

4.5 AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

4.5.1 Introduction and Background

This section discusses the Plan's and the alternatives' impacts on agricultural resources.¹ In the Plan Area, the center of agricultural development has historically been centered in the Indio/Coachella area, although into the mid-20th Century large-scale date and citrus cultivation extended as far northwest as present-day Cathedral City and Rancho Mirage. Today, prime agricultural lands are located in the eastern valley, generally extending from Washington Street southeast to the Salton Sea. For a complete description of existing conditions related to agriculture, see Section 3.6. For purposes of analysis in this EIR/EIS, the definition for the term "agriculture" may come from a variety of sources. Those definitions as defined by the California Department of Conservation are outlined in Section 3.0; however, in some instances agricultural lands were identified based on local jurisdictions' land use plans or were identified as such due to existing land uses.

4.5.2 Thresholds of Significance/Criteria for Determining Significance for CEQA Analysis

The Plan and the Alternatives would have a significant effect on agricultural resources if they:

- (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.
- (b) Conflict with actively cultivated farmlands, a Williamson Act contract or existing zoning for agricultural uses.
- (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.

4.5.3 Project Impacts to Agricultural Resources

Proposed Action/Preferred Alternative

The Plan does not require or impose any new or unusual management obligation on cultivation or other agricultural activity. The Plan does include species/community-specific avoidance, minimization and mitigation measures that further the goals of the Plan. The MSHCP does not

¹ Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, Division of Land Resources Protection, California Department of Conservation, 2001. These resources are defined as "prime farmland," "farmland of state-wide importance," "unique farmland," "farmland of local importance," and "grazing land."

provide Take Authorization for nor control agriculture. Further, “development” is defined in the MSHCP as, “The uses to which land shall be put, including construction of buildings, structures, infrastructure and all associated alterations of the land.” Development refers to new land disturbances and conversions. Agricultural activities are not subject to the MSHCP. Agricultural activities including cultivation, processing, storage, equipment maintenance and other activities associated with agriculture would not be subject to MSHCP requirements unless a permit or entitlement were required from a Permittee.

The Plan Land Use Adjacency Guidelines address drainage, toxic materials, lighting, noise, invasive plants, barriers and land disturbance (grading/development) on land to be developed. These Guidelines do not apply to agricultural activities as these are not subject to the MSHCP; nor do agricultural activities receive Take Authorization through the MSHCP. Additionally, the Plan does identify the use of agricultural pesticides but does not prescribe any particular use regime. Neither does the Plan change the legal or regulatory environment in which agricultural activities, including the application of agri-chemicals, are to be conducted in the Plan Area.

In the Proposed Action/Preferred Alternative, approximately 1,120 acres of farmland near the Salton Sea are included in the Conservation Area. This could constitute a maximum potential loss of 1.4% of agricultural lands in the Plan Area. These lands carry a heavy load of mineral salts from decades of on-going evaporation of irrigation water, and about one-half are in cultivation. The lands in this area, including the subject 1,120 acres, are designated as "Farmland of Local Importance" by the California Department of Conservation.² The Plan includes only approximately 710 acres of currently undisturbed, state-designated farmlands in conservation. Of these designated “Prime” and “Statewide Importance” lands, only about 70 acres have the potential for cultivation.

No other active farmlands are included in the Plan Conservation Areas. Approximately 160 acres of “Prime Farmland” (without access to irrigation water) is mapped within the existing bounds of the CV Fringe-toed Lizard Preserve, and adoption of the Plan does not change the circumstances of these lands. An additional 480+/- acres of state-designated “Unique Farmland” is located within the East Indio Hills Conservation Area and is currently entitled for sand and gravel surface mining, with subsequent dedication to conservation upon conclusion of mining and reclamation activities. It should be noted that over the past decade, extensive areas of farmlands designated “Prime” and “Statewide Importance”, including lands previously in active agriculture and with access to irrigation water, have been converted to a variety of urban uses. Based upon the limited impact to active agricultural lands and state-identified farmlands with the potential for conversion to agricultural use, the Plan will have a less than significant impact on these lands.

² Ibid.

The Alternative also includes designated agricultural lands already within the boundaries of the Coachella Valley Preserve of the fringe-toed lizard, immediately west of Washington Street and north of I-10. Other agricultural soils in this area have been converted into or are planned for Development. No other active or cultivatable land is impacted by the implementation of this Alternative. Therefore, given the limited impact on marginal farmlands, the alternative would not significantly conflict with or result in conversion of designated or actively cultivated important farmland. Additionally, this Alternative would not impact lands under Williamson Act contract. The subject lands are designated "Agriculture" on the Riverside County General Plan (Eastern Coachella Valley Area Plan). It is important to note that adoption of the MSHCP would not compel owners to sell the subject lands, cease agricultural or other otherwise legal activities, nor would the placement of these lands within a Conservation Area affect existing or future Williamson Act contracts.

