

## **3.0 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING**

This section provides a brief description of the current environmental conditions in the proposed project area. The project area is defined as the entire County of San Luis Obispo. The countywide analysis has been broken down further into discussion by planning area, when appropriate. The county divides land uses within all planning areas into various categories. The official maps of the County Land Use Element (LUE) show the precise locations where land use categories and combining designations are applied, and define regulations for land uses, densities and intensity of use.

### **3.1 REGIONAL SETTING**

Located along the Central Coast of California, San Luis Obispo County is bounded by the Pacific Ocean to the west, Monterey County to the north, Kern County to the east, and Santa Barbara County to the south (Figure 2-1). The San Luis Obispo County region is moderately urbanized, but remains as a generally low density, rural and agricultural area of California that has grown as a major tourist destination. The region includes seven incorporated cities: Arroyo Grande, Atascadero, Grover Beach, Morro Bay, Paso Robles, Pismo Beach, and San Luis Obispo. The seven incorporated urban areas include approximately 56% of the county's total population (California Department of Finance, "City/County Population Estimates with Annual Percent Change," January 2009). Urban concentrations in the unincorporated portions of the county include Avila Beach, Cambria, Cayucos, Heritage Ranch, Los Osos/Baywood Park, Nipomo, Oceano, San Simeon, Santa Margarita, San Miguel, Shandon, and Templeton. All of the urban areas within San Luis Obispo County are linked to Highways 1 and 101, which are the primary transportation corridors serving the region.

Population growth in the county increased 13.6% between the years 1990 and 2000. As of the year 2009, 270,429 residents live in San Luis Obispo County (California Department of Finance, "City/County Population Estimates with Annual Percent Change," January 2009). This growth has resulted in an increased demand for housing in the county. The City of San Luis Obispo is the employment, entertainment, education, and shopping center of the region both geographically and economically. Commercial and residential development has increased in the North County and Nipomo, as slower rates of growth have occurred and costs have risen in the San Luis Obispo and North Coast regions.

### **3.2 COUNTY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO**

San Luis Obispo County is divided into two major regions: 1) the coastal zone, established as a result of the California Coastal Act of 1976; and 2) the inland area. Each of these two large areas is further broken down into more manageable "planning areas" (refer to Figure 2-2). The following paragraphs describe the physical setting and land uses found within each planning area. Much of the information contained therein was adapted from applicable Area Plans, which are available for review at the County Department of Planning and Building.



### **Adelaida Planning Area**

The Adelaida planning area occupies approximately 207,978 acres (325 square miles) and encompasses the central northwest portion of the county. The area's terrain descends from the rugged, mountainous western slope of the Santa Lucia Range to rolling farmlands in the eastern portion of the planning area. The primary land use in the area is agriculture, with steeper and more remote areas providing grazing capabilities. The Adelaida Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 1997) designates lands within the planning area by land use category. The area is predominantly agricultural land uses (approximately 73%) with rural lands and public facilities each accounting for 13% of the area's land use. There are no urban or village areas in the Adelaida planning area.

### **El Pomar-Estrella Planning Area**

The El Pomar-Estrella planning area covers approximately 132,000 acres (206 square miles) of rolling hills east of the Salinas River and west of the Shandon-Carrizo planning area. The planning area is characterized by its rural landscape with agricultural operations consisting mainly of vineyards in flatter areas and livestock grazing on steeper slopes. Residential rural developments are also scattered throughout the planning area. The El Pomar-Estrella Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 2002) designates lands within the planning area by land use category. Agriculture is the predominant land use in the planning area (approximately 80.2%) with rural lands and residential rural making up approximately 10.4 and 9.0%, respectively. There are no urban areas in the El Pomar-Estrella planning area, but there is one village: Creston.

### **Estero Planning Area**

The Estero planning area occupies approximately 42,335 acres (66 square miles) of the central coastal area of the county from Point Estero on the north to Point Buchon on the south. The planning area occupies a narrow strip along the coast north of the City of Morro Bay and south of the unincorporated community of Los Osos. The planning area includes large portions of the Morro and Little Morro Creek watersheds on the north, a portion of the Irish Hills on the south, and a portion of Cuesta College on the east. The Estero planning area consists predominantly of agricultural land uses (approximately 74%) with extensive recreational, open space and residential uses. The Estero Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 2002) designates lands within the planning area by land use category. The Estero planning area encompasses the Cayucos, Los Osos, and Morro Bay urban areas. This planning area is entirely in the Coastal Zone.

### **Huasna-Lopez Planning Area**

The Huasna-Lopez planning area occupies 103,673 acres (162 square miles) in the south central portion of the county. It is a predominantly agricultural (approximately 82%) and rural lands (approximately 14%) planning area that is bordered by the Los Padres National Forest to the north and east, Santa Barbara County to the south, and the range of hills (Newsom and Temattate Ridges) that separate the Huasna Valley from Nipomo Valley on the west. The Huasna-Lopez Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 1996) designates land uses within the planning area. There are no urban or village areas within the Huasna-Lopez planning area.

