

V.H. AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

1. Existing Conditions

Agricultural Land Uses. The project site contains a variety of agricultural uses, including nurseries, greenhouse operations, and irrigated row crops.

Certain undeveloped areas west of US 101 have been used for dryland grain production in recent years. Certain areas east of Nipomo Creek and west of Thompson Avenue have been the subject of irrigation and crop production. Remaining areas west of Nipomo Creek and US 101 are not in either dryland or irrigated agricultural production, primarily due to existing residential zoning, smaller parcel sizes, and limited water availability.

Undeveloped areas on both the east and west sides of US 101 (east of Hetrick Avenue and west of Thompson Avenue) have also been occasionally used for cattle grazing. A cattle undercrossing is located within the study area under US 101 approximately 1.25 miles north of Tefft Avenue. This under crossing connects two separate ownership parcels. It is only utilized, very rarely, by cattle operators leasing grazing land on both sides of US 101.

Nurseries are, according to the California Food and Agriculture Code, also considered to be agricultural operations. Two nurseries currently operate in the project area: the C&M Nursery, adjacent to and immediately east of US 101, and Pismo Flowers, Inc. (formerly Brand Flowers), a greenhouse/flower growing operation west of Hetrick Avenue and east of Pomeroy Road.

The C&M Nursery currently encompasses a total of approximately 34 acres. The nursery operators propagate and grow both avocado and citrus trees. Their trees are sold to commercial orchardists, farmers, retail nursery outlets (such as Wal-Mart and K-mart), and commercial landscapers. At this time, approximately 50 percent of their tree stock consists of avocados and the remaining 50 percent involves a variety of citrus species. Approximately 20 acres of the property are the subject of a long-term lease with the Canada family. The remaining 10 acres (at the northern end of the nursery) are owned by the nursery.

A major concern to nursery growers is the potential for avocado trees to suffer from avocado root rot (also known as *Phytophthora cinnamomi*). This root fungus is easily spread. Once a tree has been infected, it is no longer legal in California to sell it. The C&M Nursery has been certified by the California Department of Food and Agriculture as being free of avocado root rot. In order to maintain this condition, all soil brought into the nursery is either fumigated with methyl bromide or steam sterilized. In addition, all vehicles entering the nursery area must drive through a shallow pool containing a fungicide intended to kill fungus spores on the tires of entering vehicles.

Pismo Flowers, Inc. operates a commercial flower nursery on approximately five acres located west of Hetrick Avenue and east of Pomeroy Road. Pismo Flowers, Inc. has operated this in-ground cut-flower nursery for the past nine years. They provide cut flowers for commercial use and sale. Prior to their leasing this property, similar nursery operations were conducted at this location.

Agricultural Preserves. There are 10 agricultural preserves within the project area. These preserves were formed pursuant to Chapter 7, Article 1, Section 51200 et.seq. of the California Government Code also known as the California Land Conservation Act of 1965, or the Williamson Act. This legislation allows local jurisdictions (cities or counties) to establish agricultural preserves consisting of existing agricultural or other vacant lands. Through the execution of long-term agreements with the landowner, the land uses of the property are restricted to agricultural or similar endeavors. In return, the land is assessed for tax purposes according to these restricted uses, rather than its "highest and best use." The vehicle for these land use agreements is a rolling term 10- year contract, which means that the contract is automatically extended (renewed) each year under the initial terms of the contract unless either party files a "notice of nonrenewal". If a Notice of Non-Renewal is filed with the local agency, a 9-year nonrenewal process begins and the annual tax assessment gradually increases. At the end of the 9-year nonrenewal period, the contract is terminated.

Figure V.H-1, Agricultural Preserves, shows the location of agricultural preserves within the project area. This figure includes agricultural preserve status, parcel numbers, and acreage totals. As noted on the figure, several of the preserves, parcels 091-301-042 through 091-301-046, and 091-301-033, have Williamson Act contracts that expired. These expired preserves total approximately 207 acres.

