

4.2 Agricultural Resources

This section identifies and evaluates issues related to agricultural resources in the context of the Proposed Project and alternatives. It includes a description of existing land use conditions in relation to agricultural resources and an evaluation of potential impacts associated with implementation of the Proposed Project and alternatives. A discussion of applicable State, local, and regional plans and/or programs is also included.

4.2.1 Setting

Important Farmland

To characterize the environmental baseline for agricultural resources, Important Farmland Maps produced by the California Department of Conservation's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) were reviewed. Important Farmland maps show categories of *Prime Farmland*, *Farmland of Statewide Importance*, *Unique Farmland*, *Farmland of Local Importance* (if adopted by the county), *Grazing Land*, *Urban and Built-up Land*, *Other Land*, and *Water*. *Prime Farmland* and *Farmland of Statewide Importance* map categories are based on qualifying soil types, as determined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), as well as current land use. These map categories are defined by the Department of Conservation's FMMP as follows (Department of Conservation, 2009a):

Prime Farmland: Land which has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the production of crops. It has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields of crops when treated and managed, including water management, according to current farming methods.

Farmland of Statewide Importance: Land that is similar to *Prime Farmland* but with minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or less ability to hold and store moisture.

Unique Farmland: Land of lesser quality soils used for the production of specific high economic value crops. It has the special combination of soil quality, location, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high quality or high yields of a specific crop when treated and managed according to current farming methods. It is usually irrigated, but may include non-irrigated orchards or vineyards as found in some climatic zones in California. Examples of crops include oranges, olives, avocados, rice, grapes, and cut flowers.

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. Examples include dairies, dryland farming, aquaculture, and uncultivated areas with soils qualifying for *Prime Farmland* and *Farmland of Statewide Importance*.

Grazing Land: Land on which the existing vegetation, whether grown naturally or through management, is suitable for grazing or browsing of livestock.

Urban and Built-up Land: Land used for residential, industrial, commercial, construction, institutional, public administrative purpose, railroad yards, cemeteries, airports, golf courses, sanitary landfills, sewage treatment plants, water control structures, and other development purposes. Highways, railroads, and other transportation facilities are also included in this category.

Other Land: Land which is not included in any of the other mapping categories. Common examples include low-density rural developments, brush, timber, wetland, and riparian areas not suitable for livestock grazing, confined livestock, poultry or aquaculture facilities, strip mines, borrow pits, and water bodies smaller than 40 acres.

Water: Water areas with an extent of at least 40 acres.

Existing Agriculture Resources

According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, there are 219,943 acres of farmland in Riverside County, including its component cities (USDA, 2009). The Proposed Project and alternatives are in rural open desert spaces or residential areas along existing SCE rights-of-ways (ROWs) or local public road franchise ROWs. Please refer to Section 4.9, *Land Use and Planning*, for a more detailed description of existing land uses through which the Proposed Project and alternatives would traverse.

The Proposed Project and alternatives would not be located on or in the vicinity of any parcels designated as Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance. Furthermore, no lands subject to Williamson Act contracts would be crossed by the Proposed Project or alternatives (Department of Conservation, 2009b and RCLIS, 2009).

A portion of the proposed Mirage-Santa Rosa 115 kV subtransmission line and Alternative 5 would cross through a parcel designated as Farmland of Local Importance. This parcel is located north of Interstate 10 (I-10) and south of the Tri-Palm Estates Community. Currently, this parcel of land is not producing crops, nor is it used for the production of confined livestock. It should be noted that analysis of Farmland of Local Importance is not required under CEQA significance criteria.

Regulatory Setting

State

California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

The California Department of Conservation, under the Division of Land Resource Protection, has set up the FMMP. The FMMP monitors the conversion of the State's farmland to and from agricultural use. The map series identifies eight classifications and uses a minimum mapping unit size of ten acres. The FMMP also produces a biannual report on the amount of land converted from agricultural to non-agricultural use. The FMMP is an informational service only and does not have regulatory jurisdiction over local land use decisions. For the purpose of this environmental analysis and consistency with the Farmland Policy Act of 1981, farmland includes

Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Statewide Importance, and any conversion of land within these categories is typically considered to be an adverse impact.

