

1. Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) requires state and local government agencies to inform decision makers and the public about potential environmental impacts of proposed projects, and to avoid, reduce, or minimize those environmental impacts where *feasible*. CEQA is set forth in state law¹, and is incorporated by reference into the Ventura County CEQA Implementation Manual. The CEQA Implementation Manual identifies the specific procedures and provisions adopted by the County of Ventura to implement and comply with CEQA requirements.

The State CEQA Guidelines require each public agency to adopt objectives, criteria and specific procedures consistent with CEQA and the State CEQA Guidelines for administering its responsibilities under CEQA (see State CEQA Guidelines Section 15022). The Ventura County CEQA Implementation Manual and the Ventura County Initial Study Assessment Guidelines (ISAGs) are to be used in conjunction with the State CEQA Guidelines.

If a *Lead Agency* determines that a proposed activity is a project under CEQA, the *Lead Agency* must determine whether the project is exempt from CEQA (see Section 3.4 of the CEQA Implementation Manual). If a project is not exempt, the *Lead Agency* must prepare an Initial Study to determine whether the project may result in potentially significant environmental effects and prepare a new or identify a previously prepared environmental document for the project. An Initial Study is a preliminary analysis prepared by the *Lead Agency* to determine whether an environmental impact report (EIR), negative declaration (ND), or mitigated negative declaration (MND) is required for the project. While a sample format of an Initial Study is provided in Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines, agencies are free to devise their own format. The County of Ventura has developed an Initial Study Checklist and ISAGs that address environmental issues outlined in Appendix G as well as issues unique to Ventura County. The ISAGs provide a framework with unique threshold criteria by which to conduct an Initial Study and complete the Initial Study Checklist.

1.2 PURPOSE

The purpose of the ISAGs is to inform any interested stakeholder (e.g., the public, project applicants, consultants and County of Ventura staff) of the threshold criteria and standard assessment methodology used to determine whether a project (individually or cumulatively with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable probable future projects) could have a potentially significant effect on the environment pursuant to CEQA. Furthermore, the ISAGs provide guidelines for evaluating environmental issues, completing the Initial Study Checklist, and determining the type of environmental document for individual projects.

The ISAGs present a range of quantitative and qualitative threshold criteria for particular environmental issues. Normally, in the absence of *substantial evidence* to the contrary, an

¹ Section 21000 et seq. of the Public Resources Code; State CEQA Guidelines are set forth at Section 15000 et seq. of Title 14, Division 6, Chapter 3 of the California Code of Regulations.

affirmative response to any one threshold means the project would result in a potentially significant environmental effect, whereas effects that do not meet any of the thresholds will normally be determined to be “less than significant.” The State CEQA Guidelines Section 15064(b)(1) states:

“The determination of whether a project may have a significant effect on the environment calls for careful judgment on the part of the public agency involved, based to the extent possible on scientific and factual data. An ironclad definition of significant effect is not always possible because the significance of an activity may vary with the setting. For example, an activity which may not be significant in an urban area may be significant in a rural area.”

The ISAGs assist in providing a consistent, objective and predictable evaluation of significant effects. The ISAGs are not binding on any decision-maker and should not be substituted for the use of independent judgment to determine significance or the evaluation of evidence in the record.

1.3 ISAGS READER’S GUIDE

The ISAGs document is made up of a collection of guidelines for assessing environmental issues that must be evaluated pursuant to CEQA and a glossary that contains all technical terms used frequently throughout the document. The following subsections describe these components within the ISAGs document. Federal, state, and local legislation or policies are referenced where applicable throughout the guidelines and discussions provided in the ISAGs. All federal, state, and local legislation or policy references in the ISAGs shall be applicable, as amended.