The Williamson Act (Chapter 7, Article 6, Section 51290 et.seq.) addresses the circumstance of a public improvement within an existing agricultural preserve. Pertinent sections related to public acquisition of land within agricultural preserves are noted below.

51290. (a) It is the policy of the state to avoid, whenever practicable, the location of any federal, state, or local public improvements and any improvements of public utilities, and the acquisition of land therefore, in agricultural preserves.

(b) It is further the policy of the state that whenever it is necessary to locate such an improvement within an agricultural preserve, the improvement shall, whenever practicable, be located upon land other than land under a contract pursuant to this chapter.

(c) It is further the policy of the state that any agency or entity proposing to locate such an improvement shall, in considering the relative costs of parcels of land and the development of improvements, give consideration to the value to the public, as indicated in Article 2 (commencing with Section 51220), of land, and particularly prime agricultural land, within an agricultural preserve.

51290.5. As used in this chapter, "public improvement" means facilities or interests in real property, including easements, rights-of-way, and interests in fee title, owned by a public agency or person, as defined in subdivision (a) of Section 51291.

51291. (a) As used in this section and Sections 51292 and 51295,(1) "public agency" means any department or agency of the United States or the state, and any county, city, school district, or other local public district, agency, or entity, and (2) "person" means any person authorized to acquire property by eminent domain.

(b) Except as provided in Section 51291.5, whenever it appears that land within an agricultural preserve may be required by a public agency or person for a public use, the public agency or

person shall advise the Director of Conservation and the local governing body responsible for the administration of the preserve of its intention to consider the location of a public improvement within the preserve. In accordance with Section 51290, the notice shall include an explanation of the preliminary consideration of Section 51292, and give a general description, in text or by diagram, of the agricultural preserve land proposed for acquisition, and a copy of any applicable contract created under this chapter. The Director of Conservation shall forward to the Secretary of Food and Agriculture, a copy of any material received from the public agency or person relating to the proposed acquisition. Within 30 days thereafter, the Director of Conservation and the local governing body shall forward to the appropriate public agency or person concerned their comments with respect to the effect of the location of the public improvement on the land within the agricultural preserve and those comments shall be considered by the public agency or person. In preparing those comments, the Director of Conservation shall consider issues related to agricultural land use, including, but not limited to, matters related to the effects of the proposal on the conversion of adjacent or nearby agricultural land to nonagricultural uses, and shall consult with, and incorporate the comments of, the Secretary of Food and Agriculture on any other matters related to agricultural operations. The failure by any person or public agency, other than a state agency, to comply with the requirements of this section shall be admissible in evidence in any litigation for the acquisition of that land or involving the allocation of funds or the construction of the public improvement. This subdivision does not apply to the erection, construction, alteration, or maintenance of gas, electric, piped subterranean water or wastewater, or communication utility facilities within an agricultural preserve if that preserve was established after the submission of the location of those facilities to the city or county for review or approval.

(c) When land in an agricultural preserve is acquired by a public entity, the public entity shall notify the Director of Conservation within 10 working days. The notice shall include a general explanation of the decision and the findings made pursuant to Section 51292. If different from that previously provided pursuant to subdivision (b), the notice shall also include a general description, in text or by diagram, of the agricultural preserve land acquired and a copy of any applicable contract created under this chapter.

(d) If, after giving the notice required under subdivisions (b) and (c) and before the project is completed within an agricultural preserve, the public agency or person proposes any significant change in the public improvement, it shall give notice of the changes to the Director of Conservation and the local governing body responsible for the administration of the preserve. Within 30 days thereafter, the Director of Conservation and the local governing body may forward to the public agency or person their comments with respect to the effect of the change to the public improvement on the land within the preserve and the compliance of the changed public improvements with this article. Those comments shall be considered by the public agency or person, if available within the time limits set by this subdivision.

(e) Any action or proceeding regarding notices or findings required by this article filed by the Director of Conservation or the local governing body administering the agricultural preserve shall be governed by Section 51294.

