

5.2 AGRICULTURE AND FOREST RESOURCES

5.2.1 METHODOLOGY

This section of the EIR addresses potential impacts to agricultural resources that would result from implementation of the proposed facilities and improvements called out in the Master Development Plan Input (MDPI). Information regarding agricultural resources in the project area is based on the California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP), the County of Los Angeles General Plan (1980), and the 2008 Draft General Plan update. Information on forest lands is based on information from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE).

5.2.2 EXISTING CONDITIONS

Regulatory Setting

State

California Land Conservation Act

The California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (Williamson Act) enables local governments to enter into contracts with private landowners for preserving agricultural land or related open space uses. In return, landowners receive a lower property tax assessment based on farming and open space uses, as opposed to full market value. Local governments receive an annual subvention of forgone property tax revenues from the State via the Open Space Subvention Act of 1971, but these payments were suspended in 2009 as part of the State budget cuts. In turn, the contract prevents the development of the land for urban uses for ten years. Either a filing for non-renewal is needed or cancellation of the contract with payment of fees would be required if the property is planned for development after ten years.

Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

The FMMP is a non-regulatory program that provides a consistent and impartial analysis of agricultural land use and land use changes throughout California. The FMMP provides land use conversion information for decision makers to use in their planning for present and future uses of California's agricultural land resources, including the bi-annual preparation of "Important Farmland Maps". The following farmland classifications are based on information from the California Department of Conservation (DOC) Division of Land Resources Protection's *A Guide to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (2004 Edition)* (FMMP 2004):

- **Prime Farmland (P).** Prime Farmland is land which has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the long-term production of agricultural 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. The land must have been used for the production of irrigated crops at some time during the two previous cycles prior to the mapping date (a cycle is approximately two years). It does not include publicly owned lands for which there is an adopted policy that prevents agricultural use.

- **Farmland of Statewide Importance (F).** Farmland of Statewide Importance is land other than Prime Farmland that has a good combination of physical and chemical characteristics for crop production. It must have been used for the production of irrigated crops at some time during the two previous cycles prior to the mapping date. It does not include publicly owned lands for which there is an adopted policy that prevents agricultural use.
- **Unique Farmland (U).** Unique Farmland is land that does not meet the criteria for Prime Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance. It must be currently used for the production of specific high-economic value crops (as listed in the last three years of *California Agriculture* produced by the California Department of Food and Agriculture). It has the special combination of soil quality, location, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high quality or a high yield of a specific crop when treated and managed according to current farming methods. Examples of such crops may include oranges, olives, avocados, rice, grapes, and cut flowers. This land is usually irrigated, but may include non-irrigated orchards or vineyards, as found in some climatic zones in California. The land must have been cultivated at some time during the two cycles prior to the mapping date.
- **Farmland of Local Importance (L).** Farmland of Local Importance is of importance to the local agricultural economy and is determined by each County's Board of Supervisors and a local advisory committee. According to the DOC, Farmland of Local Importance in Los Angeles County includes producing lands that would meet the standard criteria for Prime Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance, but which are not irrigated.
- **Grazing Land (G).** Grazing land is land on which the existing vegetation, whether grown naturally or through management, is suitable for livestock grazing. The minimum mapping unit for Grazing Land is 40 acres.
- **Urban and Built-up Land (D).** Urban and built-up land is occupied with structures that have a building density of at least one unit to one-half acre or approximately six structures to a ten-acre parcel.
- **Other Land (X).** This category is for land that is not included in any 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. Vacant and nonagricultural land that is surrounded on all sides by urban development and is greater than 40 acres is mapped as "Other Land".

The DOC administers the FMMP pursuant to Section 65570 of the *California Government Code*. The FMMP identifies farmlands in the State based on current land use information and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS') soil survey data on soil characteristics that best support crop production. The program also tracks the conversion of farmland to other uses every two years.

