

3.3 Agriculture and Forest Resources

This section describes the regulatory and environmental setting for agricultural and forestry resources. It also describes impacts on agricultural and forest resources that would result from implementation of the Climate Action 2020: Community Climate Action Plan (CAP) and includes mitigation for significant impacts, where feasible and appropriate.

3.3.1 Environmental Setting

This section describes the agricultural and forest resources present in Sonoma County (County). This information has been drawn and modified from the *Sonoma County General Plan 2020 Environmental Impact Report* (EIR) (Sonoma County 2006).

3.3.1.1 Agricultural Resources

Sonoma County ranks 16th in California for farming productivity and 34th in the nation. Over the course of the County's agricultural history, the dominant crop in the market has shifted several times. At the beginning of the 20th century, apples were the most valuable commodity, followed by a shift to poultry in the 1920s. Dairy products dominated the market in the mid-1950s, and wine grapes have been the dominant crops since the 1980s. Today, fruits have fallen in importance, and although dairy farms and livestock operations are still present, both are reduced in number. Vegetables have increased their share of the market, and the nursery industry has grown to supply the demand for varietal wine-grape rootstock.

Important farmland soils are located throughout Sonoma County but are concentrated primarily in the Sonoma Valley, west Sebastopol, west Santa Rosa, Alexander Valley, and Dry Creek Valley regions (Sonoma County 2008). As of 2012, Sonoma County had approximately 578,006 acres of agricultural land (56% of the County), as determined by the state through the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) (California Department of Conservation 2012a). Of that total, 417,091 acres (41% of the County) were designated as grazing land, and 160,915 acres (16% of the County) were classified as important farmlands (California Department of Conservation 2012a). Grazing land represents land where existing vegetation is suitable for grazing or browsing, whether growing naturally or through management. Important farmland categories represent the agricultural lands that are most suitable for cultivating crops and include Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Local Importance, as described below in Section 3.3.2.2.

Table 3.3-1 provides the types and total acreages of the agricultural lands that were inventoried by the FMMP in the County for 2012.

Table 3.3-1. Total Acres of Agricultural Lands in Sonoma County (2012)

Farmland Type	Total Acreage
Prime Farmland	29,882
Farmland of Statewide Importance	17,213
Unique Farmland	33,079
Farmland of Local Importance	80,741
Important Farmland Total	160,915
Grazing Land	417,091
Agricultural Land Total	578,006

Source: California Department of Conservation 2012a.

Most areas that have been designated as Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Local Importance in the County are located outside city boundaries, in unincorporated areas. Designated Prime Farmland and Farmland of Statewide Importance are located in northern Sonoma County, south of Cloverdale and north and southwest of Geyserville. Most of the other mapped farmlands are in areas west of the City of Santa Rosa and southwest of the City of Sonoma (California Department of Conservation 2012b).

Agricultural Preservation

As the urbanized parts of Sonoma County continue to expand, pressure to develop agricultural lands increases. The many factors that might make a piece of property ideal for farming are similar to the factors that might make a piece of property attractive for development. The most common programs for preserving agricultural lands and continuing uses for agricultural purposes include the Williamson Act and programs related to the purchase of conservation easements.

Approximately 271,611 acres of prime and nonprime farmland in the County are covered by a Williamson Act contract (California Department of Conservation 2015). Approximately 30,000 acres of agricultural land are protected by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District under conservation easements or fee title. In addition, the Sonoma Land Trust protects 2,667 acres of agricultural land.

3.3.1.2 Forest Resources

Approximately 513,000 acres (about 50% of the County land area) consists of forest and woodlands, including approximately 72,000 acres of conifer forest, 284,000 acres of hardwoods, and 157,000 acres of conifer mixed with hardwoods (Sonoma County 2008). These forest and woodland areas in the County are often interspersed with grasslands, shrublands, or agricultural lands and residences. The Sonoma Land Trust protects 1,134 acres of sustainable forestry land.

Forest areas also provide commercial timber as a renewable resource. "Timberlands" are generally considered to be those lands that are capable of and available for growing a commercial species of timber, such as redwood and Douglas-fir. In Sonoma County, these lands are predominantly in the northwest part of the County and Russian River area. There are approximately 232,000 acres of timberland in the County (Sonoma County 2008).