51292. *No public agency or person shall locate a public improvement within an agricultural preserve unless the following findings are made:*

(a) The location is not based primarily on a consideration of the lower cost of acquiring land in an agricultural preserve.

(b) If the land is agricultural land covered under a contract pursuant to this chapter for any public improvement, that there is no other land within or outside the preserve on which it is reasonably feasible to locate the public improvement.

Agricultural Soils. According to the Soil Survey of San Luis Obispo County, California, published by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service, several soil associations are present in the project area, as shown in Figure V.H-2, Soils Map. These various soils associations are described below. As noted therein, each soils association possesses a Land Capability Class which is designated by Roman numerals I through VIII. These numerals indicate progressively greater limitations and narrower choices for practical uses. Class I soils have few limitations that restrict their use, while Class II soils have moderate limitations that reduce the choice of plants or that require moderate conservation practices. Both Class I and Class II soils are considered to be “prime” agricultural soils. Class III and IV soils have severe and very severe limitations, respectively, that reduce the choice of plants, require special conservation practices, or both. Class V, VI, VII and VIII soils have severe or very severe limitations that make them unsuited for cultivation and that restricts their use largely to pasture, range, woodland, or wildlife food and cover.

As shown in Figure V.H-2, the Oceano Sand soils associations are found west of Nipomo Creek while the Cropley Clay, Diablo Clay, and Tierra Sandy Loam soil associations are found east of Nipomo Creek. Each soil association is discussed in further detail below.

Oceano Sand. 0 to 9 percent slopes (soil category 184 on Figure V.H-2). This soils association involves “old, stabilized sand dunes” which are formed deposits of wind blown sand. Permeability (i.e., drainage ability) of Oceano soil is rapid and the ability to retain moisture is low. This low water holding capacity creates a high susceptibility to soil blowing and drought. These soils are primarily used for rangeland, urban development, and limited crops (lemons, avocados, strawberries, and Christmas trees) and supports groves of bluegum eucalyptus. This soil provides excellent base material for roadways and structures. This soil association has a Capability Class of IV if irrigated and VI if non-irrigated.

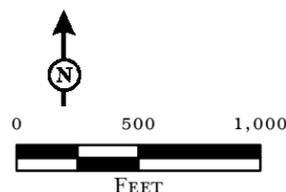
Oceano Sand. 9 to 30 percent slopes (soil category 185 on Figure V.H-2). This soil association also involves “old, stabilized sand dunes” as discussed above. Its permeability is also rapid and its ability to retain moisture is also low. These soils are used for rangeland and also support groves of bluegum eucalyptus. This soil provides excellent base material for roadways and structures. This soil association has a Capability Class of VI in a non-irrigated condition (steeper slopes inhibit the use of irrigation).

Cropley Clay. 0 to 2 percent slopes (soil category 127 on Figure V.H-2). This soil association is formed from alluvial soils. It is deep, moderately well-drained, and is found on alluvial fans and plains. Soil permeability is slow and, as such, available water capacity is high. This soil association is well-suited to vegetable crops, dryland farming with occasional use for irrigated



FIGURE V.H-1

LSA



- Agricultural Preserves
- Project Limits
- ~ Geometrics

Willow Road Extension/U.S. 101 Interchange Project
Agricultural Preserves

SOURCE: Geometrics - Rajappan & Meyer Consulting Engineers Inc. and Aerial - County of San Luis Obispo, Ag Preserves - Willow Road Extension Draft EIR (1999)
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crops. Roadways in these soils can require replacement of base material so that subsequent maintenance is minimized. This soil association has a Capability Class of II (“prime” agricultural soil) if irrigated and III if non-irrigated.