Important farmlands in the Coachella Valley, as determined by the California Department of Conservation, are shown on *Exhibit 4-4*.

Consistency with General Plan Policies

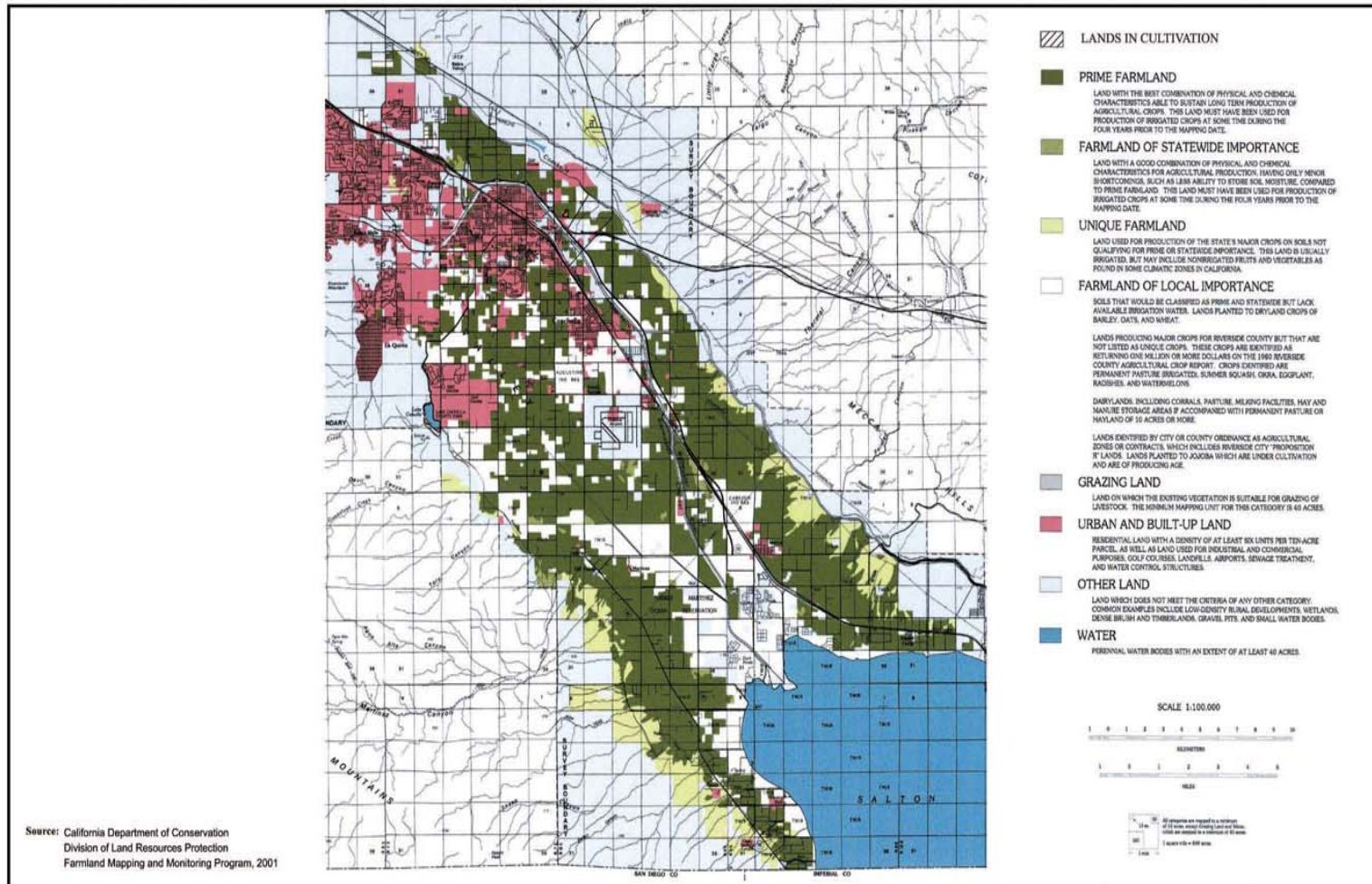
The County General Plan policies recognize the importance of retaining agricultural lands and activities, but states that protection should be focused on lands “where agricultural activity can be sustained at an operational level” (LU 16.1). As noted above, essentially all of the Plan area agricultural lands (GP or state designated, and lands in active cultivation) are lower value, are entitled for other uses (conservation, mining) or lack access to irrigation water.