1.3.1 Environmental Issues

Each environmental issue is assigned to one or more specific County of Ventura agency/department on the basis of its professional subject matter expertise. Note that the Ventura County Air Pollution Control District is a separate entity, independent of the County of Ventura, whose authority is established by Division 26 of the California Health and Safety Code. The environmental issues and their assigned agencies/departments are summarized in Table 1-1. Each assigned agency/department shall assist the *Lead Agency* in the preparation of the Initial Study Checklist for its assigned environmental issue(s). Where one or more agency/department is assigned, the *Lead Agency* and assigned agencies/departments shall ensure there is consensus across all assigned agencies/departments on the evaluation and determination made for the environmental issue. Note that the Ventura County Air Pollution Control District is a separate entity, independent of the County of Ventura, whose authority is established by Division 26 of the California Health and Safety Code.

Table 1-1. Assigned Agencies/Departments for Environmental Issues

Environmental Issue / ISAG Section	County Agency/Department											Ventura County Air Pollution Control District
	Agriculture/Weights & Measures	County Executive Office Sustainability Division	Department of Airports	Fire Protection District	General Services Agency	Library Services	Public Works Agency	Watershed Protection District	RMA Environmental Health Division	RMA Planning Division	Sheriff's Office	
1. Introduction												
2. Agriculture & Forestry	●											
3. Air Quality												●
4. Greenhouse Gases												●
5. Energy		●										
6. Biological Resources										●		
7. Hydrology							●	●				
8. Beaches and Coastal Sand Dunes										●		
9. Water Resources							●					
10. Paleontological Resources										●		
11. Mineral Resources										●		
12. Aesthetics										●		
13. Historical Resources										●		
14. Archaeological Resources										●		
15. Tribal Cultural Resources										●		
16. Land Use & Planning			●							●		
17. Population & Housing										●		
18. Recreation					●							
19. Aviation Hazards			●									
20. Noise & Vibration										●		
21. Geological Hazards							●					

Environmental Issue / ISAG Section	County Agency/Department											Ventura County Air Pollution Control District
	Agriculture/Weights & Measures	County Executive Office Sustainability Division	Department of Airports	Fire Protection District	General Services Agency	Library Services	Public Works Agency	Watershed Protection District	RMA Environmental Health Division	RMA Planning Division	Sheriff's Office	
22. Wildfire Hazards				●								
23. Hazardous Materials & Waste									●			
24. Public Services				●		●					●	
25. Utilities & Service Systems				●			●		●			
26. Transportation			●	●			●					

1.3.2 Section Organization

Each section of the ISAGs provides a framework for evaluating a specific environmental issue and contains the sections described below.

Background and Context

Provides a brief introduction of the environmental issue along with background information and context pertinent to the evaluation of impacts. Oftentimes, additional information related to the environmental issue can be found in the Ventura County General Plan Background Report ("Background Report").

Thresholds of Significance

Enumerate qualitative and/or quantitative thresholds of significance related to the environmental issue and provide specific requirements or exceedance levels to ensure that impacts resulting from a project would be less than significant. The thresholds help determine whether a project's impact may be significant.

Impact Analysis

Provides guidelines for evaluating the level of impact based on the specified threshold criteria and how to determine whether a given significance threshold has been met.

References

Include a list of source documents, plans, regulations, tools, or other resources that are cited or referenced throughout the section, the agency responsible for the specific source reference, and hyperlinks to the source if available online.

Appendices

Include supplemental information that is associated with the guidelines provided in the section.

1.3.3 Glossary

The glossary contains definitions for technical terms that are used frequently throughout the ISAGs document. Technical terms included in the glossary are identified by italicized text throughout the document with a subtle dashed green underline, such as *this example*. Federal, state, and local regulations or policies are cited as the source for several definitions. Where a conflict occurs between the ISAGs definition and the definition used in the regulation or policy, the definition from the regulation or policy shall prevail.