Diablo Clay. 5 to 9 percent slope (soil category 129 on Figure V.H-2). This soil association is formed from weathered sandstone, shale, or mudstone. Soil permeability is slow and the available water capacity is moderate to very high. Most of the soils in the area are used as rangeland or for hay crops and small grains, such as barley and oats. Other dryland crops are also well suited to these soils. Roadways in these soils can also require replacement of base material so that subsequent maintenance is minimized. This soil association has a Capability Class II (“prime” agricultural soil) if irrigated and III if non-irrigated.

Tierra Sandy Loam. 2 to 9 percent slopes (soil category 216 on Figure V.H-2). This soil association is formed from old alluvial soils weathered from sedimentary rocks. Soil permeability is very slow, but the available water capacity is low to moderate. It also has a moderate soil blowing hazard. Most of the soils in the area are used for rangeland or for hay crops and small grains. Common crops are grain barley and oat hay. Roadways in these soils require special design due to soil expansion and shrinkage, low soil strength, and slow permeability. This soil association has a Capability Class of III in both the irrigated and non-irrigated condition.

2. Thresholds of Significance

Significance criteria for evaluating project impacts on agricultural resources are based on Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines and the County of San Luis Obispo Initial Study Checklist. For purposes of this SEIR, a significant impact upon agricultural resources would occur if the proposed project would:

- Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland) to non-agricultural use;
- Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act Contract;
- Involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of farmland, to non-agricultural use.

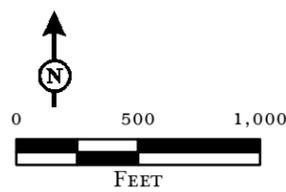
Methods for Evaluating Agricultural Impacts. Project impacts in accordance with these thresholds can be quantified when a project involves the direct impact or removal of prime agricultural lands from production. For this reason, the California Agricultural Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) model was performed for the project area. The LESA model is intended “to provide lead agencies with an optional methodology to ensure that significant effects on the environment of agricultural land conversions are quantitatively and consistently considered in the environmental review process” (Public Resources Code Section 21095).

The LESA model is a point-based approach that is generally used for rating the relative value of agricultural land resources. In basic terms, a given LESA model is created by defining and measuring two separate sets of factors. The first set, Land Evaluation, includes factors that measure the inherent soil-based qualities of land as they relate to agricultural suitability. The second set, Site Assessment,



FIGURE V.H-2

LSA



- Project Limits
- Geometrics
- Cropley Clay (127)
- Tierra Sandy Loam (216)
- Oceano Sand (184, 185)
- Diablo Clay (129)

Willow Road Extension/U.S. 101 Interchange Project
Project Area Soils

SOURCE: Geometrics - Rajappan & Meyer Consulting Engineers Inc. and Aerial - County of San Luis Obispo, Soils - San Luis Obispo County for the NRCS - Mapping/Graphics 781-5600 (1999)
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includes factors that are intended to measure social, economic, and geographic attributes that also contribute to the overall value of agricultural land.

A single LESA score is generated for a given project after all of the individual Land Evaluation and Site Assessment factors have been scored and weighted. Final project scoring is based on a scale of 100 points, with a given project being capable of deriving a maximum of 50 points from the Land Evaluation factors and 50 points from the Site Assessment factors. Scoring thresholds are based upon both, the total LESA score, and the component Land Evaluation and Site Assessment subscores. In this manner, the scoring thresholds are dependent upon the minimum score for the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment subscores so that a single threshold is not the result of heavily skewed subscores. (i.e., a site with a very high Land Evaluation score, but a very low Site Assessment score, or vice versa). Table V.H-1 presents the California Agricultural LESA scoring thresholds.

Table V.H-1 California LESA Model Scoring Thresholds

Total LESA Score	Scoring Decision
0-30 Points	Not Considered Significant
40-59 Points	Considered Significant <u>only</u> if Land Evaluation <u>and</u> Site Assessment subscores are each <u>greater</u> than or equal to 20 points
60-79 Points	Considered Significant <u>unless</u> either Land Evaluation <u>and</u> Site Assessment subscores is <u>less</u> than 20 points
80-100 Points	Considered Significant

In addition to cultivated or grazed lands, for the purposes of this SEIR, impacts would also be considered significant if major agricultural operations (such as nurseries) are impaired or eliminated.

