

3.2 AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

3.2.1 SETTING

Agricultural lands within Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties include some of the most productive in the United States. The economy of the region is primarily based on agriculture, and as indicated above, the 130-mile long Salinas Valley has a reputation as the nation’s “Salad Bowl”, due to the lettuce and other vegetables that are grown there. Large areas are also in crop production in the Pajaro Valley, on the coastal terraces of Santa Cruz County, and in northern San Benito County.

The California Department of Conservation has identified and mapped several categories of important farmland within the state, including the categories described below.

- Prime Farmland has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the production of crops.
- Farmland of Statewide Importance is land other than Prime Farmland that has a good combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the production of crops.
- Unique Farmland does not meet the criteria for Prime Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance, but has recently been used for the production of specific crops with a high economic value.

Each of the three counties within the Monterey Bay region has farmland areas that have been mapped under these definitions.

Under the California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (Williamson Act), local governments can enter into contracts with private landowners for the purpose of maintaining land in active agricultural use. Property taxes on those parcels under Williamson Act contracts are based on an assessment of the property as it supports farming and open space uses, rather than full market value (which may be considerably higher, particularly in areas that are exposed to development pressure where market prices for developable land can be far above prices based on the revenue such land could generate in agricultural uses). Williamson Act contracts are automatically renewed each year, unless the property owner files a notice of non-renewal. If so, property taxes on the affected parcel are adjusted upward in each of the remaining years of the contract, so that they will reflect the market value of the property at the end of the contract period. There are a limited number of circumstances, however, under which a Williamson Act contract may be cancelled without following non-renewal procedures, each involving a comprehensive review and approvals process.

There are lands under active Williamson Act contracts in each of the three counties within the Monterey Bay region.

3.2.2 IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Implementation of the three plans could have a significant environmental impact if it were to result in:

- The conversion of Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency) to non-agricultural use;
- Any conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use;
- Any conflict with a Williamson Act contract; or
- Other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency) to non-agricultural use.

Although adoption of the three plans would not, in and of itself, change current land use designations established by jurisdictions within the region, construction of several of the proposed roadway improvement projects identified in the financially constrained Action Element could result in the conversion of some prime farmlands, unique farmlands or farmlands of statewide importance to non-agricultural uses. The actual acreage of farmland that may be converted as a result of the construction of the proposed transportation system improvement projects identified in the financially constrained Action Elements of the three plans can only be determined following the design of each of these roadways and the formal definition of the proposed rights-of-way. Even if these roadways were designed to minimize the loss of productive farmlands, however, some farmlands would necessarily be converted to non-agricultural use as a result of the construction of the proposed roadways.

Farmland Conversion

IMPACT 3.2.1: Conversion of Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland and Farmland of Statewide Importance. Construction of several of the projects identified in the financially constrained Action Elements of the three plans could be expected to result in the conversion of prime farmlands, unique farmlands or farmlands of statewide importance to non-agricultural uses. Examples of projects which might involve such impacts may include (but are not necessarily limited to) road widenings, construction of new roadways and interchanges, and construction of some trails. In addition, the extension of existing roadways and the construction of new roadways, have the potential to induce, or accommodate, growth in the surrounding areas by providing new access, which could result in the conversion of additional farmland. This could represent a **potentially significant environmental impact** associated with implementation of these types of projects.

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE

MITIGATION MEASURE 3.2.1: Design Modifications

In designing specific transportation system improvement projects, implementing agencies shall, where appropriate, avoid the conversion of prime farmland, unique farmland and farmland of statewide importance to the maximum extent feasible, and shall, where appropriate, consider alternative alignments that reduce or avoid the conversion of such farmlands. Where avoidance is not feasible, such projects shall, where appropriate, be designed to minimize the conversion of such farmlands. Implementing agencies will be required to evaluate the possible conversion of farmland during site-specific environmental review for each project. The Land Evaluation and Site Assessment Model (LESA) from the California Department of Conservation shall, where appropriate, be utilized to identify the potentially significant project-related impacts resulting from changes in agricultural land use. Implementing agencies should consider the use of agricultural land conservation easements where project-related conversion of farmland is determined to be unavoidable.

RESULTING LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE

Although most projects could be designed by the implementing agencies to reduce the conversion of prime farmland, unique farmland or farmland of statewide importance to non-agricultural uses to a level of less than significant, implementation of a few of the projects identified in the financially constrained Action Elements of the three plans could result in an undetermined extent of such conversion which could not be effectively mitigated. In such cases, this impact could remain **significant and unavoidable**.

