

3.0 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

This section provides a brief description of the current environmental conditions in the Santa Margarita Ranch area.

3.1 REGIONAL SETTING

The Santa Margarita Ranch is located in San Luis Obispo County, approximately 10 miles north of the City of San Luis Obispo, and surrounding the community of Santa Margarita. San Luis Obispo County is located in the central coast region of California. The County covers approximately 3,300 square miles, and contains approximately 260,727 residents. The County is topographically diverse, with mountains, rich agricultural valleys, and distinct urban areas, all within close proximity of the Pacific Ocean. The mediterranean climate of the region produces moderate temperatures year round, with rainfall concentrated in the winter months. The region is subject to various natural hazards, including earthquakes, landslides, and wildfires.

3.2 AGRICULTURAL RESIDENTIAL CLUSTER SUBDIVISION AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM SITE SETTING

The Santa Margarita Ranch property encompasses approximately 14,000 acres and is located immediately east of U.S. Highway 101, and surrounds the community of Santa Margarita. The proposed Agricultural Residential Cluster Subdivision includes 3,778 acres near the middle of the Ranch, southeast of the community of Santa Margarita, while the Future Development Program occurs in various locations throughout the balance of the 14,000-acre property. Surrounding land uses include rural residential development, grazing lands, and lands in agriculture production. The site is bounded by the Santa Lucia Mountains, Highway 101, and agricultural uses to the west and north and by the Salinas River and rural and agricultural lands to the east and south. The Conoco-Phillips Oil Company operates a petroleum pump station located on the east side of El Camino Real, approximately midway between the communities of Santa Margarita and Garden Farms. This facility includes four open top floating tanks and two fixed roof tanks for heavier crude. The site is comprised of 28 assessor parcels. Figure 2-2 (in Section 2.0, *Project Description*) shows the regional location of the Ranch property within its local context.

3.2.1 General Property Characteristics

The Santa Margarita Ranch has been historically utilized for grazing and crop production since the late 1700's. The Santa Margarita Ranch property consists of varied terrain with the mountainous area on the west side of the Ranch containing the Santa Lucia Mountain ridge and slopes of 50 percent and greater. The predominant interior valleys of the Ranch are sloped at 1 to 9 percent while the Santa Margarita Creek lowlands typically contain slopes less than 5 percent. Elevations across the site range from a high of 1,276 feet along the Santa Lucia ridgeline to 1,020 feet at the north end of the property. At that location, the primary on-site tributary (Trout Creek) drains to the Salinas River, located approximately 1.25 miles north of the Ranch property.



3.2.2 Hydrologic Setting

The Santa Margarita Ranch is located in the Salinas River watershed which empties into the Pacific Ocean at Monterey Bay. Specifically, the Ranch contains a number of smaller internal drainage basins which are west bank tributaries to the Salinas River. Drainage generally flows from south to north via four main drainages: Trout Creek (northeast of Agricultural Residential Cluster Subdivision site); an unnamed tributary to Trout Creek (between Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the Agricultural Residential Cluster Subdivision site); Yerba Buena Creek (southwest of the Agricultural Residential Cluster Subdivision site); and Rinconada Creek (southeast of the Agricultural Residential Cluster Subdivision site). All of these drainages are categorized as Waters of the U.S. and each eventually flow to the Salinas River. From a hydrologic perspective, the water movement potential of the Ranch is quite variable because the Ranch's terrain varies from rugged mountains to rolling hills and flat land. A number of soil types on the Ranch are characterized by medium to very rapid runoff and high to very high erosion potential.

3.2.3 Geologic Setting

San Luis Obispo County occupies an area of complex geology extending from the Pacific Coast on the west to the San Andreas Rift Zone on the east. The Santa Margarita Ranch property lies within the southern Coast Ranges of San Luis Obispo County, in the Coast Range Geomorphic Province. The Ranch comprises a central alluvial valley complex with low lying hills, bordered on the west by the Santa Lucia Range of higher bedrock mountains, and on the east by the Salinas River. Geologic structure, formed by millions of years of folding and faulting, is oriented predominantly in a northwesterly direction; the northwest draining Yerba Buena, Santa Margarita and Trout Creeks follow this trend.

Thirty-four active and potentially active earthquake producing faults lie within 100 miles of the center of the Santa Margarita Ranch property. Individual earthquakes as large as Magnitude 7.9 have occurred within this distance. Fault rupture of the ground surface is possible on any of these faults with a large enough earthquake and secondary effects such as ground settlement, liquefaction and landsliding can occur.