### **Las Pilitas Planning Area**

The Las Pilitas planning area includes a total of approximately 65,553 acres (102 square miles), including much of the mountainous portions of the county east of the community of Santa Margarita. The planning area is primarily composed of agricultural and rural land designations



(approximately 93%), and is adjacent to the Los Padres National Forest to the east, south and southeast. The Las Pilitas Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 1996) designates lands within the planning area by land use category. There are no urban areas in the Las Pilitas planning area, but there is one village: Pozo.

### **Los Padres Planning Area**

The Los Padres planning area encompasses approximately 217,593 acres (340 square miles). The entire planning area is rural with no urban or village areas and includes a large portion of the Santa Lucia and La Panza mountain ranges that traverse the center of the county from the northwest to the southeast. Approximately 94 percent of the Los Padres planning area is designated agriculture and open space, with rural lands filling the remaining 6 percent. The planning area is adjacent to the Los Padres National Forest. The Los Padres Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 1996) designates lands within the planning area by land use category.

### **Nacimiento Planning Area**

The Nacimiento planning area occupies approximately 97,665 acres (153 square miles) bounded by the Santa Lucia Mountains on the west, Camp Roberts on the east, Monterey County on the north, and the Adelaida planning area on the south. Lake Nacimiento is located in the center of the of the planning area and is surrounded by landscape ranging from gently sloping savannah woodlands and meadows in the northeast section of the planning area to the rugged chaparral-covered terrain of the Santa Lucia foothills in the west. The Nacimiento Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 1996) designates land use categories within the planning area, with open space, rural lands, and agriculture identified as the predominant land uses (together, approximately 89%). Residential, recreation, and commercial land use designations each account for less than one percent of land use within the planning area. The Nacimiento planning area includes the villages of Heritage Ranch and Oak Shores.

### **North Coast Planning Area**

The North Coast planning area includes approximately 167,216 acres (261 square miles) extending from the Monterey County line on the north to Point Estero on the south and inland to the main ridge of the San Lucia Mountains. The planning area includes the communities of Cambria and San Simeon as well as the Hearst Ranch, which occupies almost half of the planning area. Agriculture-designated land occupies the majority of the planning area (approximately 93%). The North Coast Land Use Element and Local Coastal Program (San Luis Obispo County, 2001) designate land use categories within the planning area. The North Coast planning area includes the Cambria urban area and San Simeon Acres village, and is located entirely within the Coastal Zone.

### **Salinas River Planning Area**

The Salinas River planning area occupies approximately 90,823 acres (142 square miles) and includes the urban communities of Paso Robles, Atascadero, Templeton, San Miguel, and Santa Margarita, and the village of Garden Farms. The Salinas River Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 1996) designates land use categories within the planning area. This planning area contains predominantly agriculture and open space land use designations (approximately 74%) with some residential rural, residential suburban, and residential single-family land designations (approximately 16%).



### **San Luis Bay Coastal Planning Area**

The San Luis Bay Coastal planning area encompasses 59,469 acres (93 square miles) in the south central coastal portion of the county. The planning area extends from Point Buchon and Montana de Oro in the north to the Nipomo Mesa in the south. The inland boundary of the planning area approximately follows the ridgeline from Avila Beach through Pismo Beach and inland as far as Highway 1 south of Oceano near the mesa. It includes the coastal zone portions of the Five Cities urban areas of Pismo Beach, Grover Beach, Arroyo Grande, Oceano and Halcyon, and the coastal zone portion of Avila Beach. The San Luis Bay Coastal Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 2001) designates lands within the planning area by land use category. This planning area contains predominantly rural (approximately 38%) and agricultural (approximately 33%) land uses. A portion of the Avila Beach, Pismo Beach, Grover Beach, and Oceano urban areas are located within this planning area. The San Luis Bay Coastal planning area is located entirely inside the Coastal Zone.

### **San Luis Bay Inland Planning Area**

The San Luis Bay Inland planning area encompasses 61,018 acres (95 square miles) in the south central coastal portion of the county, extending from and including most of Montana de Oro on the north to the Nipomo Mesa on the south. It includes the non-coastal zone portions of the Five Cities urban areas of Pismo Beach, Grover Beach, Arroyo Grande, Oceano and Halcyon, and Avila Beach outside the coastal zone. The San Luis Bay Inland Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 2002) designates land use categories within the planning area, with agriculture (approximately 40%) and rural lands (approximately 30%) as the dominant land uses. Outside of the urban and village reserve lines, an area of residential rural and residential suburban designated land, known as the Arroyo Grande fringe, covers approximately 16 percent of the planning area. The San Luis Bay Inland planning area includes the urban area of Arroyo Grande and portions of the urban areas of Avila Beach, Pismo Beach, Grover Beach, and Oceano.

