce this impact, but not to a less-than-significant-level for all projects because Monterey County cannot guarantee that conversion of farmland can be avoided as part of future projects. Therefore, this impact is considered **significant and unavoidable**.

Mitigation Measure AG-1.1: Evaluate the Potential for Direct Farmland Conversion at the Project Level and Avoid, Minimize, and Compensate for Loss of Farmland

The County will evaluate the environmental significance of potential farmland conversion impacts at the project level using the California Agricultural Land Evaluation and Site Assessment Model, which was developed by the California Department of Conservation's Division of Land Resource Protection to provide lead agencies with a systematic and objective method for evaluating the potential impacts of proposed projects on agricultural resources. The County will implement the following measures to reduce conversion of significant farmland:

- design the proposed roadway projects to avoid or minimize the direct conversion of Important Farmland to nonagricultural uses, and
- compensate for unavoidable Important Farmland conversion impacts by:
 - enrolling offsite agricultural lands under Williamson Act contracts,
 - protecting productive offsite agricultural land subject to conversion through the purchase or transfer of its development rights, or
 - making agricultural improvements on potential prime agricultural lands.

Impact AG-2: Indirect Conversion of Important Farmland to Nonagricultural Use (Less Than Significant)

The proposed roadway improvement contributes to indirect growth of Carmel Valley to planned buildout. This growth could result in conversion of farmland to residential or other urban or semi-urban use. However, this growth is planned and approved. Further, while the proposed program accommodates future growth, it does not immediately convert a significant amount of farmland to another use. Any new development would be planned and approved separately from the proposed program and would undergo its own CEQA review. This impact is considered **less-than-significant**. No mitigation is necessary.

B. Conflict with Existing Use or Legal Status

Impact AG-3: Conflict with Existing Williamson Act Contracts (Less Than Significant)

The Williamson Act allows county and city governments to define compatible land uses for contract lands within their jurisdictions if those uses are consistent with the compatibility principles set forth in Government Code Section 51238.1. There is one parcel under Williamson Act contract in Carmel Valley close

enough to the roads to be potentially affected by the proposed improvements. This parcel is under non-renewable contract. There are no other lands under Williamson Act contracts at any of the proposed roadway improvement areas. This impact is considered **less-than-significant**. No mitigation is required.

Impact AG-4: Conflict With Use of Adjacent Lands That Induces Conversion to Nonagricultural Use (Less than Significant)

The proposed roadway improvements would improve or modify existing transportation-related uses within the Carmel Valley Road and Laureles Grade corridors. Specific projects, such as lane additions, could require taking of minimal amounts of adjacent lands in order to expand road right-of-way. Furthermore, none of the proposed traffic improvements are expected to require division of existing parcels used for agricultural production. Therefore, this impact is considered **less-than-significant**. No mitigation is required.