

2. Agriculture and Forestry Resources

2.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This topic analyzes whether a project could result in loss of agricultural resources or conversion of agricultural resources to non-agricultural uses. It also considers whether a project could result in the loss of agricultural resources by allowing for non-agricultural land uses *adjacent* to agricultural resources. The analysis also evaluates the potential for conflicts between projects with existing zoning for agricultural use, *Williamson Act contracts*, and zoning for *forest land* or *timberland* production. Loss of forestland or conversion of *forest land* to non-forest use is also evaluated in this section.

2.1.1 Agricultural Soils

Soil that is utilized or suitable for agricultural crop production is considered an important, irreplaceable agricultural resource. This issue entails the direct loss of *Important Farmland* due to removal or permanent overcovering, and the indirect loss of *Important Farmland* resulting from the siting of non-agricultural land uses *adjacent* to *Important Farmland*. Examples of indirect losses of *Important Farmland* due to land use conflicts include, but are not limited to, decreased solar access due to building heights from nonagricultural uses, dust exposure from construction or ongoing operations, a reduction in available water resources for irrigation, or loss of an agricultural tree row or other changes that increase wind and water erosion.

2.1.2 Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

The California Department of Conservation established the *Important Farmland* Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) in 1982. Recent data (2016) from the California Department of Conservation FMMP inventoried over 555,000 acres of land in Ventura County, classifying over 118,000 acres of land as *Important Farmland*. Over 430,000 acres inventoried are in the unincorporated county, while the remaining 126,000 acres are part of incorporated cities. FMMP classifies land into five agricultural categories (*Prime Farmland*, *Farmland of Statewide Importance*, *Unique Farmland*, *Farmland of Local Importance*, and *Grazing Land*) and three non-agricultural categories (Urban and Built-up Land, Other Land, Water). Four of the five agricultural categories (excluding *Grazing Land*) are considered *Important Farmland*. The fifth category, *Grazing Land*, contains vegetation suitable for livestock grazing.

The distribution of *Important Farmland* in Ventura County is shown on Figure 9-2 in Section 9.1 of the Ventura County General Plan Background Report (“Background Report”) or as depicted on the Ventura County *Resource Management Agency Geographic Information System (RMA GIS) Viewer*. The FMMP classifies 118,508 acres of land in Ventura County as *Prime*, *Farmland of Statewide Importance*, *Unique*, or *Farmland of Local Importance*. Of that total, 35 percent or 40,976 acres, is designated *Prime Farmland*, as shown in Table 9-2.1 of Section 9.1 of the Background Report.

2.1.3 California Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act)

The Land Conservation Act (also known as Williamson Act) is implemented and regulated by the County through the County's entry into three contract types at the request of property owners: Land Conservation Act Contract (LCA), the Farmland Security Zone Area Contract (FSZA/LCA), and the Open Space Contract (OS/LCA) shown on Figure 9-10 in Section 9.3 of the Background Report. These contracts require preservation of agricultural and open space land and discourage its premature conversion to non-agricultural uses. Additional details on the three types of Land Conservation Act contracts and information on existing contracts within Ventura County are provided in Section 9.3 of the Background Report.

2.1.4 Land Use Compatibility

The County has numerous regulations in place to minimize conflicts between agricultural and urban land uses to ensure compatibility with, and the long-term productivity of, the agricultural sector, including the Save Open Space and Agriculture Resources (SOAR) initiative measure, the Guidelines for Orderly Development, the Land Conservation Act program, greenbelt agreements with Ventura County cities, the Ventura County Agricultural/Urban Buffer Policy, the Ventura County Right-to-Farm Ordinance, and the Ventura County Hillside Erosion Control Ordinance. In addition, the Ventura County General Plan Agriculture Element includes goals and policies, and the County's zoning ordinances contain zoning designations and land use rules, that also contain various compatibility protections.