The County of San Luis Obispo places the utmost importance on preserving agricultural lands. The County’s efforts to this extent are outlined on page 1-1 in the Agriculture and Open Space Element of the San Luis Obispo County General Plan (General Plan) and are geared toward “identify[ing] those areas of the County with productive farms, ranches and soils, and establish[ing] goals, policies, and implementation measures that will enable their long-term stability and productivity”.

Agricultural Policy number 24 of the Agriculture and Open Space Element of the General Plan is an attempt to discourage the conversion of agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses. This section states that land proposed for conversion from agricultural to non-agricultural designations should be consistent with certain findings, including: “the conversion to non-agricultural uses shall not adversely affect existing or potential agricultural production on surrounding lands that will remain designated Agriculture”; and “there is an over-riding public need for the conversion of the land that outweighs the need to protect the land for long-term agricultural use...”. Therefore, for the purposes of this SEIR, an impact would also be considered significant from the county’s perspective if existing agricultural operations are impaired or eliminated without an over-riding public need for the proposed project.

3. Project Impacts

Agricultural Land Uses. The proposed project will traverse areas currently being devoted to a variety of agricultural uses including dryland and irrigated farming, nurseries, and greenhouse operations. Overall, the proposed project will not have a significant impact on agricultural lands. This determination is supported by the conclusions derived from the LESA analysis (see Volume III, Appendix I). The project's final score in the LESA analysis was 41. The subscore for the Land Evaluation factors were 25.1 and the subscore for the Site Assessment factors were 15.9. As listed in Table V.H-1, a total final score of 40 to 59 is considered significant only if Land Evaluation and Site Assessment subscores are each greater than or equal to 20 points. Because the Site Assessment subscore is less than 20, the final score is not significant and therefore it can be concluded that the proposed project will not have a significant impact on agricultural lands.

The proposed Willow Road extension between Pomeroy Road and Hetrick Avenue will pass approximately 800 feet north of the existing greenhouse operations of Pismo Flowers, Inc. Because this nursery operation lies south and outside of the proposed Willow Road alignment it will not be impacted by the proposed project.

East of US 101, the proposed project (northbound US 101 off ramp to Willow Road) cuts through the northern corner, approximately 0.73 acre, of the existing C&M Nursery. This portion of C&M Nursery is being used for soil fumigation and as a container storage area. According to the 1999 FEIR, the nursery manager confirmed that these uses can be relocated without a significant effect on the nursery operation. Therefore, the impact of the proposed project on C&M Nursery is considered to be less than significant.

The proposed Willow Road extension will pass about 250 feet north of an existing cattle undercrossing east of US 101. The proposed road extension will not impact the cattle undercrossing. However the proposed US 101 interchange would impede cattle crossing because the proposed on- and off- ramps will traverse the paths leading to the cattle undercrossing. Although the cattle undercrossing is used only on occasion, cutting off access to it is a significant impact. If cattle operators are using the undercrossing at the time the interchange is proposed for construction or foresee that they will continue to use the undercrossing in the future, the County should provide a separate unpaved access to the cattle undercrossing in order to maintain this connection. If the cattle operators are provided access to the undercrossing should they request it, impact to the cattle undercrossing will be less than significant.

Agricultural Preserves. Project facilities will be located within or adjacent to existing Williamson Act Agricultural Preserves (see Figure V.H-1, Agricultural Preserves) and will traverse areas containing potentially prime agricultural soils (when irrigated).

As indicated in Figure V.H-1, Agricultural Preserves, the proposed Willow Road alignment and the US 101 interchange between Hetrick Avenue and US 101 runs along the southern boundary of five separate agricultural preserves, totaling approximately 200 acres. All five of these preserves (parcels 091-301-042 through 091-301-046), however, have Williamson Act contracts that expired as of January 1, 1996. This expiration means that the agricultural preserve status can be removed from these parcels at any time. The Willow Road alignment is therefore not expected to significantly impact the preserve status of these five parcels west of US 101.