1.4 PREPARING AN INITIAL STUDY

Details on the Initial Study process are further discussed in Section 4.2 of the CEQA Implementation Manual. An Initial Study may be completed by the *Lead Agency* for a discretionary project if the project is not exempt from CEQA or another state or federal law. An Initial Study is not required if the *Lead Agency* determines that a full EIR will be required for the project (State CEQA Guidelines Section 15063). However, it may still be desirable as a means to focus the EIR. Without an Initial Study, the EIR must address all environmental issues listed in the Initial Study Checklist. Each agency/department responsible for review of one or more environmental issue as identified in Table 1-1 must concur with the factual basis for determining both individual and cumulative effects for their specific environmental issue(s).

The Initial Study shall consist of four sections: Project Description, Initial Study Checklist, Mandatory Findings of Significance, and Determination of Environmental Document. An Initial Study template is accessible online (see Section 1.6).

1.4.1 Project Description

The project description should sufficiently capture the nature and extent of the project (see “Definition of Project” in Section 3.2 of the CEQA Implementation Manual). This section should include the project name and number, name of applicant, project location (including map), specific description of the nature and purpose of the project, existing and proposed land use designation and zoning of the project site, a description of all proposed project activities (construction, operation, maintenance), including the physical alterations/improvements proposed by the project (including site plan, elevations, off-site improvements, etc.), a description of the public facilities (e.g., roads, water supply, sewers, utilities) that must be extended or expanded to serve the project, and a list of all *Responsible Agencies* as defined in State CEQA Guidelines Section 15381.

1.4.2 Initial Study Checklist

For each environmental issue listed in the Initial Study Checklist and described in the subsequent sections of the ISAGs, a determination shall be made as to whether the project could have an effect on the existing environment, and whether that effect could be significant. The Initial Study must consider the whole action involved, including on-site as well as off-site, project-level as well as cumulative, direct as well as indirect, and construction as well as operational impacts. For purposes of technical review, environmental issues have been assigned to specific agencies/departments on the basis of their professional expertise (see Section 1.3.1). Should there be any environmental issues that are unassigned, the *Lead Agency* shall be responsible for acquiring appropriate professional expertise to address that environmental issue.

In responding to each environmental issue on the Initial Study Checklist, the *Lead Agency* shall use the ISAGs and its professional judgment, which requires analysis of the scientific and factual data that are a matter of public record (see State CEQA Guidelines Section 15064(b)). The subsequent sections of the ISAGs provide a brief discussion of each environmental issue and guidance for analyzing each issue. For all County public works projects occurring within city limits, the *Lead Agency* may use city-adopted Initial Study threshold criteria that cover the same environmental issue found within the Initial Study Checklist.

Project Impacts

“Effects” and “impacts” are used synonymously throughout the ISAGs. Impacts analyzed under CEQA must be related to a physical change to the environment. Project impacts include both *direct* and *indirect impacts*.

Direct or primary impacts are physical changes in the environment caused by the project and occur at the same time and place. Examples include dust, noise, and traffic of heavy equipment that would result from construction of a sewage treatment plant.

Indirect or secondary impacts are caused by the project and are later in time or farther removed in distance, but are still reasonably foreseeable. If a direct physical change in turn causes another change, then the other change is an *indirect impact*. For example, the construction of a new sewage treatment plant or extension of a sewer may facilitate population growth in the service area due to the increase in sewage treatment or service capacity and may lead to an increase in air pollution (State CEQA Guidelines Section 15064(d)).

Indirect impacts may also include reasonably foreseeable growth inducing impacts and other impacts related to induced changes in the pattern of land use, population density, or growth rate, and related impacts on air and water and other natural systems, including ecosystems. Growth inducement is defined in State CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.2(e), as may be amended, which states, “the ways in which the proposed project could foster economic or population growth, or the construction of additional housing, either directly or indirectly, in the surrounding environment. Included in this are projects which would remove obstacles to population growth (a major expansion of a wastewater treatment plant might, for example, allow for more construction in service areas).”

Cumulative Impacts

Each agency/department assigned to an environmental issue is responsible for determining the geographical area subject to the cumulative impact assessment for that issue. For those issues that are unassigned to a specific agency, the *Lead Agency* shall determine the geographical area appropriate for that issue.