The 14,000-acre Ranch property includes ten geologic units, ranging in age from the Jurassic Franciscan Formation (mélange) through Pliocene Paso Robles Formation (Hart, 1976). On-site units include the Franciscan mélange, granitic rocks, Toro and Atascadero Formations, Simmler and Vaqueros Formations, Monterey and Santa Margarita Formations, Paso Robles Formation, and older and younger alluvium. These units have a wide range of physical properties with older basement rocks found in the higher elevations being generally more resistant to weathering and degradation; they are also more highly fractured, and structurally more complex. The intermediate-aged bedrock units flank the ranges and border the alluvial valleys. These units are softer and weather into smoother low lying hills with fewer fractures and exhibit a gentler folding.

Alluvium occupies the lower portions of the valleys and ranges from older uplifted, dissected river terraces and alluvial fans to the most recent stream deposits in the lower elevation flood plains and active river channels. Structurally simple and relatively undisturbed by faulting, these units are semi-consolidated to loose, and generally comprise mixtures of gravel and sand.



3.2.4 Natural and Cultural Resources

Habitats on the Santa Margarita Ranch are composed of grasslands, coastal scrub, chaparral, oak woodlands, riparian, and emergent wetlands/seasonal pools that occur in a mosaic pattern across the landscape. Perennial and intermittent streams, which support important riparian habitat for resident and migratory wildlife species, occur throughout the region. Vineyards comprise a significant portion of the agricultural landscape within the southern portion of the Ranch property, while dry farmed grains are found in the northern portion of the Ranch property. Cattle ranching occurs over all the on-site habitats with the exception of dry-farmed and vineyard areas.

Archaeological evidence indicates that coastal San Luis Obispo County was occupied as early as 10,000 years ago. The Santa Margarita Ranch lies in an area historically occupied by both Salinans and Obispoño Chumash. Generally, lands from Santa Margarita south and west have been ascribed to the Obispoño, while the Salinans utilized lands along the coast and in the rugged mountains of the interior, and may have occupied the area extending south from Soledad to a point near Atascadero. Historically, there were at least two named native rancherias (villages) on or near the ranch. By the end of the Mission Period in 1834, the native population had been reduced to a small percentage of its former number by maltreatment, disease, and subsequent declining birthrates. Population loss as a result of disease and economic deprivation continued into the next century.

The archaeological sites, historical buildings, and other cultural remains on the ranch have combined with the unique natural environment of the Santa Margarita Valley to produce a distinctive cultural landscape shaped by American Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and Euro-American cultural traditions.

3.3 BASELINE SPECIAL EVENTS

Numerous special events are held at the Ranch property annually. According to data provided by the applicant, 84 special events occurred at the Ranch in a one year period between July 2004 and July 2005. Events at the Ranch ranged from small meetings of 15 people to major events with up to 2,506 attendees and staff. According to data provided by Ranch management, over the year, a total of 22,050 people may have attended or staffed special events at the Ranch. For the purposes of this EIR, the baseline special events for the Ranch property include an annual total of 22,050 people, and a daily peak of 2,506 attendees and staff. A complete list of events with corresponding estimates of attendance and staff is provided in Appendix B.

3.4 CUMULATIVE PROJECTS SETTING

The State CEQA Guidelines require the analysis of the cumulative effects of a project in combination with other foreseeable development in the area. 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.



In accordance with Section 15130 of the State CEQA Guidelines, this EIR uses a summary of growth projections to analyze cumulative impacts. The evaluation of the Future Development Program in this EIR accounts for all of the expected growth in the Santa Margarita area, as it represents buildout of the major landholding that surrounds the existing community, consistent with the Salinas River Area Plan. The cumulative vicinity of the Ranch property includes the communities of Garden Farms and Santa Margarita, and surrounding agricultural lands. Based on a review of vacant lands within the communities of Santa Margarita and Garden Farms, these communities are considered to be currently built out. Additional growth within these communities would be negligible. Therefore, the cumulative scenario evaluated throughout this EIR consists of buildout of the Agricultural Residential Cluster Subdivision in addition to buildout of the Future Development Program. However, it should be noted that certain cumulative issue areas, such as traffic and associated vehicle air contaminant and noise emissions, are more appropriately addressed at a larger, regional level (i.e., outside the vicinity of the property) to account for regional influences on impacts considered in combination with the Agricultural Residential Cluster Subdivision and Future Development Program. For such issue areas, a cumulative growth factor is applied to account for the influence of regional growth.

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