The siting of non-agricultural land uses *adjacent* to *Important Farmland* can result in indirect losses of agricultural resources due to land use conflicts including, but not necessarily limited to, decreased solar access due to building heights from nonagricultural uses, dust exposure from construction or ongoing operations, and a reduction in available water resources for irrigation. Incompatibility issues can also result from the effect of agricultural operations on *adjacent*, non-agricultural land uses, such as the application of *Restricted Materials*.

2.1.5 Forest & Timberlands

The Timberland Productivity Act of 1982 requires all counties and cities in California with productive private *timberland* to establish Timberland Production Zones for the purpose of discouraging the premature conversion of *timberland* to other uses (Government Code Section 51100 *et seq.*). The general plan must reflect the distribution of existing Timberland Production Zones and have a land use category that provides for timber production.

The Ventura County Non-Coastal Zoning Ordinance regulates forest resources through Section 8104-6.2. This ordinance provision defines the purposes of the Timber-Preserve zone as follows: to maintain the optimum amount of the limited supply of *timberland* so as to ensure its current and continued availability for the growing and harvesting of timber, and compatible uses; to discourage premature or unnecessary conversion of *timberland* to urban area designations and other uses; and to encourage investment in *timberlands* based on reasonable expectation of harvest.

Ventura County does not contain land which produces timber commercially for eventual use as lumber or pulp; however, six parcels either currently or formerly used for Christmas tree farming are zoned Timberland Preserve (T-P) pursuant to the provisions of the Timberland Preserve Zone of the Ventura County Non-Coastal Zoning Ordinance.

2.2 THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The determination of significance shall be made on a case-by-case basis and evaluated using the following thresholds of significance as specified below.

AGR-1 A project may have a significant impact if it would result in the loss of *Important Farmland* exceeding the thresholds set forth in Table 2-1 below.

Table 2-1. Important Farmland Acreage Loss Thresholds

General Plan Land Use Designation	Important Farmland Category	Acres Lost
Agricultural	Prime/Statewide	5
	Unique	10
	Local	15
Open Space/Rural	Prime/Statewide	10
	Unique	15
	Local	20
All Other Land Use Designations	Prime/Statewide	20
	Unique	30
	Local	40

AGR-2 A project may have a significant impact on agricultural resources based on land use incompatibility if it is located closer than the radius distances set forth below in Table 2-2.

Table 2-2. Land Use Incompatibility Thresholds for Non-Agricultural Projects

Proposed Project	Distance from Non-Agricultural Structure or Use to Important Farmland Within the Applicable Radius Distance
Without Vegetative Screening	300 feet
With Vegetative Screening	150 feet
New K-12 School	1,320 feet

AGR-3 A project may have a significant impact if it would a) conflict with an existing *Williamson Act Contract* and b) result in a significant adverse environmental effect due to that conflict.

AGR-4 A project may have a significant impact if it would involve changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in the loss of *forest land*, conversion of *forest land* to non-forest use, or causes the rezoning of *forest land*, *timberland*, or *timberland* zoned T-P for non-forest use.

2.3 IMPACT ANALYSIS

Guidance on addressing the questions from the Initial Study Checklist is provided below. In order to determine whether project impacts exceed or meet the criteria of the thresholds of significance in Section 2.2, the level of impact shall be evaluated based on the appropriate assessment methodologies as outlined below.

- (a) *Would the project result in the loss of Important Farmland exceeding the thresholds set forth in Threshold No. AGR-1?*

The *Lead Agency* shall: 1) review the project materials to determine the area of agricultural land that would be directly or indirectly lost due to project implementation (e.g., from buildings, parking areas, driveways, etc.), 2) review the Land Use Maps and *Important Farmland* Maps in the Ventura County General Plan and on *RMA GIS Viewer*, and 3) determine whether the project meets or exceeds the *Important Farmland* acreage loss thresholds set forth in Table 2-1 above.

The Department of Agriculture/Weights & Measures shall be consulted in determining project significance and potential mitigation measures, if necessary. Projects that would result in loss of *Important Farmland* in exceedance of the acreage loss thresholds set forth in Table 2-1 are considered to have a potentially significant impact.

