

4.2 AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

This section of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR) presents an analysis of the proposed project's effect on agricultural lands and agricultural activities. Information presented in the setting and analysis subsections was obtained from visits to the project site, the Alameda County East County Area Plan (ECAP), environmental documents associated with surrounding projects, and other sources including federal and state agencies.

4.2.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The project site is generally located in an area that can be characterized as rolling hills that is vegetated with annual grasses. Much of the land in and near the project site is rural in character and is largely devoted to cattle grazing and wind energy production uses.

4.2.1.1 Rating of Agricultural Land

There are two systems used by the United States Soil Conservation Service (SCS) to determine a soil's agricultural productivity. The two systems are the Soils Capability Classification and the Storie Index Rating System. In general, the prime soil classifications of both systems indicate the absence of soil limitations, which, if present, would require the application of management techniques (e.g., drainage, leveling, special fertilizing practices) to enhance production.

4.2.1.1.1 Soil Capability Classification

The Soil Capability Classification System takes into consideration soil limitations and the way in which soils respond to treatment. Capability classes range from Class 1 soils, which have few limitations for agriculture, to Class VII soils, which are unsuitable soils. Class I soils give top yields with a minimum of management skills, while yields of Class II land can equal those of Class I with implementation of minor management practices. Generally, as the ratings of the capability classification system increase, crop yields, and profits are more difficult to obtain.

4.2.1.1.2 Storie Index Rating System

The Storie Index Rating system ranks soil characteristics according to their suitability for agriculture from Grade 1 soils (80 to 100 rating), which have few to no limitations for agricultural production to Grade 6 soils (less than 10), which are not suitable for agriculture. Under this system, soils deemed less than prime can operate as prime soils when limitations, such as poor drainage, slopes, or soil nutrient deficiencies, are partially or entirely removed.

4.2.1.1.3 State of California Department of Conservation Classifications

The California Department of Conservation (CDC) sponsors the Important Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) that delineates important farmland resources in the state. The FMMP combines technical soil ratings, water availability, and current land use information to create an inventory of Important Farmland. Information on soils is primarily taken from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) soil surveys.

Farmlands that meet these criteria for important farming use are placed in one of the four main categories: Prime Farmland, which is the most productive; Farmland of Statewide Importance; Unique Farmland; and Farmland of Local Importance.

The FMMP delineates lands that are not considered important farmland resources as Grazing Land, Urban and Built-Out Land, and Other. Grazing Land is defined in Government Code Section 65570(b)(3) as

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

Urban and Built-Out Land is used for development purposes, or is vacant and non-agricultural land which is surrounded by urban development and is less than 40 acres in size. Vacant and nonagricultural land larger than 40 acres in size is mapped as Other Land.

4.2.1.1.4 Williamson Act

To encourage the preservation of farmland, including Important Farmland, the State of California passed the California Land Conservation Act, commonly known as the Williamson Act. This act provides tax benefits to farmers who sign a contract with the state to maintain agricultural uses for a given period. According to the Alameda County Assessor, the project site is not under a Williamson Act contract.

4.2.1.2 Local Characteristics

Much of the land in and near the project site is sparsely developed and rural in character, and is largely devoted to cattle grazing and wind energy production. The closest lands designated by ECAP (which serves as the general plan for the project area) for cultivated agricultural uses are found near the City of Livermore. According to the San Francisco Bay Area Important Farmland Map, there are no areas within a 5-mile radius of the project site designated as Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Local Importance (Department of Conservation 2007).

The native soils found on the project site consist of Linne Clay Loam, which are soils that are considered by the US Department of Agriculture as best suited to food, feed, fiber, forage, and oilseed crop production, and are rated as Farmland of Statewide Importance. However, based on existing site conditions, including slope, drainage, acidity, and erosion, the CDC assigned a Storie Index Rating of “Grade 3, Fair.” Given the soil quality and historic uses, FMMP identifies the project site and the areas around the project site as Grazing Land.

4.2.2 REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

4.2.2.1 Alameda County East County Area Plan

The ECAP includes several agricultural land use designations. The project site is designated for “Large Parcel Agriculture” uses. This discussion allows for agricultural uses, agricultural processing facilities, limited agricultural uses, secondary residential uses, public and quasi-public uses, solid waste landfills and related waste management facilities, quarries, wind farms and related facilities, utility corridors, other industrial uses appropriate for remote areas and determined to be compatible with agriculture, and similar and compatible uses.