Furthermore, conversion of agricultural lands to urban use generally requires an amendment to the applicable General Plan, as well as discretionary actions by the local jurisdiction. Conversion of agriculture to urban use would need to be addressed by additional environmental review. Thus, although implementation of the MSHCP Plan may lead to a pattern of future development different from that which may occur in the absence of the Plan, it is not necessarily the case that there will be a widespread urbanization of agricultural lands. Such conversion, if it does occur, is subject to public policy decisions and market factors which are not directly associated with the Plan.

Consistency with County Right-to-Farm Ordinance

The County’s Right-to-Farm Ordinance (Ordinance 625.1) is intended to preclude agricultural lands from being declared a nuisance if it has been in operation for more than three years and has not been declared a nuisance during that time. The proposed Plan does not identify agriculture as a nuisance, but does recognize that agriculture (and other land uses) does have a potential for impacting vegetation and wildlife beyond the bounds of agricultural activity. As demonstrated,

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Coachella Valley MSHCP
Important Farmlands
Coachella Valley



Exhibit
4-4

the Plan does not restrict existing agricultural uses, nor does it prohibit or unreasonably restrict activities essential to irrigation, pest control, equipment operation, cultivation or the raising of farm animals. The Plan does not affect activities, which as stated in the County Ordinance 625.1, are conducted in a manner consistent with proper and accepted customs and standards.

Indirect Impacts to Agricultural Economy and Industry

As discussed above, the MSHCP has a very limited and less than significant impact on the agricultural industry, and thus on the ability for this industry to generate jobs. The agricultural industry is being affected by a wide range of changing circumstances, including relatively high costs of production and falling competitiveness compared to producers elsewhere. The implementation of the MSHCP will not have a significant effect on the agricultural industry or associated employment either directly, indirectly or cumulatively. Additionally, the assembly of the Reserve System will be accomplished through the acquisition of conservation lands from willing sellers. No owners of agricultural or other lands will be compelled to sell their lands.

Indirect Impacts to Biological Resources

One species, burrowing owl, frequently occurs in agricultural areas, and is especially found in and around agricultural drains and canals. The species is also found in and around drainage berms and flood control levees. Recognizing these opportunities to facilitate burrowing owl conservation in the Plan area, the CVCC, on behalf of three public agency Permittees (Riverside County Flood Control, CVWD and IID), will inventory owl locations along levees, berms, dikes and similar structures under the management responsibility of these Permittees. Based upon these surveys and in consideration of O&M requirements associated with these facilities, each agency shall prepare an O&M management manual, which provides for the protection of the owl to the greatest extent feasible (see Plan Section 4.4). However, this will not impact or stop agricultural operations.

In addition, most of the edge boundaries between agricultural lands and proposed Conservation Areas on the eastern and western boundaries of the valley floor include substantial buffers, including major flood protection dikes and levees on the west valley and topography and flood protection levees on the east. These circumstances further limit the potential for conflicts between agriculture and the MSHCP.

The MSHCP provides a variety of measures for the conservation of burrowing owl and desert pupfish in the Conservation Areas where these species occur. These measures include acquisition of habitat from willing sellers; required management measures pertaining to CVWD, and for the burrowing owl, a requirement that CVCC inventory owl locations along levees,

berms, dikes, and similar structures under the management responsibility of the Permittees. The Plan also provides for the installation of artificial owl burrows as an Adaptive Management measure, if monitoring deems that such activities are warranted to bolster owl populations or to address a loss of nests or habitat elsewhere in the Plan area. The construction of artificial burrows would occur on Reserve Lands. There is no requirement for such burrows to be established on private agricultural lands, although such measures could be carried out on a voluntary basis.

The Plan also includes conservation goals for the desert pupfish, which is in part associated with the lower CV Stormwater Channel and delta areas, as well as agricultural drains in this area where the fish occurs or may occur. Pupfish “refugia” are also located in Dos Palmas and in the Coachella Preserve in Thousand Palms. Plan goals include the protection of ecological processes, including agriculture-related hydrologic processes in drains and the CVSD. The Plan provides that a program of biological monitoring and Adapted Management actions will be developed by CVWD within one year of Plan approval, to ensure persistence of pupfish populations in the agricultural drains. However, as with the burrowing owl, this program will not impact agricultural operations.

Exhibit 4-4a shows agricultural land in the Conservation Areas.