Cumulative Impact Analysis

Pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines section 15183, projects that are consistent with the development density established by the County's existing General Plan policies or applicable zoning ordinance for which an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) was certified do not require additional environmental review, except as might be necessary to examine whether there are project-specific significant effects that are peculiar to the project or its site. This principle is relevant to the County's assessment of cumulative loss of *Important Farmland*, which was addressed in the certified EIR for the Ventura County General Plan ("General Plan EIR"). The General Plan EIR concluded that the cumulative impacts to loss of *Important Farmland* resulting from the development density established by the Ventura County General Plan was significant and unavoidable and addressed such cumulative impacts in a Statement of Overriding Considerations and adopted mitigation measures. Such cumulative impacts to *Important Farmland* resulting from implementation of the General Plan are not required to be re-studied. Therefore, if a project is consistent with the development density established by the Ventura County General Plan or zoning ordinances for which the General Plan EIR or other applicable EIR was certified, additional cumulative impact analysis is not required for the loss of *Important Farmland*. However, to the extent that such consistency does not exist (for instance, if a project would amend the Ventura County General Plan's or zoning ordinance's development density-related provisions in a manner that has not been addressed in a certified EIR), then cumulative impact analysis is required.

Impact Mitigation

Ventura County General Plan Policy AG-1.8 requires that projects located on land identified as *Important Farmland* shall be conditioned to avoid direct loss of *Important Farmland* to the extent *feasible*.

Projects that will result in loss of *Important Farmland* in exceedance of the acreage loss thresholds set forth in Table 2-1 shall comply with the below-stated requirements for an *agricultural conservation easement* consistent with Ventura County General Plan Program AG-O, unless an

alternate mitigation measure is imposed that will result in the physical creation, restoration or replacement of a quantity and quality of offsite *Important Farmland* that is equivalent to the *Important Farmland* being lost as a result of the project. “Offsite” means an area that is outside of the project’s permit boundaries if applicable and would not be disturbed by the project with respect to agricultural soils or production.

Projects that would result in loss of *Important Farmland* in exceedance of the acreage loss thresholds set forth in Table 2-1 shall ensure the permanent protection of offsite farmland of equal quality at a 1:1 ratio (acres preserved: acres converted) through the establishment of an offsite *agricultural conservation easement*, unless the alternative mitigation described above is imposed to result in the physical creation, restoration or replacement of *Important Farmland* lost as a result of the project. Areas that are outside the identified permit boundaries but are on the same property as the project may be considered for an offsite *agricultural conservation easement*, where *feasible*. Discretionary projects that develop and provide housing for use by farmworkers and their families are not subject to this *agricultural conservation easement* requirement.

Agricultural Conservation Easement Mitigation

The project applicant shall be required to prepare and submit a report for the review and approval of the Ventura County Resource Management Agency (RMA) Planning Division, in consultation with the Ventura County Department of Agriculture/Weights & Measures. The report shall identify a minimum of one proposed potential mitigation site suitable for ensuring the permanent protection of offsite farmland of equal quality at a 1:1 ratio (acres preserved: acres converted) through the establishment of one or more offsite *agricultural conservation easements*. The preservation of more than one offsite *agricultural conservation easement* may be considered in order to meet the required number of acres. The applicant shall also deposit funds with the County to contract with a qualified third-party agricultural economic consultant to review and advise the Ventura County RMA Planning Division and Ventura County Department of Agriculture/Weights & Measures regarding the establishment and implementation of the *agricultural conservation easement(s)*. The contents of the report shall be determined, reviewed, and approved by the Ventura County RMA Planning Division in consultant with the Ventura County Department of Agriculture/Weights & Measures (hereafter referred to as the “reviewing agencies”), and shall include information necessary for the reviewing agencies and a qualified entity responsible for holding the *agricultural conservation easement* (e.g., a land trust organization) to determine the viability of the proposed mitigation site(s) for the establishment of a permanent *agricultural conservation easement*.