3.3.2 Regulatory Setting

3.3.2.1 Federal

There are no relevant federal regulations for identifying impacts on agricultural and forestry resources as a result of the CAP.

3.3.2.2 State

California Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act)

The California Land Conservation Act, also known as the Williamson Act, was adopted in 1965 to encourage the preservation of the state's agricultural lands and prevent their premature conversion to urban uses. The Williamson Act established an agricultural preserve contract procedure by which any county or city within the state may tax a landowner at a lower rate, using a scale that is based on the actual use of the land for agricultural purposes, as opposed to its unrestricted market value. In return for a reduced tax rate, the owner guarantees that the property remains under agricultural production for a 10-year period. The contract is automatically renewed on an annual basis until the property owner indicates a desire to terminate the contract.

The California Department of Conservation has oversight responsibility for Williamson Act program administration and compliance. However, the local government is authorized to adopt rules to govern the administration of agricultural preserves. The County of Sonoma first adopted its Rules for Administering Agricultural Preserves in 1967, which were last amended in 1989. Two different rules were adopted, one for "Type I" preserves (prime agricultural land) and one for "Type II" preserves (nonprime agricultural land [e.g., grazing or open space]).

In 1998, the state passed the Farmland Security Zone law, sometimes known as the Super Williamson Act. Under the law, farmers can receive an additional 35% reduction in the land's value for property-tax purposes. To earn the additional tax reduction, farmers must agree to keep their land in the conservation program for 20 years, twice as long as required by the Williamson Act. Sonoma County adopted the Super Williamson Act through a County resolution on October 2, 2001, but has yet to receive any applications.

Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

The California Department of Conservation administers the FMMP, which evaluates the quality of farmlands throughout the state. The suitability of local soil resources plays a crucial part in the FMMP's farmland classifications. The FMMP uses U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA NRCS) soil survey information, land inventories, and monitoring criteria to classify most of the state's agricultural regions into five agricultural and three nonagricultural land types. Every 2 years, the FMMP publishes this information in its Important Farmland map series. The five agricultural land classifications are as follows:

- **Prime Farmland** – Lands with the best combination of physical and chemical features that are able to sustain long-term production of agricultural crops. The land must be cropped and supported by a developed irrigation water supply that is dependable and of adequate quality during the growing season. Land must have been used for production of irrigated crops at some time during the two update cycles prior to the mapping date.

- **Farmland of Statewide Importance** – Lands that are similar to Prime Farmland but with minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or less ability to store soil moisture. These lands have the same reliable sources of adequate-quality irrigation water available during the growing season. Land must have been used for production of irrigated crops at some time during the two update cycles prior to the mapping date.
- **Unique Farmland** – Lower quality soils that are used for the production of the state’s leading agricultural crops. These lands are usually irrigated but may include non-irrigated orchards or vineyards, as found in some climatic zones of California. Land must have been cropped at some time during the two update cycles prior to the mapping date.
- **Farmland of Local Importance** – Land of importance to the local agricultural economy, as determined by each county’s board of supervisors and local advisory committees. In Sonoma County, these farmlands include the hay-producing areas of the Santa Rosa Plains, Petaluma Valley, and Tubbs Island Naval Reservation. Additional areas include those lands that are classified as having the capability of producing locally important crops, such as grapes, corn, etc., but may not be planted at the present time.
- **Grazing Land** – Lands of at least 40 acres on which the existing vegetation is suited to the grazing of livestock.

The first three categories (Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, and Unique Farmland) are considered “important farmland” and also meet the definition of agricultural land under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Section 21060.1).

3.3.2.3 Local

Appendix C, *Local General Plan Goals, Objectives, and Policies*, provides a list of the goals, objectives, and policies in the local general plans of the participating jurisdictions, including those related to agricultural and forestry resources. These goals, objectives, and policies were reviewed to assess whether the Project is consistent with the general plans of participating jurisdictions. Disclosure of this consistency analysis is for informational purposes. An additional purpose of providing a list of relative local policies is, where appropriate, to provide the context within which the CAP will be locally implemented. As described in the CAP, most of the CAP measures represent implementation of many of the priorities outlined in existing local policies.