California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (Williamson Act)

The California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (commonly referred to as the Williamson Act) serves to preserve open spaces and agricultural land. It discourages urban sprawl and prevents landowners from developing their property for the greater land value of commercial and/or residential uses. The Williamson Act is a State program that allows agricultural landowners to pay reduced property taxes in return for their contractual agreement to retain the land in agricultural and open space uses for a period of ten years. The term of the contract automatically renews each year, so that the contract always has a ten year period left to function. The Williamson Act Program was revised by the enactment of Farmland Security Zone (FSZ) legislation during the 1998 legislative session, offering landowners greater property tax reduction in exchange for a longer contract term than under the Williamson Act Program.

Local

Riverside County General Plan

The following agricultural conservation policies identified in the General Plan Land Use Element (RCIP, 2003) may be applicable to the Proposed Project and alternatives:

Policy LU 16.1: Encourage retaining agriculturally designated lands where agricultural activity can be sustained at an operational scale, where it accommodates lifestyle choice, and in locations where impacts to and from potentially incompatible uses, such as residential uses, are minimized, through incentives such as tax credits.

Policy LU 16.2: Protect agricultural uses, including those with industrial characteristics (dairies, poultry, hog farms, etc.) by discouraging inappropriate land division in the immediate proximity and allowing only uses and intensities that are compatible with agricultural uses.

Policy LU 16.4: Encourage conservation of productive agricultural lands. Preserve prime agricultural lands for high-value crop production.

Policy LU 16.5: Continue to participate in the California Land Conservation Act (the Williamson Act) of 1965.

Policy LU 5.4: Ensure that development and conservation land uses do not infringe upon existing public utility corridors, including fee owned rights-of-way and permanent easements, whose true land use is that of “public facilities.” This policy will ensure that the “public facilities” designation governs over what otherwise may be inferred by the large scale general plan maps.

Policy LU 25.7: Due to the scale of General Plan and Area Plan maps and the size of the County, utility easements and linear rights-of-way that are narrow in width are not depicted on General Plan and Area Plan maps. These features need to be taken into consideration in the review of applications to develop land and proposals to preserve land for conservation.

Desert Cities General Plans

The General Plans for the Cities of Palm Springs, Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage, Cathedral City, and Indian Wells provide background information regarding agriculture, but do not contain any agricultural control/management policies that may be applicable to the Proposed Project or alternatives (City of Palm Springs, 2007; City of Palm Desert, 2004; City of Rancho Mirage, 2005; Cathedral City, 2002; City of Indian Wells, 1996).

4.2.2 Significance Criteria

The significance criteria for this analysis were developed from criteria presented in Appendix G of the *CEQA Guidelines*. The project would result in a significant impact to agricultural resources if it would:

- a) Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance, as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use;
- b) Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract; or
- c) Involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland of Statewide Importance to non-agricultural use.

4.2.3 Applicant Proposed Measures

No applicant proposed measures have been identified by SCE for agricultural resources.

4.2.4 Agricultural Resources Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Approach to Analysis

Based on the CEQA statute, the analysis considers whether the Proposed Project would result in impacts to Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Statewide Importance (hereafter collectively referred to as Farmland). For information purposes, impacts to Farmland of Local Importance are provided below; however, from a CEQA perspective, this designation is not considered an “agricultural land” per CEQA Statute Section 21060.1(a).

a) 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.

As discussed previously, there are no lands designated as Farmland within the project area. Therefore, construction and operation of the Proposed Project would not result in the conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use. No impacts would occur (No Impact).

Impact 4.2-1: The Proposed Project would traverse a parcel of land that is identified as Farmland of Local Importance. *Less than significant (Class III)*

The proposed Mirage-Santa Rosa 115 kV alignment would traverse a parcel designated as Farmland of Local Importance under the FMMP. This parcel of land is mainly associated with the Tri-Palm Estates golf course and is currently not used for agricultural purposes. In addition, the portion of the proposed Mirage-Santa Rosa 115 kV alignment that would be constructed through the parcel would be constructed entirely within SCE's existing ROW. Therefore, although a portion of the Proposed Project would traverse through a parcel designated as Farmland of Local Importance, agricultural impacts to the parcel would be less than significant and mitigation would not be required.

Mitigation: None required.

b) Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract.

There are no lands within the project area that are currently under a Williamson Act contract. As such, the Proposed Project would not adversely affect any land subject to Williamson Act contracts. Furthermore, the project area does not include any lands zoned for agricultural purposes. Therefore, the Proposed Project would not conflict with land currently zoned for agricultural uses (No Impact).

c) Involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature could result in conversion of Farmland, to non-agricultural use.

