

**SECTION 3.0
ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING**

The following paragraphs present a summary of the geographic setting of the property and discuss some of the applicable designations and policies from the County General Plan and Land Use Ordinance. The CEQA Guidelines (Section 15125(d), under “Environmental Setting,” state that an EIR shall discuss any inconsistencies between a project and any applicable plans. In this EIR, each of the topical sections in Chapter 4 includes a summary policy consistency analysis. Depending on the topic and specific issue, varying levels of discussion are provided in each section as appropriate. The related issue of land use compatibility is also discussed in some of the topical sections, and is addressed in more detail in Section 4.14 Land Use.

The following paragraphs present an overview of the land use designations on the property, followed by discussions of the regional setting that affect some of the specific issues discussed in this EIR (aesthetics and water supply).

3.1 LAND USE DESIGNATIONS

The property is within the County’s Las Pilitas Planning Area and is designated as Rural Lands (San Luis Obispo County, 2010). This land use designation is described in the area plan as “...generally large ownerships used for grazing, and watershed leading to Santa Margarita Lake and the Salinas River” (San Luis Obispo County, 2003: page 5-2). Various uses that may occur in this land use designation – and the permit requirements for each – are set forth in the San Luis Obispo County Land Use Ordinance in Section 22.06.20 and Table 2-2 of the Land Use Ordinance.

In Table 2-2 of the Land Use Ordinance, “Mines and quarries” are classified under the “Agriculture, Resource, and Open Space Uses,” and are listed as: “A2 Allowable Use, subject to land use permit required by the specific use standards.” The specific standards and procedures for mines and quarries are in Section 22.36 (Surface Mining and Reclamation). Section 22.36.040A requires a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) for all new surface mining operations. Other applicable Land Use Ordinance requirements are found in Sections 22.30.380 (dealing with recycling), 22.30.560 (storage yards), and 22.30.020(D) which allows exceptions to special use standards if approved via a CUP, such as that required for the proposed project.

The proposed quarry site within the subject property is also covered by the EX1 Extractive Resource Combining Designation in the Las Pilitas Rural Area Combining Designation map (San Luis Obispo County, 2009). In this region, the EX1 Combining Designation is placed over the La Panza Granitics, a large area that is classified as MRZ-2 by the California State Geological Survey (Busch and Miller 2011:6). This state classification is applied where

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adequate information is available indicating significant mineral deposits are present, or where it is judged that a high likelihood for their presence exists. The La Panza Granitics are referenced as “Sector C” by the California Geological Survey and cover 12,328 acres. In the Las Pilitas Planning Area, the EX1 Combining Designation occupies about 8,000 acres. This EX1 Combining Designation extends northward into the El Pomar-Estrella Planning Area and a little into the Salinas Planning area to the west.

In summary, the proposed surface mine is consistent with the applicable General Plan and Land Use Ordinance designations, and the required CUP and Reclamation Plan provide the appropriate review mechanism for consideration of the project. The proposed quarry project may be inconsistent with several specific policies in applicable plans, and these are noted in the policy consistency analysis and discussions throughout Chapter 4. That chapter concludes with Section 4.14 Land Use, which addresses the issue of land use compatibility in the vicinity of the project site as well as within the community of Santa Margarita.

3.2 GEOGRAPHY AND SCENIC RESOURCES

The Las Pilitas Planning Area includes about 65,500 acres, and is central within the rural planning areas that occupy the mountainous land between the flatter Salinas River valley to the west and the Shandon-Carrizo Planning Area to the east. Figure 3-1 shows this pattern in the County planning areas, and the location of the project site within this larger region. The project site is near the western boundary of the Las Pilitas Planning Area, which at this location is formed by the Salinas River. The project vicinity is within a geographic transition that separates the flatter alluvial areas and lower hills to the west from the steeper hillsides to the east.

State Route 58 (SR 58), also called Calf Canyon Road in the project vicinity, connects US Highway 101 on the west through Bakersfield in the southern San Joaquin Valley to Barstow in the Mojave Desert on the east. No part of SR 58 is listed as an official Scenic Highway by Caltrans (2011), although a segment between Mojave and Barstow is considered “eligible” for such designation. The County General Plan Conservation and Open Space Element (COSE) lists SR 58 as a “Suggested Scenic Corridor” (San Luis Obispo County 2010: Table VR-2). The property containing the proposed quarry consists mainly of steep slopes (30-50 percent) covered in chaparral and scrub vegetation. Views of these types of slopes, as well as oak and pine woodlands and several major creek crossings, are part of the scenic environment associated with SR 58 leading to its inclusion in the COSE. The County has not prepared a corridor study or designated any land along SR 58 as a scenic resource area, as of the time the application for the project was submitted (April 2010).