### **San Luis Obispo Planning Area**

The San Luis Obispo planning area includes approximately 63,630 acres (99 square miles), including the City of San Luis Obispo and surrounding unincorporated agricultural and rural lands. The planning area extends to the Los Padres National Forest on the north and east, Cuesta College and Camp San Luis Obispo to the west, and the Irish Hills and Arroyo Grande fringe to the south. As with other planning areas in the county, the San Luis Obispo planning area primarily contains agricultural and rural lands (approximately 85%). The San Luis Obispo Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 1999) designates lands within the planning area by land use category. The San Luis Obispo planning area includes the urban area of San Luis Obispo and the Edna/Los Ranchos village. The San Luis Obispo urban area outside of city limits includes a large area of industrial and commercial service designated land around the county airport.

### **Shandon-Carrizo Planning Area**

The Shandon-Carrizo planning area, the largest of the county planning areas, encompasses approximately 842,411 acres (1,316 square miles) of sparsely populated agricultural and rural lands in the eastern portion of the county. This area, which includes the regions of Cholame and the Cholame Hills, the Temblor Range (where the San Andreas Fault is located), the La Panza Range, the Carrizo Plain, and the Cuyama Valley, consists of undulating terrain devoted almost



exclusively to dry-land farming and rangeland. The urban area of Shandon and the villages of Whitley Gardens and California Valley are the only population centers within the planning area. The Shandon-Carrizo Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 1996) designates land uses within the planning area by land use category. The Shandon-Carrizo planning area includes the urban area of Shandon and the California Valley village.

### **South County Coastal Planning Area**

The South County Coastal planning area includes approximately 98,910 acres (154 square miles), extending from the urban boundaries of the Five Cities area on the north, the coastal range on the east, the Santa Maria River on the south, and the Pismo Dunes and Pacific Ocean on the west. The only portion of the planning area within the coastal zone is the land west of Highway 1. The South County Coastal Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 1988) designates land uses within the planning area. The South County Coastal planning area does not include any urban areas, but does include a portion of the Callender-Garrett village. This planning area is located entirely in the Coastal Zone.

### **South County Inland Planning Area**

The South County Inland planning area includes approximately 82,000 acres (128 square miles) extending from the urban boundaries of the “Five Cities” area to the north, the coastal range to the east, the Santa Maria River to the south, and the coastal zone boundary along Highway 1 and the Southern Pacific Railroad to the west. The entire Nipomo Urban Area, the five village areas of Black Lake, Palo Mesa, Los Berros, Woodlands, and Callender-Garrett, and South County rural areas are included within this planning area. The South County Inland Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County, 2003) designates land uses within the planning area outside of the coastal zone. As with much of the county, land uses within the South County Inland planning area are predominantly agricultural (approximately 59%). The South County Inland planning area includes the urban area of Nipomo and the villages of Blacklake, Woodlands, Callender-Garrett (portion), Palo Mesa, and Los Berros.

## **3.3 CUMULATIVE PROJECTS SETTING**

CEQA defines “cumulative impacts” as two or more individual events that, when considered together, are considerable or will compound other environmental impacts. Cumulative impacts are the changes in the environment that result from the incremental impact of development of the proposed project and other nearby projects. For example, traffic impacts of two nearby projects may be insignificant when analyzed separately, but could have a significant impact when analyzed together. This method of cumulative impact analysis allows an EIR to provide a reasonable forecast of future environmental conditions and can more accurately gauge the effects of a series of projects.

Section 15130 of the State CEQA Guidelines indicates that cumulative impacts shall be discussed when the project’s incremental effect is cumulatively considerable. The discussion of cumulative impacts shall reflect the severity of the impacts and their likelihood of occurrence, but the discussion need not provide as great detail as is provided for the effects attributable to the project alone. The discussion should be guided by the standards of practicality and reasonableness.



According to the Guidelines, the following elements are necessary for an adequate discussion of significant cumulative impacts:

- *A list of past, present, and probable future projects producing related or cumulative impacts, including, if necessary, those projects outside the control of the agency, or*
- *A summary of projections contained in an adopted general plan or related planning document, or in a prior environmental document that has been adopted or certified, which described or evaluated regional or areawide conditions contributing to the cumulative impact. Any such planning document shall be referenced and made available to the public at a location specified by the Lead Agency.*
- *The discussion shall also include a summary of the expected environmental effects to be produced by those projects with specific reference to additional information stating where that information is available, and a reasonable analysis of the cumulative impacts of the relevant projects. The EIR shall examine reasonable options for mitigating or avoiding any significant cumulative effects of a proposed project.*

Cumulative impacts are discussed within each of the specific impact analysis discussions in Section 4.0, *Environmental Impact Analysis*.