Inconsistencies with general plan policies are not necessarily considered a significance impact under CEQA unless it is related to a physical impact on the environment that is significant in its own right.

Implementation of the CAP is consistent with the applicable general plan goals, objectives, and policies of the participating jurisdictions in relation to agricultural and forestry resources.

3.3.3 Impacts Analysis

3.3.3.1 Methodology

The analysis of agriculture and forestry resources presented in this section is based on a review of the project description and available literature from state and local agencies. This impact analysis is focused on the compatibility of the project with existing agricultural uses and policies in Sonoma

County and whether the activities that would occur with implementation of the CAP could result in physical effects on agriculture and forestry resources.

3.3.3.2 Significance Criteria

State CEQA Guidelines Appendix G (14 California Code of Regulations [CCR] 15000 et seq.) identifies the significance criteria to be considered in determining whether a project would have significant impacts on existing agriculture.

An impact would be considered significant if construction or operation of the project would have any of the following consequences.

- Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland), as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use.
- Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use or a Williamson Act contract.
- Conflict with existing zoning for, or cause rezoning of, forestland (as defined in Public Resources Code Section 12220(g)), timberland (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 4526), or timberland zoned Timberland Production (as defined by Government Code Section 51104(g)).
- Result in the loss of forestland or conversion of forestland to non-forest use.
- Involve other changes in the existing environment that, because of their location or nature, could result in the conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use or conversion of forestland to non-forest use.

3.3.3.3 Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Impact AG-1: Implementation of the CAP could convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland) to non-agricultural use (less than significant).

Sonoma County includes approximately 80,174 acres of farmlands that have been mapped on the FMMP as Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance. None of the CAP measures would result in direct conversion of existing mapped farmlands to non-agricultural uses. The CAP would promote the construction or installation of a limited number of facilities (e.g., anaerobic digester facilities to capture methane gas from manure) at existing dairies to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from livestock operations. Because these facilities would be installed at existing dairies, they would not result in the conversion of farmland to a non-agricultural use.

Several CAP measures would encourage a shift in a mode of transportation. These would involve generally minor changes to existing streetscapes. Some new bicycle facilities may require road widening adjacent to farmlands, which could result in significant impacts and warrant mitigation. Mitigation for any new facilities would be identified during project-level review, but, given the limited scale of bicycle pathways, even those requiring road widening, such impacts would be readily mitigable to a less-than-significant level.

The CAP also promotes the construction of mixed-use and transit-oriented development in city centers to reduce fuel use and travel demand through smart land use and development as well as solid waste facilities to increase waste diversion, reuse of materials, and recycling. Infill mixed-use and transit-oriented development in city centers would be located in developed areas and would not

result in the conversion of farmlands to non-agricultural uses. Although the locations for the solid waste facilities are unknown, there is presently no basis to conclude that there will be impacts on agricultural land associated with these facilities.

Furthermore, CAP measures related to agriculture promote reducing GHG emissions from livestock operations and expanding sustainable agriculture practices. None of the proposed CAP measures would result in the conversion of farmland to a non-agricultural use. In fact, one measure would encourage the preservation of existing agricultural lands to prevent conversion of such lands to urban uses. Therefore, impacts related to the potential for converting farmlands to a non-agricultural use are considered to be less than significant at this time.

Individual proposals for solid waste facilities would be required to undergo project-level CEQA review, disclose any potential impacts related to conversion of farmlands, and provide mitigation of any significant impacts, if necessary. Since the CAP does not include any specific proposed facilities or facility locations, no further analysis of this potential impact can be provided at this time.

Impact AG-2: Implementation of the CAP could conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use or a Williamson Act contract (less than significant).