The County has adopted highway corridor design standards for US Highway 101 in the region, and these are contained in the Areawide Standards for the Salinas River Area Plan (Section 22.104.020 H, found in Article 9 of the County Land Use Ordinance). Lands subject

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to these standards, however, are all located within the Salinas River Area Plan, and do not extend into the Las Pilitas Area Plan or to the project site. The nearest lands subject to the Highway Corridor Design Standards are located about 2,500 feet northwest from the proposed quarry site (San Luis Obispo County 2008), and include low foothills visible from the west and portions of the existing Hanson Santa Margarita quarry. The design standards for this land visible within the US Highway 101 corridor apply only to "...residential structures, residential accessory buildings, residential access roads, specified agricultural accessory buildings and signs..." Other uses, such as the existing Hanson quarry and the proposed surface mine, are not subject specifically to the highway corridor design review process but are reviewed through the CUP or other regulatory procedures.

3.3 SURROUNDING LAND USES AND WATER SUPPLY

The Rural Lands designation is the largest land use category area within the Las Pilitas Planning Area – covering over 39,000 acres (San Luis Obispo County: 2003: Table C). Most areas surrounding the property containing the proposed quarry are also designated as Rural Lands, which, as noted above, are intended for large ownerships, grazing, and watershed uses. Besides the two existing residences within the subject property, there are two residences in the adjacent Rural Lands designation to the east and north of the property. Both of these sites are well removed from the proposed quarry location and are separated from it by intervening ridgelines.

Some adjacent properties to the south and southeast of the property are designated Residential Rural. This designation is placed on subdivided land southeast of SR 58 at the western edge of the planning area, and on subdivided lands along Parkhill Road. Within the first of these Rural Residential areas, there are about one dozen residences several of which are at locations with views into the proposed quarry site. There are several dozen residences in the second Rural Residential area along Parkhill Road to the southeast, but all of these are separated from the proposed quarry site by intervening ridges and greater distances.

These two Residential Rural areas are described in the Las Pilitas Area Plan (San Luis Obispo County: 2003: pages 5-2 and 5-3) as follows:

- The two areas designated as Residential Rural are not suited for commercial agriculture because of soil conditions, topography, small property size, broken ownership patterns and prior residential commitments. The area at the westerly edge of the planning area (south of the Oster/Las Pilitas Quarry subject property) primarily encompasses an existing group of lots that are about 10 acres in size. They have access from SR 58 and are located near Santa Margarita, Garden Farms and Atascadero for goods and services. Building single-family residences should be allowed on these parcels; however, this type of use should not be allowed to expand beyond the present locations.

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- The second area of rural residential uses, along Parkhill Road (southeast of the Oster/Las Pilitas Quarry property), has developed in recent years as properties have been divided. The area has limited water resources, and properties must rely on individual wells located in Moreno Creek and small local drainage ways. Rural residential use should be confined to existing lots in this area so as to not further over-burden an already limited water capability. These lands should not be developed with agricultural uses that will require intensive irrigation, thereby adversely impacting existing users in the area. Some existing residences appear to have been located in the creekbed, which subjects them to potential flooding. This practice should be corrected, especially since many of these properties have relatively flat areas adjacent to the road located out of the flood hazard area and off of the steep, brush-covered hillsides (where slopes often exceed 30 percent).

From the above descriptions, it appears unlikely that expansion of the Residential Rural designation or extensive residential subdivision will occur in the project vicinity. One of the constraints to extensive future development in the vicinity is the limited groundwater supply for most areas, particularly along Parkhill Road as described above. The Moreno Creek drainage basin along Parkhill Road includes about 3,200 acres of steep granitic hillsides and shallow alluvial material along the creek itself and its local tributaries. The Calf Canyon tributary to Moreno Creek is similar, but with a smaller drainage area of about 2,100 acres. The subject property is at the confluence of these smaller drainages with the much larger drainage of the Salinas River from the south. This unique location has a much larger groundwater resource than the nearby Residential Rural developed areas along Parkhill Road.

The water system within the 234-acre property includes permitted diversion points for surface and shallow subsurface water (wells), surface water ponds and water tanks for storage, and various pumps and pipelines. The total diversion amount for which permits have been issued by the California Department of Water Resources is about 94 acre-feet per year, or over 80,000 gallons per day. Actual water use on the property is less than this total, however, and has ranged from several hundred to several thousand gallons per day. The existing water supply serves two residences on the property and supports grazing and other minor agricultural uses on the property.