Cumulative impacts are defined by State CEQA Guidelines Section 15355 as two or more individual effects which, when considered together, are considerable or which compound or increase other environmental impacts. The individual effects may be changes resulting from a single project or a number of separate projects. The incremental impact of a project, when added to the related impacts of other closely related past, present, and reasonably foreseeable probable future projects, contributes to a cumulative impact that results in a change in the environment. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant projects taking place over a period of time.

The project under review must contribute to the adverse impact in order for its impact to be characterized as a cumulative impact.² In other words, if a project does not make some contribution to a cumulative environmental effect, the cumulative effect cannot be characterized as a cumulative impact of that project under review.

Pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Section 15064(h), when assessing whether a cumulative effect requires an EIR, the *Lead Agency* shall consider whether the cumulative impact is significant and whether the effects of the project are cumulatively considerable. “Cumulatively considerable” means that the incremental effects of an individual project are significant when viewed in connection with the effects of past projects, the effects of other current projects, and the effects of probable future projects. An EIR must be prepared if the cumulative impact may be significant and the project’s incremental effect, though individually limited, is cumulatively considerable.

In addition, a project’s incremental contribution to a cumulative impact is not cumulatively considerable if the project would comply with the requirements in a previously approved plan or mitigation program that provides specific requirements that would avoid or substantially lessen the cumulative impact within the geographic area in which the project is located (e.g., water quality control plan, air quality attainment or maintenance, integrated waste management plan, habitat conservation plan, natural community conservation plan, plans or regulations for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions). Such plans or programs must be specified in law or adopted by the public agency with jurisdiction over the affected resources through a public review process to implement, interpret, or make specific the law enforced or administered by the county/special district. When relying on a plan, regulation or program, the *Lead Agency* should explain how implementing the requirements in the plan, regulation or program ensures that the project’s incremental contribution to the cumulative effect is not cumulatively considerable. If there is *substantial evidence* that the possible effects of a particular project are still cumulatively considerable notwithstanding that the project complies with the specified plan or mitigation program, an EIR must be prepared for the project. The mere existence of significant cumulative impacts caused by other projects alone shall not constitute *substantial evidence* that the proposed project’s incremental effects are cumulatively considerable.

Discussion of Cumulative Impacts

Pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Section 15130(b), the discussion of cumulative impacts shall reflect the severity of the impacts and their likelihood of occurrence, but the discussion need not be as detailed as the discussion on effects attributable to the project alone. The discussion should be guided by the standards of practicality and reasonableness, and should focus on the cumulative impact contributions of other identified projects, rather than the attributes of other projects which do not contribute to the cumulative impact. The following elements are necessary to an adequate discussion of significant cumulative impacts:

- a. A list of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable probable future projects that produce related or cumulative impacts, including, if necessary, those projects outside the control of the agency. When utilizing a list of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable probable future projects, factors to consider when determining whether to include a related project should include the nature of each environmental resource being examined, the location of the project, and its type. Location may be important, for example, when water quality impacts are at issue since projects outside the watershed would probably not contribute to a

² *Sierra Club v. West Side Irrig. Dist.* (2005) 128 Cal.App.4th 690, 700.

cumulative effect. Project type may be important, for example, when the impact is specialized, such as a particular air pollutant or mode of traffic.

- b. A summary of projections contained in an adopted local, regional or statewide plan, or related planning document, that describes or evaluates conditions contributing to the cumulative effect. Such plans may include: a general plan, regional transportation plan, or plans for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. A summary of projections may also be contained in an adopted or certified prior environmental document for such a plan. Such projections may be supplemented with additional information such as a regional modeling program. Any such document shall be referenced and made available to the public at a location specified by the *Lead Agency*.
- c. The geographic scope of the area, defined by the *Lead Agency*, that would be affected by the cumulative effect and provide a reasonable explanation for the geographic limitation used.
- d. A summary of the expected environmental effects to be produced by those projects with specific reference to additional information stating where that information is available.
- e. A reasonable analysis of the cumulative impacts of the relevant projects. An EIR shall examine reasonable, *feasible* options for mitigating or avoiding the project's contribution to any significant cumulative effects.