Among the factors necessary for approval by the reviewing agencies, the proposed mitigation site(s) shall be located in the unincorporated area of Ventura County, must not already have permanent protection, must be equivalent to or greater than the type of *Important Farmland* (e.g., *Unique Farmland*) that would be converted by the project, and must be of sufficient size to be viable for long-term farming use as determined by the County. Among other terms that may be required by the reviewing agencies in consultation with the qualified entity, the terms of an *agricultural conservation easement* shall include a requirement that it run with the land. There must also be a provision for annual monitoring by the qualified entity or its representative to ensure adherence to the terms of the agricultural conversation easement. Project applicants are responsible for all costs incurred by the County and the qualified entity to successfully implement the report. Proof of the successful establishment of an *agricultural conservation easement* shall be provided to the Ventura County RMA Planning Division prior to issuance of a zoning clearance for the inauguration of the project.

(b) Would the project be located closer than the radius distances set forth in Threshold AGR-2?

Any project not defined as Agriculture or Agricultural Operations in the County's applicable zoning ordinance that is located within the applicable radius distance to *Important Farmland* set forth in Threshold AGR-2 will be evaluated for impacts to the *Important Farmland* based upon land use compatibility.

The *Lead Agency* shall consult with the Ventura County RMA Planning Division and the Ventura County Department of Agriculture/Weights & Measures to review the *Important Farmland* Inventory layer on *RMA GIS Viewer* to determine whether there is *Important Farmland* within the vicinity of the project. The *Lead Agency* shall determine, in consultation with the Ventura County RMA Planning Division and Ventura County Department of Agriculture/Weights & Measures, whether the proposed project structures or uses are within the applicable radius distances as specified in Table 2-2. The radius distance shall be measured from the edge of the proposed structure or use as illustrated in Appendix 2A.

The *Lead Agency* shall also consider the following additional issues when evaluating whether any incompatible land use is created by non-agricultural projects near *Important Farmland*: whether dust from construction or ongoing operations will occur and whether the project type will deplete a water source intended for agricultural irrigation or result in contaminated drainage.

A project that has a potentially significant impact based upon proximity to *Important Farmland* pursuant to Table 2-2 may be considered to have a less than significant impact if one or more of the factors set forth in Table 2-3 exist. However, depending upon the specific circumstances, mitigation may be required to avoid a significant impact. The factors in Table 2-3 do not apply to projects that involve new K-12 schools. The Ventura County Department of Agriculture/Weights & Measures shall be consulted in determining impact significance and potential mitigation measures, if necessary.

Table 2-3. Factors That May Establish a Less Than Significant Impact Based Upon Incompatibility

Factors
The new use is a single-family dwelling on a parcel with AE, OS, RA, RE, COS, CA, or CR zoned land.
Existing topography eliminates or reduces land use conflicts.
There is mature vegetative screening on the project site at the boundary.
There is an offsite right of way or easement at the boundary that precludes farming.
There are offsite physical features at the boundary area that preclude farming.
Individuals are not continuously present in the proposed structures or use areas.
The non-agricultural use is a farmworker or other housing complex with a functional notification and response plan for the use of <i>Restricted Materials</i> on or off-site within 300 ft of the housing.
The non-agricultural use could easily be temporarily closed to allow scheduled <i>Restricted Materials</i> applications by an <i>adjacent</i> farmer.
The non-agricultural use is a continuing industrial use with no substantial changes in existing land use incompatibility.

Impact Mitigation

If the project is within any of the applicable threshold distance(s) set forth in Table 2-2, and none of the factors listed in Table 2-3 exist, the project shall be considered to have a potentially significant impact.

If the project is within any of the applicable threshold distance(s) set forth in Table 2-2 but at least one of the factors listed in Table 2-3 exists, the project may be considered to have a less than significant impact. However, depending upon the specific circumstances, mitigation may be required to avoid a potentially significant impact.