As discussed under a) above, the Proposed Project would not convert Farmland to any non-agricultural use. In addition, there is no Farmland in the project area that could adversely be affected by the Proposed Project. As discussed under b), the Proposed Project would not affect any lands zoned for agriculture, or involve any lands currently under Williamson Act Contract. Therefore, the Proposed Project would not involve other changes to the existing environment which, due to its location or nature could result in conversion of farmland, to non-agricultural use. The Proposed Project would have no impact on agricultural resources (No Impact).

4.2.5 Cumulative Impacts

The construction, operation, and maintenance of the Proposed Project, in addition to the other reasonably foreseeable future developments listed in Section 3.6, *Cumulative Projects*, would not result in cumulative impacts to agricultural resources. As previously mentioned, the Proposed Project would not convert Farmland to non-agricultural use. In addition, the project would not conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or with land currently under a Williamson Act contract, or involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to its location or nature

could result in conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use. The proposed Mirage-Santa Rosa 115 kV alignment traverses a parcel designated as Farmland of Local Importance under the FMMP. However, impacts to this parcel would be less than significant given that the parcel is not currently used for agricultural purposes and the portion of the proposed alignment that traverses the parcel would be located within existing SCE ROW. Therefore, the Proposed Project would have a less than significant contribution to a cumulatively considerable impact when considered in combination with the other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable projects in the area (Class III).

4.2.6 Alternatives

No Project Alternative

For the purposes of this analysis, the No Project Alternative includes the following two assumptions: 1) the project would not be implemented and the existing conditions in the study area would not be changed; and 2) new subtransmission and transmission lines and/or additional power generation would be constructed in or near the study area to supply power to the Electrical Needs Area. Given the highly speculative nature of the No Project Alternative assumptions, this analysis is qualitative.

Under the No Project Alternative, none of the facilities or infrastructure upgrades associated with the Proposed Project evaluated in this EIR would be constructed by SCE. However, SCE would be required to design a new project in order to satisfy the objectives of the Proposed Project. If a new project required SCE to acquire new ROW, there would be a potential that the project could result in impacts to designated farmlands. Furthermore, acquisition of new ROW would have the potential to result in construction and operational impacts if new ROW would be located in areas zoned for agricultural uses or if the ROW included properties under an existing Williamson Act contract. Also, if a new project required SCE to acquire new ROW in areas currently used as farmland, there would be a potential that the project could result in the conversion of farmland to non-agricultural use. However, impacts would be unlikely as the study area is generally characterized as developed or open space desert land.

Alternative 2

There are no lands designated as Farmland within the area of the Alternative 2 alignment. Furthermore, no lands within the vicinity of the alternative are currently under Williamson Act contract nor are there any lands zoned for agricultural purposes. Therefore, no impact to agricultural resources would occur from construction and operation of Alternative 2 (No Impact).

Alternative 3

There are no lands designated as Farmland within the area of the Alternative 3 alignment. Furthermore, no lands within the vicinity of the alternative are currently under Williamson Act contract nor are there any lands zoned for agricultural purposes. Therefore, no impact to agricultural resources would occur from construction and operation of Alternative 3 (No Impact).

Alternative 5

There are no lands designated as Farmland or under Williamson Act contract within the area of the Alternative 5 alignment. Similarly to the Proposed Project, Alternative 5 would traverse a parcel designated as Farmland of Local Importance. This parcel of land is mainly associated with the Tri-Palm Estates golf course and is not currently used for agricultural purposes. Therefore, impacts to agricultural resources associated Alternative 5 would be less than significant (Class III).

Alternative 6

There are no lands designated as Farmland within the area of the Alternative 6 alignment. Furthermore, no lands within the vicinity of the alternative are currently under Williamson Act contract nor are there any lands zoned for agricultural purposes. Therefore, no impact to agricultural resources would occur from construction and operation of Alternative 6 (No Impact).

Alternative 7

There are no lands designated as Farmland within the area of the Alternative 7 alignment. Furthermore, no lands within the vicinity of the alternative are currently under Williamson Act contract nor are there any lands zoned for agricultural purposes. Therefore, no impact to agricultural resources would occur from construction and operation of Alternative 7 (No Impact).

References – Agricultural Resources

City of Cathedral City, 2002. *City of Cathedral City General Plan*, adopted July 31, 2002.

City of Indian Wells, 1999. *City of Indian Wells General Plan*, adopted February 1, 1999.

City of Palm Desert, 2004. *City of Palm Desert General Plan*, adopted March 2004.

City of Palm Springs, 2007. *City of Palm Springs 2007 General Plan*, adopted October 2007.

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