Use of Previous EIRs to Identify Cumulative Impacts

Each assigned agency/department is also responsible for determining whether the certified EIR for the Ventura County General Plan or another certified EIR is sufficient to address the cumulative impact assessment for their assigned environmental issue. At a minimum, the EIR must include sufficient detail to adequately address the impacts of the project being reviewed.

If the previous EIR is sufficient to cover a subsequent project, the Initial Study must reference the EIR, describe where a copy can be viewed, and provide a brief summary.

For environmental issues that were not sufficiently assessed in a previous EIR to address cumulative impacts, a list of approved and proposed projects can be used. Information regarding discretionary permits/entitlements related to land use and development can be obtained from the Ventura County Resource Management Agency (RMA) Planning Division. Information regarding city permits/entitlements can be obtained from the planning departments of the respective cities.

In addition to approved and proposed projects, the cumulative analysis must also consider reasonably foreseeable probable future projects. If there has been a public announcement of a pending project, then that project should be included. In cases where the project includes a legislative amendment (General Plan amendment or zone change), it is also important to consider the potential of similar amendments for similar properties within the specified geographical area identified for the cumulative analysis.

Adopted Forecasts/Land Use Plans

The Ventura County General Plan's population, *dwelling unit* and employment forecasts, in conjunction with the land use maps, should be used as the foundational basis for determining cumulative development within the specified geographical area for those environmental issues that were sufficiently addressed in the certified EIR of the Ventura County General Plan or are directly or indirectly related to population, *dwelling units* or employment growth (e.g., Public Services). Refer to the Background Report for forecasts on population, *dwelling unit*, and employment. In addition, all known General Plan amendments that have been filed or are likely to be filed in the same

geographical area should be added to the forecasts. Information regarding Ventura County General Plan amendments can be obtained from the Ventura County RMA Planning Division.

Whether a cumulative impact is significant, and whether a project's incremental contribution is cumulatively considerable varies by environmental issue and the facts and circumstances of each case.

Determining Level of Impact

If the *Lead Agency* determines that the project would have absolutely no project or cumulative impact for a particular threshold of significance, the *Lead Agency* shall mark "N" (no impact) for that threshold.

The *Lead Agency* shall mark "LS" (less than significant impact) for a particular threshold of significance if it determines that the project may have a project impact but the impact would be less than significant, or that the incremental impacts of a project are not cumulatively considerable pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15064(h)(1) because the project would result in only a de minimis contribution to a potentially significant cumulative impact caused by other projects. A de minimis contribution means that the environmental conditions would essentially be the same (no measurable or perceptible change) whether the proposed project is implemented.

The *Lead Agency* shall mark "LS-M" (less than significant impact with mitigation incorporated) for a particular threshold of significance if it determines that, with the incorporation of project revisions or mitigation measures, a project's effects would clearly be reduced to less than significant or that a project's contribution to a cumulative would be less than cumulatively considerable. See also State CEQA Guidelines Section 15064(h)(2).

The *Lead Agency* shall mark "PS" (potentially significant impact) for a particular threshold of significance if it determines that a project may have a potentially significant project impact that requires further analysis in an EIR including to determine whether the project could feasibly mitigated to a less than significant level, or that the project could have a substantial contribution to a potentially significant cumulative impact. Refer to State CEQA Guidelines Sections 15063(b), 15064, 15070, 15126, 15126.2, 15130 and 15355 for a complete discussion of this matter.