Agricultural Zoning

IMPACT 3.2.2: Potential Conflict with Existing Zoning for Agricultural Use. In some jurisdictions, construction of some of the projects identified in the financially constrained Action Elements of the three plans may conflict with existing zoning which is intended to protect land for agricultural use. Examples of projects which might involve such impacts may include (but are not necessarily limited to) roadway widenings and the construction of new roadways and interchanges. This could represent a **potentially significant environmental impact** associated with implementation of these types of projects.

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE

MITIGATION MEASURE 3.2.2: Project-Related Variances

In those instances where approval of a project could conflict with existing zoning intended to protect agricultural uses, the implementing agencies shall, where appropriate, first ensure that any appropriate variance is obtained.

RESULTING LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE

Approval of a variance to enable the construction of a transportation system improvement project to go forward despite a conflict with existing zoning regulations would indicate that the local jurisdiction has accepted the need for that improvement as being consistent with the general planning policies of that jurisdiction, in effect reducing this impact to a level of less than significant.

Williamson Act Contracts

IMPACT 3.2.3: Potential Conflicts with Williamson Act Contracts. In some jurisdictions, construction of some of the projects identified in the financially constrained Action Elements of the three plans may be built on lands which are currently under Williamson Act contracts. Examples of projects which might involve such impacts may include (but are not necessarily limited to) roadway widenings, the construction of new roadways and interchanges, and the construction of bike paths or pedestrian trails through agricultural areas. As long as these contracts remain in force, this could represent a **potentially significant environmental impact** associated with implementation of these types of projects.

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE

MITIGATION MEASURE 3.2.3: Avoidance/Cancellation of Contracts

In designing specific transportation system improvement projects, implementing agencies shall, where appropriate, avoid the cancellation of Williamson Act contracts to the maximum extent feasible. Where avoidance is not feasible, such projects shall, where appropriate, be designed to minimize the number of Williamson Act contracts that would need to be canceled. Implementing agencies will be required to evaluate the possible cancellation of Williamson Act contracts during site-specific environmental review for each project.

RESULTING LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE

Where the cancellation of current Williamson Act contracts can be avoided, potential impacts would be reduced to a level of less than significant. In those instances where project modifications to avoid cancellation of Williamson Act contracts cannot be made, it may be necessary for the jurisdiction which is a party to such contracts to take action to cancel them prior to project approval. In a few such cases, the impact could remain **significant and unavoidable**.

Fragmentation of Agricultural Land/Changes in Agricultural Uses

IMPACT 3.2.4: Fragmentation of Agricultural Lands and Changes in Land Uses Adjacent to Agricultural Lands. Construction of several of the projects identified in the financially constrained Action Elements of the three plans could be expected to result in major changes in existing land uses adjacent to land currently in agricultural uses or in the fragmentation of existing agricultural

operations, which could also result in land use conflicts that might ultimately cause the agricultural operators to abandon their agricultural operations. For example, the improved access which would be provided through the construction of a new roadway in an area adjacent to land which is in active agricultural use could also result in increased trespass or vandalism on these farmlands, which might discourage the continued use of that land for agricultural purposes. Examples of projects which might involve such impacts might be (but would not necessarily be limited to) roadway widenings, construction of new roadways and interchanges, and the construction of new bike paths or pedestrian trails through agricultural areas. This could represent a **potentially significant environmental impact** associated with implementation of this type of project.

RECOMMENDED MITIGATION MEASURE

MITIGATION MEASURE 3.2.4: Project-Specific Agricultural Protection

A. In designing specific transportation system improvement projects, implementing agencies shall, where appropriate, ensure that rural roadway alignments follow property lines to the maximum extent feasible, to minimize impacts to the agricultural production value of any specific property. Farmers shall, where appropriate, be compensated for the loss of agricultural production at the margins of lost property, based on the amount of land deeded as road right-of-way, as a function of the total amount of production on the property.

B. In those instances where projects are proposed in areas adjacent to lands currently in agricultural uses (particularly lands which have been designated as prime farmland, unique farmland or farmland of statewide importance), implementing agencies shall, where appropriate, incorporate project-specific design features which would provide adequate protection for the farmland adjacent to the project site (fencing, warning notices, etc.).

RESULTING LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE

The effective application of this type of mitigation by the implementing agencies could reduce changes in land use adjacent to land in agricultural uses to a level of less than significant for most projects. However, even with the implementation of these mitigation measures, impacts associated with project-related fragmentation of parcels currently in agricultural uses may remain **significant and unavoidable** for a few projects.