4.2.2.2 Alameda County General Ordinance Code

The project site’s current zoning designation is A (Agricultural) District. The A District permits a range of uses including one single-family dwelling per parcel; crop, vine or tree farming; truck gardens; plant nurseries, the raising or keeping of poultry, fowl, rabbits, sheep or goats or similar animals; grazing, breeding or training of horses or cattle; wineries or olive oil mills; fish hatcheries and rearing ponds; public or private riding or hiking trails; and second units (Alameda County Zoning Ordinance Section 17.06.030). Other uses of lands within the A District are permitted with the approval of a conditional use permit. Permitted conditional uses include outdoor recreational facilities.

4.2.3 ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

4.2.3.1 Thresholds of Significance

The proposed project would result in a significant impact if it would

- Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland), as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the FMMP of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use;
- Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract; or

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

4.2.3.2 Methodology

Published reports prepared by the USDA and the CDC were used in determining whether impacts to agricultural resources would be significant environmental effects.

4.2.3.3 Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Potential Impact 4.2-1: Would the project convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland), as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the FMMP of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use?

The project site is not classified as Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance. The project area's general classification within the context of suitability for farming and agricultural activities is fair, and the area is currently used for grazing and wind energy production.

The project site is currently used as a motorsports facility, and has been in such use since 1963. Conversion of the site from any form of agricultural use occurred in 1963. The proposed rezoning of the site to Planned Development would not affect the current use of the site. Installation of a roof over a portion of the existing grandstand, the installation of two mobile homes for use as caretaker residences, and the installation of two freeway signs would not result in any further conversion of agricultural land on the project site, regardless of classification. Therefore, the project would not result in the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses and this is not considered an impact.

Conclusion: No impact

Mitigation Measure: None required

Potential Impact 4.2-2: Would the project conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract?

The County of Alameda's General Ordinance Code zones the project site as A (Agricultural) District. The intent of the A District is to:

Promote implementation of general plan land use proposals for agricultural and other nonurban uses, to conserve and protect existing agricultural uses, and to provide space for and encourage such uses in places where more intensive development is not desirable or necessary for the general welfare. (Alameda County Municipal Code 17.06.010)

The A District allows an outdoor recreational facility as a conditionally permitted use (Alameda County Municipal Code 17.06.040). An outdoor recreation facility is defined as

A park, or a playing field for active games, a golf course, a swimming pool, a camp or picnic grounds, a vacation resort or guest lodge, or a neighborhood recreation area, together with such buildings or uses as are accessory to the recreational use. The term does not include drive-in theater, a drive-in business, carnival, circus or trampoline courts. (Alameda County Municipal Code 17.04.010)

There are no ongoing agricultural uses on the project site. AMP currently operates under the definition of an outdoor recreation facility in accordance with a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) approved most recently in 1996. Therefore, the current operation of AMP is considered consistent with the A District based on the prior determination by the County that the use is a conditionally permitted use as an outdoor recreational facility.

The proposed rezoning of the entire project site to Planned Development would alleviate the issue of on-site conflict with existing agricultural zoning. Additionally, the proposed rezoning of the site to Planned District would not conflict with adjacent lands zoned for agricultural activities nor would the proposed rezoning affect the use of those adjacent lands for agricultural activities. Existing use of adjacent lands for agricultural activities is currently limited to the grazing of cattle and other livestock which over the more than 40 years of the raceway's operation do not appear to have been influenced by raceway activities. Therefore, the proposed rezoning of the site to Planned Development would not conflict with the existing conditionally permitted uses under the A District zoning.

According to the Alameda County Assessor, the project site is not under an existing Williamson Act contract. Therefore, the continued operation of the facility would not conflict with an existing Williamson Act contract.

Conclusion: No impact

Mitigation Measure: None required

Potential Impact 4.2-3: Would the project involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland, to non-agricultural use?

The proposed rezoning of the site to Planned Development and the installation of a roof over the existing grandstand, the installation of two caretaker residences, and the installation of two freeway signs would not result in any changes to the site or area's environment that would be envisioned as a potential catalyst

to the conversion of farmland to non-agricultural uses. Further, the addition of drifting, as well as future unanticipated motorsports activities, is similarly not envisioned as a potential catalyst to the conversion of farmland to non-agricultural uses. The motorsports park's more than 40-year history and the absence of any adjacent or off-site land uses designed to support or compliment the raceway and its operation indicates that the raceway is not a catalyst to the additional conversion of agricultural lands, regardless of their classification. Therefore, the project would not result in conversion of the project site or surrounding properties to non-agricultural uses and there would be no impact.

Conclusion: No impact

Mitigation Measure: None required