In 2008, approximately 32,408 acres of Prime Farmland were mapped in Los Angeles County, along with 1,228 acres of Farmland of Statewide Importance; 1,178 acres of Unique Farmland or Farmland of Local Importance; and 229,475 acres of Grazing Land. The total of 271,482 acres of Prime, Unique, and Statewide Important Agricultural Lands in the County in 2008 reflects a 2.5 percent reduction since 2006 (FMMP 2009b).

Environmental Conditions

The 2008 Los Angeles County Important Farmland Map shows that much of the southern half of the County is not mapped as part of the FMMP, likely due to the prevalence of dense urban development and/or areas not suited to agricultural production due to topography such as the Angeles National Forest. As such, the WNCBRA and surrounding areas are not identified as Farmland by the FMMP.

Both the County of Los Angeles' 1980 Special Management Areas Map and the 2008 draft Natural Resource Areas Map indicate there are no designated agricultural resource areas within or near the WNCBRA (Los Angeles County 1980, Los Angeles County 2008).

The County's Zoning Ordinance (Title 22 of the *Los Angeles County Code*) has zoned the area within the Rio Hondo Channel north of San Gabriel Boulevard and the portion of the San Gabriel River northeast of the flood flow channel as A-1-5 (Light Agriculture). However, no agricultural uses are present in these areas. The only Williamson Act contract in Los Angeles County is for the preservation of open space on Santa Catalina Island (Los Angeles County 2008).

Approximately 82 acres of the WNCBRA are leased for operation of 4 nurseries/agricultural fields with 3 separate lessees. As shown on Exhibit 5.9-4 in Section 5.9, Land Use and Planning, of this EIR, a community garden is located along the eastern boundary of the WNCBRA immediately north of the Santa Anita Avenue on-ramp to Interstate 60 (I-60), an agricultural field is located just east of the Whittier Narrows Reclamation Plant on Rosemead Boulevard (State Route 19), a seasonal strawberry field is located southwest of Legg Lake at the northeastern corner of Rosemead Boulevard and Durfee Avenue, and a plant nursery is located just east of the Rio Hondo and north of Rush Street.

There are no national forests or national grasslands under the management of the USFS in or near the WNCBRA (USFS 2004). In addition, the CAL FIRE has identified the WNCBRA and the surrounding area as Urban Land in its Forest and Range 2003 Assessment (FRAP 2003).

5.2.3 THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The following significance criteria are derived from Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines. The project would result in a significant adverse impact on agriculture and forest resources if it would:

Threshold 5.2.1: *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;*

Threshold 5.2.2: *Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act Contract;*

Threshold 5.2.3: *Conflict with existing zoning for, or cause rezoning of, forest land (as defined in Public Resources Code section 12220[g]), timberland (as defined by Public Resources Code section 4526), or timberland zoned Timberland Production (as defined by Government Code section 51104[g]);*

Threshold 5.2.4: *Result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use; or*

Threshold 5.2.5: *Involve other changes in the existing environment, which due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use or conversion of forest land to non-forest use.*

5.2.4 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Project Design Features

There are no project design features that specifically relate to agriculture and forest resources.

Standard Conditions

There are no standard conditions that specifically relate to agriculture and forest resources.

Impact Analysis

Farmland

Threshold 5.2.1: Would the project 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?

There are no lands in the WND BRA that are designated as Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance. The FMMP does not include the San Gabriel Valley in its mapping effort due to the predominance of urban development and the lack of agricultural uses. Thus, proposed programs, facilities, and improvements under the MDPI would have no impact on designated Farmlands.

Existing Agricultural Zone and Williamson Contract

Threshold 5.2.2: Would the project conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract?

The County has zoned the area within the Rio Hondo Channel north of San Gabriel Boulevard and the portion of the San Gabriel River northeast of the flood flow channel as A-1-5 (Light Agriculture). However, there are no agricultural uses in these areas. The western section of the conservation pool is zoned by the City of Montebello as Residential-Agriculture but no agricultural uses are present in this area.