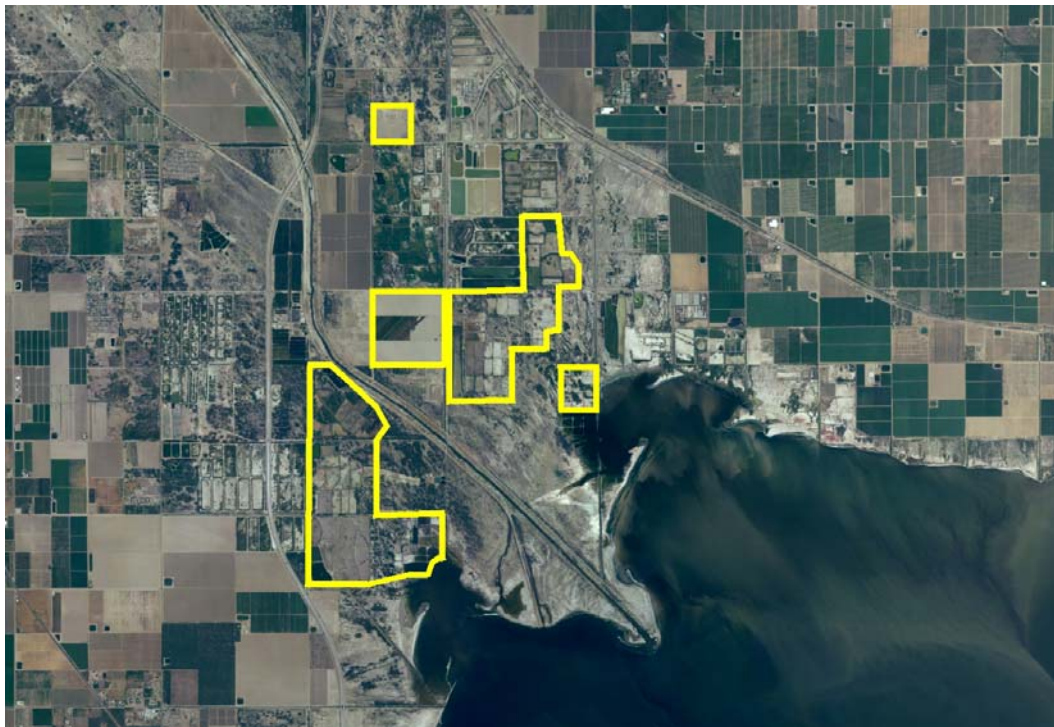


Exhibit 4-4a: Agricultural Land in the Conservation Areas
Proposed Action/Preferred Alternative

Public Lands Alternative

No new areas would be acquired for Plan purposes under this Alternative. Therefore, the Alternative would not significantly conflict with designated or actively cultivated important farmland, nor would it affect lands under Williamson Act contract.

Core Habitat with Ecological Processes Alternative

This Alternative would entail less overall acquisition than the Preferred Alternative; however, the same agricultural lands would be affected. The impacts of this Alternative would be, therefore, the same as those under the Preferred Alternative.

Enhanced Conservation Alternative

This Alternative would result in a substantial increase in lands within a Conservation Area beyond that of any of the other Alternatives. Additional lands would be added to a variety of broadly distributed Conservation Areas. This Alternative would result in direct impacts to existing agricultural activities on 700± acres located both east and west of Dillon Road and north of I-10 and designated as "Unique Farmland". These lands are designated "Agriculture" in the Riverside County General Plan (Western Coachella Valley Area Plan). The placement of these lands in a Conservation Area could be a significant impact for CEQA analysis purposes. It is important to note that the adoption of this MSHCP alternative would not compel owners to sell the subject lands, cease agricultural or other otherwise legal activities, nor would the placement of these lands within a Conservation Area affect existing or future Williamson Act contracts.

No Action/No Project Alternative

The No Action/ No Project Alternative would preclude the adoption and implementation of a multiple species habitat conservation plan. Based upon the essential "grandfathered" status of existing agricultural activity in the Plan Area, this alternative would not affect agriculture or agricultural lands.

Table 4-4 summarizes impacts of the alternatives on agricultural resources.

TABLE 4-4
Agricultural Resources Summary of Impact by Alternative

Alternative	Potential Adverse Impacts to Agricultural Resources
Proposed Action/Preferred Alternative	No
Public Lands Alternative	No
Core Habitat With Ecological Processes Alternative	No
Enhanced Conservation Alternative	Yes
No Project/No Action Alternative	No

4.5.4 Agriculture-Related Mitigation Measures for all Alternatives

For the Proposed Action/Preferred Alternative and all the other Alternatives except the Enhanced Conservation Alternative, no mitigation is required because potential impacts on agricultural resources are less than significant. The Enhanced Conservation Alternative results in indirect impacts to existing agricultural activities on 700± acres located both east and west of Dillon Road and north of I-10 and designated as "Unique Farmland". No direct impacts would result given that neither existing agricultural activity nor Williamson Act contracts would be affected. No feasible mitigation measures have been identified.

4.5.5 Levels of Significance after Mitigation for CEQA Analysis

For the Proposed Action/Preferred Alternative and all the other alternatives, except the Enhanced Conservation Alternative, the potential impacts to agricultural lands are less than significant. Indirect impacts for the Enhanced Conservation Alternative are potentially significant for CEQA analysis purposes and no feasible mitigation measures have been identified.