The CAP does not propose changes to existing land use designations or zoning and anticipates that actions promoted by the CAP will be consistent with the land use designations established by the local land use plans. As discussed above, the CAP promotes the construction of mixed-use and transit-oriented development in city centers to reduce fuel use and travel demand through smart land use and development as well as solid waste facilities to increase waste diversion, reuse of materials, and recycling. Although the locations of these developments and facilities are unknown, there is presently no basis to conclude that there will be conflicts with existing zoning for agricultural use or a Williamson Act contract associated with these facilities. Furthermore, as described above, one CAP measure would encourage communities and the County to preserve natural open space, working timberlands, and agricultural lands to prevent conversion of such lands to urban uses. Therefore, impacts related the potential conflicts with existing zoning for agricultural use or a Williamson Act contract are considered to be less than significant at this time.

Individual proposals for solid waste facilities would be required to undergo project-level CEQA review, disclose any potential impacts related to conflicts with agricultural zoning or Williamson Act contracts, and provide mitigation of any significant impacts, if necessary. Since the CAP does not include any specific proposed facilities or facility locations, no further analysis of this potential impact can be provided at this time.

Impact AG-3: Implementation of the CAP could conflict with zoning for or cause rezoning of forestland or timberland or result in the loss of forestland or conversion of forestland to non-forest use (less than significant).

Approximately half of the land area of Sonoma County consists of forests and woodlands, including approximately 232,000 acres of timberland in the County. As described under Impact AG-2, the CAP does not propose to change existing land use designations or zoning and anticipates that actions promoted by the CAP will be consistent with the land use designations established by the local land use plans. As described above, one CAP measure would encourage communities and the County to preserve natural open space, working timberlands, and agriculture lands to prevent conversion of such lands to urban uses. Therefore, impacts related the potential conflicts with existing zoning for or cause rezoning of forest land or timberland are considered to be less than significant at this time.

Individual proposals for solid waste facilities would be required to undergo project-level CEQA review, disclose any potential impacts related to conversion of forest or timberland, and provide mitigation of any significant impacts, if necessary. Since the CAP does not include any specific proposed facilities or facility locations, no further analysis of this potential impact can be provided at this time.

Impact AG-4: Implementation of the CAP could involve other changes in the existing environment that could result in the conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use or forestland to non-forest use (less than significant).

As described under Impacts AG-1 through AG-3, the CAP does not propose to change existing land use designations or zoning and anticipates that actions promoted by the CAP will be consistent with the land use designations established by the local land use plans. The CAP includes several measures aimed at reducing GHG emissions related to agriculture and encouraging sustainable farming techniques. None of the proposed CAP measures would directly result in the conversion of farmland to a non-agricultural use or forestland to a non-forest use. In fact, one of the CAP measures would promote rangeland carbon farming and sequestration, which would improve agricultural soils and result in a wide range of other environmental benefits. Carbon farming is a method of farming that captures and holds carbon in vegetation and soils, thereby helping to reduce GHG emissions. Carbon farming includes techniques such as adding compost from local community waste or manure from dairy operations to the soil or planting hedgerows and riparian corridors. Residue management, prescribed grazing, range and critical area planting, and filter strips are other techniques. These methods would help to sustain the existing agricultural land by reducing erosion and soil loss, improving soil structures, increasing soil fertility, reducing soil salinity, increasing biodiversity, creating healthier soils and vegetation, increasing water efficiency, and buffering against drought (Carbon Farmers of Australia 2012). Therefore, impacts would be less than significant. No mitigation is required.

3.3.3.4 Cumulative Impacts

Impact C-AG-1: Implementation of the CAP, in combination with other foreseeable development in the surrounding area, could have a significant cumulative impact on agricultural and forest resources (less than considerable contribution).

The geographic context for the cumulative analysis of impacts on agricultural and forestry resources is the area affected by the CAP, in combination with other development in Sonoma County. Implementation of the CAP would include measures that would encourage energy efficiency, a transportation mode shift, and the densification of transit-oriented land uses near city centers and transit corridors. The CAP itself does not propose any specific facilities that would require conversion agricultural land uses, timberlands, or forestlands to nonagricultural or non-forest uses within Sonoma County and would not contribute considerably to any cumulative loss of agricultural land uses, timberlands, or forestlands.

Individual proposals for any future new facilities would be required to undergo project-level CEQA review, disclose any potential impacts related to agriculture, and provide mitigation of any significant impacts, if necessary. Since the CAP does not include any specific proposed facilities or facility locations, no further analysis of this potential impact can be provided at this time.

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