For most projects within the applicable threshold distance(s) set forth in Table 2-2 where dust from construction or ongoing operations will occur, a mitigation measure such as the following should be imposed:

Activities must be halted during high winds to prevent dust from blowing off-site onto Important Farmland. Any operations that create dust, such as vehicles driven on unpaved areas or open storage, require periodic watering to prevent dust.

- (c) *Would the project 1) conflict with an existing Williamson Act Contract and 2) result in a significant adverse environmental effect due to that conflict?*

Note that the cancellation of a Williamson Act Contract is a non-exempt discretionary action that is normally subject to CEQA review.

The Lead Agency, in consultation with the Ventura County RMA Planning Division, shall review the Land Conservation Act layer in County View and RMA GIS Viewer to determine whether the project site is subject to an effective Williamson Act Contract. The project may result in a potentially significant impact due to a conflict with an existing Williamson Act Contract at the project site. Conflicts may include, but are not limited to, uses that are inconsistent with the Ventura County Land Conservation Act Guidelines or material breach of the contract due to project implementation. Government Code Section 51250(b) states circumstances constituting a material breach of a Williamson Act Contract under the statute.

- (d) *Would the project involve changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in the loss of forest land, conversion of forest land to non-forest use, or causes the rezoning of forest land, timberland, or timberland zoned T-P for non-forest use?*

The Lead Agency, in consultation with the Ventura County RMA Planning Division, shall evaluate whether the project would cause changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of forest land to non-forest use. In the event the Ventura County RMA Planning Division determines that the project would cause such changes in the existing environment, the Ventura County RMA Planning Division shall evaluate potential mitigation measures to reduce such potentially significant impacts. The Ventura County RMA Planning Division shall also determine if the project is located on land zoned Timberland Preserve (T-P). If so, the Ventura County RMA Planning Division shall evaluate whether the project results in the loss of forest land or converts forest land to non-forest use. The Ventura County RMA Planning Division shall also evaluate whether the project conflicts with existing zoning or causes the rezoning of land zoned T-P. In the event the project results in the loss or conversion of forest land, or conflicts with existing zoning or causes the rezoning of land zoned T-P, the Ventura County RMA Planning Division shall evaluate potential mitigation measures to reduce potentially significant impacts.

2.4 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 Assessment Guidelines, Introduction	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	PDF Website
Ventura County Initial Study Checklist Template	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	PDF Website
References		
County View	Ventura County Geographic Information Systems	Website
Environmental Impact Report for the Ventura County General Plan	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	Website
Farmland Mapping & Monitoring Program	California Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resource Protection	Website
Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act) Statewide Program	California Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resource Protection	Website
Ventura County Agricultural/Urban Buffer Policy	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	PDF Website
Ventura County General Plan, Agriculture Element	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	PDF Website
Ventura County General Plan Background Report, Chapter 9	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	PDF Website
Ventura County General Plan, Guidelines for Orderly Development	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	PDF
Ventura County General Plan, SOAR Initiative	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	PDF
Ventura County Land Conservation Act Program	Ventura County RMA Planning Division; Ventura County Department of Agriculture/Weights & Measures	Website
Ventura County Non-Coastal Zoning Ordinance	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	PDF Website
Ventura County Right-to-Farm Ordinance	Ventura County RMA Planning Division	Website
Ventura County RMA Geographic Information Systems Viewer	Ventura County Information Technology Services	Website

APPENDIX 2A

Radius Distance of Non-Agricultural Projects

See Figure 2-1 below for an example proposed project without vegetative screening and *Important Farmland* within the vicinity of the project. In this example, a 300-foot radius distance is used (per Table 2-2) to measure the distance between the use and *Important Farmland*. The purpose of this figure is to illustrate the measurement of the radius distance. The level of impact, as well as any mitigation measures if deemed necessary, shall be evaluated based on the considerations posed by the appropriate assessment methodologies outlined in the Initial Study Assessment Guidelines.

Figure 2-1. Distance from Proposed Non-Agricultural Structure or Use to Important Farmland Within the Applicable Radius Distance