The proposed frontage road alignment runs from the proposed Willow Road extension on the west side of US 101 south to Sandydale Drive. The proposed frontage road does not intersect any agricultural preserves, and therefore, there would be no impacts from the frontage road on any agricultural preserves in the area.

East of US 101 to Thompson Road the proposed project passes through a 0.73 acre portion of the C&M Nursery (as discussed above) and will traverse two existing agricultural preserves (parcel numbers 091-251-017 and 091-301-019). These preserves total approximately 102 acres. The proposed project would have a significant impact on these agricultural preserves.

Although outside of the immediate project boundaries, two additional preserves totaling approximately 188 acres are within 20-1000 feet of the proposed road alignment. The proposed project will not have any direct impacts on these agricultural preserves.

Agricultural Soils. As indicated on the Soils Map, Figure V.H-2, and discussed above, soils designated as Cropley Clay have the potential, if irrigated, to be within Capability Class II, which is indicative of prime agricultural soils. The proposed Willow Road alignment impacts approximately 3 acres of Cropley Clay soils (see Figure V.H-2) in the area between Nipomo Creek and Thompson Avenue. According to the County of San Luis Obispo, Department of Agriculture, this potential loss of prime agricultural soils is a less than significant impact (Personal Communication, Michael Isensee, March 2005).

4. Cumulative Impacts

Direct impacts to agricultural resources, as described above, will be minimal. However, *indirect* or *cumulative* impacts to agricultural resources resulting from the proposed project could be more extensive. Provision of roadways and access facilities similar to those associated with the proposed project can eliminate a potential constraint upon development (i.e., lack of access) and, in turn, can create economic pressures and increased land values. These conditions can potentially hasten the conversion of adjacent agricultural lands and agricultural preserves as well as areas containing prime agricultural soils to developed uses. A detailed discussion of these growth-inducing impacts of the proposed project is provided in Section V.A, Land Use and Planning, and Section IX., Growth-Inducing Impacts.

The proposed project also represents a contributing step in the long-range development of the cumulative projects listed in Section IV Cumulative Projects of this SEIR. Development of these projects could impact agricultural land uses, preserves, and soils found in the project area. If all of the projects from the cumulative projects list are developed, it is likely that there will be a significant cumulative impact on existing agricultural lands and operations. The proposed projects' contribution to the cumulative effect on area development and, in turn, agricultural lands and operations would be considered significant.

5. Mitigation Measures

H-1, Agricultural Vehicle Crossings. The County of San Luis Obispo Department of Public Works shall ensure that, as part of project design, all project roadways which traverse any lands under

cultivation shall provide an adequate number of at-grade agricultural vehicle crossings. These concrete road crossings shall be striped and marked with appropriate signage to warn motorists of the potential for agricultural vehicles on the roadway and shall be located to provide safe vehicle sight distance.

H-2, Williamson Act Notice. Prior to completion of right-of-way acquisition, the County of San Luis Obispo shall prepare all required notices pursuant to Section 51291 of the Williamson Act for any roadways within established agricultural preserves.

H-3, Cattle Undercrossing. Prior to initiating construction, the County of San Luis Obispo Department of Public Works shall contact property owners utilizing the existing cattle undercrossing. If the facility is still in use at that time, the County must provide a separate cattle undercrossing to allow unimpeded access through the interchange. If this is not possible, the County shall purchase the access rights to the cattle undercrossing.

6. Residual Impacts

With proper implementation of the proposed mitigation measures, project-related impacts to agricultural resources, nurseries, greenhouses, and prime agricultural soils will be reduced to less than significant levels.

The proposed project will result in significant, unavoidable adverse project-related impacts to two agricultural preserves (Parcel Nos. 091-251-017 and 091-301-019) as well as contribute a significant cumulative impact on agricultural lands and operations.