For every "N", "LS", "PS-M" or "PS" determination in the Initial Study Checklist, the *Lead Agency* shall provide a brief description of the environmental setting for each environmental issue and the factual basis for each impact determination with respect to both individual and cumulative impacts, and shall also provide appropriate references to the source(s) of such factual data. Examples of such information sources include, but are not limited to previously certified EIRs, general plans, zoning ordinances, initial study assessment guidelines, or other published documents in support of the determination being made. References to previously prepared document(s) shall, where appropriate, include a reference to the page or pages where the substantiating information appears. A source list shall be attached to the Initial Study, and other sources used or individuals contacted should be cited in the discussion. All responses must take account of the whole action involved, including on-site as well as off-site, project-level as well as cumulative, direct as well as indirect, and construction as well as operational impacts.

For every "PS-M" determination in the Initial Study Checklist, the *Lead Agency* shall also provide a description of the mitigation measure(s) that are proposed to be incorporated into the project in order to reduce an otherwise "PS" impact to "LS-M." This description shall also include a brief explanation of how each mitigation measure would reduce the identified impact to a less than significant level. The proposed mitigation measures must be *feasible* pursuant to State CEQA

Guidelines Sections 15126.4, 15364 and 15370, shall include sufficient information to comply with the mitigation or reporting requirements of Public Resources Code Section 21081.6 and State CEQA Guidelines Section 15097, and must be agreed to by the project applicant.

For every “PS” determination made in the Initial Study Checklist, the *Lead Agency* shall, if possible, specify what additional information would be required in order to enable the *Lead Agency* to make a “PS-M” determination. This additional information may subsequently take the form of an expanded and/or revised Initial Study (if time permits) or an EIR.

1.4.3 Mandatory Findings of Significance

Based on the responses to the environmental issues listed in the Initial Study Checklist and the discussion of effects and mitigation measures, the *Lead Agency* shall answer the questions in the Initial Study Checklist related to the Mandatory Findings of Significance. Refer to State CEQA Guidelines Section 15065.

1.4.4 Determination of Environmental Document

Based on responses to the questions related to the Mandatory Findings of Significance and the information supplied in the Initial Study Checklist, the *Lead Agency* shall determine which environmental document should be prepared. An EIR should be prepared when a “PS” determination has been made in the Mandatory Findings of Significance.

1.5 AMENDMENTS TO THE ISAGS

From time to time, amendments to the ISAGs may be necessary due to changes in state law, internal regulatory and policy changes, technological changes or administrative convenience. County agencies/departments and legislative bodies may request amendments to the ISAGs. All amendment requests shall be submitted to, and processed by, the Ventura County RMA Planning Division. All amendments must be consistent with CEQA and supported by *substantial evidence*.

The Ventura County RMA Planning Director or designee is authorized to make administrative amendments without Board of Supervisors approval for changes not involving the exercise of discretion such as updating assessment methodologies in keeping with the most recent regulatory requirements and revising or updating reference materials and technical or legal citations; and addressing grammatical and formatting issues. These administrative amendments shall be considered for approval at a public hearing before the Ventura County RMA Planning Director or designee. Decisions to make administrative amendments that are approved by the Ventura County RMA Planning Director or designee may be appealed to the Board of Supervisors pursuant to Section 9 of the Ventura County CEQA Implementation Manual.

In contrast, all amendments to the ISAGs involving the exercise of discretion must be approved by the Board of Supervisors.

Prior to adopting any amendments to the ISAGs, the Ventura County RMA Planning Division shall provide public notice in accordance with State CEQA Guidelines Section 15087(a)(1) and allow the public a minimum of 30 days to review and comment on the proposed amendment(s).

1.6 RESOURCES & REFERENCES

Source	Managing Agency/Organization	Online Access
Resources		
Ventura County CEQA Implementation Manual	Ventura County Resource Management Agency (RMA) Planning Division	PDF Website
Ventura County Initial Study Checklist Template	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	PDF Website
References		
California Environmental Quality Act	California Governor’s Office of Land Use and Climate Innovation, formerly Office of Planning and Research	Website
Ventura County General Plan (including Background Report and Final EIR)	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	Website