No change in the zoning of these areas is proposed by the MDPI. Also, there are no Williamson Act contracts within the WND BRA. Thus, proposed facilities and improvements under the MDPI would have no impact on an agricultural zone or Williamson Act contract.

Forest Land and Timberland

Threshold 5.2.3: Would the project conflict with existing zoning for, or cause rezoning of, forest land (as defined in Public Resources Code section 12220[g]), timberland (as defined by Public Resources Code section 4526), or timberland zoned Timberland Production (as defined by Government Code section 51104[g])?

The WNDBRA is not zoned as forest land or timberland, and there are no forests in the WNDBRA. However, native vegetation is present, and invasive species would be removed and native species would be reintroduced as part of the MDPI. No impact on forest land or timberland would occur with proposed facilities and improvements under the MDPI.

Conversion of Forest Land

Threshold 5.2.4: Would the project result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use?

There are no forests at the WNDBRA, and no conversion of forest land to other uses would occur with proposed facilities and improvements under the MDPI. No impact on existing forest land or timberland would occur with the MDPI.

Conversion of Farmland

Threshold 5.2.5: 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 or conversion of forest land to non-forest use?

There is no designated Farmland, as identified by the FMMP, in or near the WNDBRA. Also, there are no forest lands on or near the site. The existing plant nursery and agricultural fields operate under leases from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation, as indicated, and their future operations would depend on the renewal of these leases. However, the 1996 Whittier Narrows Dam Basin Master Plan considers the agricultural fields and nurseries an interim use until the Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation develops recreational uses for these areas.

The MDPI proposes facilities and improvements in the areas where these agricultural fields and nurseries are present but does not specifically indicate that agricultural uses would be displaced. A natural area park is proposed at the edge of the Rio Hondo adjacent to the plant nursery in the northwestern section of Area A. Various recreational uses are proposed in Area B but the existing community garden would be retained. Since the USACE is allowing agricultural operations until the current leases expire, the MDPI does not specifically call for the displacement of agricultural operations, and the existing agricultural fields and nurseries are not designated as Farmland, impacts associated with the potential future conversion of the agricultural fields and nurseries in the WNDBRA to other uses are considered less than significant. No mitigation is required.

5.2.5 CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

There are no designated Farmlands in the San Gabriel Valley due to the intensity of urbanization. The Angeles National Forest is located at the northern end of the San Gabriel Valley within the San Gabriel Mountains. Scattered plant nurseries and agricultural fields are present but do not represent a major industry in the San Gabriel Valley. Thus, proposed facilities and improvements in the WNDBRA and future development in the surrounding cities and unincorporated County areas would not lead to a cumulatively considerable impact on agricultural resources as it relates to the conversion of plant nurseries and agricultural fields to urban uses. No significant cumulative adverse impacts would occur on farmlands, forest land, timberland, agricultural operations, or crop production, and conflicts with agricultural zones or Williamson Act contracts would also not occur with implementation of the MDPI.

5.2.6 MITIGATION MEASURES

No significant adverse impacts on agriculture and forest resources in the WNDBRA, the County, or the San Gabriel Valley have been identified; therefore, no mitigation is required.

5.2.7 LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION

No significant direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts on agriculture and forest resources would occur with proposed programs, facilities, and improvements under the MDPI. Impacts related to the potential future conversion of plant nurseries and agricultural fields to recreational uses are considered less than significant.

5.2.8 REFERENCES

- California Department of Conservation (DOC), Division of Land Resource Protection (LRP). 2007. Williamson Act Program. Sacramento, CA: DOC LRP. <http://www.consrv.ca.gov/DLRP/lca/Pages/Index.aspx>.
- California Department of Conservation, Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP). 2009a (September). Los Angeles County Important Farmland 2008. Sacramento, CA: FMMP.
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