

3.2 Agriculture and Forest Resources

This section identifies and evaluates issues related to agriculture and forest resources in the context of the proposed project. It includes a description of existing land use conditions in relation to agriculture and forestry resources and an evaluation of potential impacts associated with implementation of the proposed project. Cumulative impacts are determined with consideration of projected development in the area.

3.2.1 Environmental Setting

Existing Conditions

Agricultural Setting

The project site and surrounding vicinity is primarily undeveloped, vacant land. The project site has an Orange County General Plan Land Use designation as Open Space (5), and is currently zoned as General Agriculture (A1). Although the project site is zoned as General Agriculture (A1), no agricultural uses or resources exist on or adjacent to the project site. California Department of Conservation's (DOC's) Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) monitors the quantity and quality of farmland in the state and produces maps and statistical data on agricultural resources. The project site is not located in an area classified as Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland) by the FMMP (DOC, 2013).

The California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (commonly referred to as the Williamson Act) serves to preserve open spaces and agricultural land. It discourages urban sprawl and prevents landowners from developing their property for the greater land value of commercial and/or residential uses. The project site does not contain or adjacent to any lands that are subject to Williamson Act contracts, either active or in nonrenewal. The nearest land parcel under active Williamson Act contracts is located 5.9 miles northwest of the project site (APN 290-160-014).

Forest Setting

The project site is located on private land that is adjacent to areas within the southeastern portion of Cleveland National Forest, within the Santa Ana Mountains. Cleveland National Forest is a part of the national system of forest reservations, under the jurisdiction of U. S. Forest Service (USFS) and consists of 460,000 acres, mostly of chaparral, with a few riparian areas.

Timber production is historically scarce in Southern California, where the mountain vegetation is primarily brush with little timber (Sakarias, 1975). However, oak woodlands cover about 23,000 acres of the Cleveland National Forest. Several types of oak woodland are found on the forest; dominant species include coast live oak, black oak, and Engelmann oak (GORP, 2010).

The forest is divided into three Ranger Districts for administrative purposes: the Descanso District, occupying a large part of the San Diego County mountain area south of Palomar Mountain and north of the Mexican border; the Palomar District, consisting of Palomar Mountain and adjacent areas; and the Trabuco Ranger District, encompassing the Santa Ana Mountains, northeast of San Juan Capistrano in Orange, Riverside, and San Diego Counties. The project site

is located within the Trabuco Ranger District. Existing activity in the Trabuco Ranger District includes primarily hiking, biking, and horseback riding.

The forest is divided into a series of geographical units that are referred to as “places.” There are 11 places identified for the Cleveland National Forest: Aguanga, Elsinore, Laguna, Morena, Palomar, Pine Creek, San Dieguito/Black Mountain, San Mateo, Silverado, Sweetwater, and Upper San Diego River. The project site is also located within Elsinore Place (46,729 acres), as defined in the Cleveland National Forest Land Management Plan (USFS, 2005). This includes the east-facing slopes of the Santa Ana Mountains, and is almost entirely surrounded by urban development. Elsinore Place contains 497 acres of San Mateo Wilderness (existing wilderness) and 11 acres of Chiquito Basin (special interest area). The project site is not located within any special designated areas of existing wilderness or within any special interest areas.

The project site is not zoned as forest land (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 1220(g)), timberland (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 4526), or timberland zoned Timberland Production (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 51104 (g)). None of the lands within or adjacent to the project site are used for timber harvesting.

Regulatory Setting

Public Resources Code

The California Public Resource Code defines Forest Land, Timber Land, and Timber Land Production Zones as follows:

Forest Land (12220 G): Land that can support 10-percent native tree cover of any species, including: hardwoods, under natural conditions, and that allows for management of one or more forest resources, including timber, aesthetics, fish and wildlife, biodiversity, water quality, recreation, and other public benefits.

Timber Land (4526): Land, other than land owned by the Federal government and land designated by the Board as experimental forest land, which is available for, and capable of, growing a crop of trees of any commercial species used to produce lumber and other forest products, including Christmas trees. Commercial species shall be determined by the Board on a District basis after consultation with the District committees and others.

Timber Land Production Zone (51104 G): Timber Land Production Zone (TPZ) are areas which have been zoned and is devoted to and uses for growing and harvesting timber, or for growing and harvesting timber and compatible uses.

Orange County General Plan Resources Element Natural Resources Component

The Orange County General Plan Resources Element Natural Resources Component contains the following goals and objectives that are relevant to the proposed project:

Goal 1: Protect wildlife and vegetation resources and promote development that preserves these resources.

Objective 1.1: To prevent the elimination of significant wildlife and vegetation through resource inventory and management strategies.

Goal 3: Manage and utilize wisely the County's landform resources.

Objective 3.1: To minimize to the extent feasible the disruption of significant natural landforms in Orange County.

3.2.2 Thresholds of Significance

The *CEQA Guidelines* Appendix G provides guidance for assessing the significance of potential environmental impacts. Relative to agricultural and forest resources, a project could have a significant effect on the environment if it would:

- Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract; or
- Result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use.

Potential impacts to agricultural resources were examined in the Notice of Preparations/Initial Studies (see Appendices A1 and A2 of this EIR). It was determined that the proposed project would not 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 (FMMP) of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use. The Initial Study also determined that the proposed project would not conflict with existing zoning, 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)). Additionally, the proposed project would not 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 forest land to non-forest use. Therefore, no additional analysis of these significance criteria is addressed in this EIR.

3.2.3 Methodology

No existing land used for agricultural purposes is located onsite or in the vicinity of the project. The agricultural and forest resource impact analysis is based upon zoning in and around the project site, and relevant federal, state, and local regulations. Potential impacts to forestry resources are based on information from the USFS, comparing existing settings and uses and those uses anticipated from the proposed project and the potential loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use.

3.2.4 Project Impacts

Construction and operation of the proposed project would result in physical changes to the project area. Potential impacts related to agriculture and forestry resources are described below.

Impact 3.2-1: Would the project conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract?

No Impact. The project site is zoned General Agricultural (A1), which allows residential development at a maximum density of 0.25 dwelling unit per acre (or four acres per dwelling unit), and other low intensity uses that have a primarily open space character. There are no existing agricultural uses on the site or in the project vicinity. In addition, the project site also does not contain any lands that are subject to Williamson Act contracts, either active or in nonrenewal.

The project proposes to rezone land from General Agriculture (A1) to Agricultural Residential (AR) zoning. Section 7-9-59.1 of the County's Zoning Code states that the AR zone is to provide for single-family residential neighborhoods in conjunction with agricultural and outdoor recreational uses. Consistent with the proposed zoning, the project would provide agricultural resources, in the form of vineyards, as part of the fuel modification and landscaping features. Grapes grown onsite would be maintained, harvested, and sold by the project's Homeowner's Association (HOA), which is consistent with the intent of both the existing and proposed agricultural zoning classification. Overall, the project would provide agricultural production to an area where none currently exists. Therefore, the project would not conflict with agricultural zoning and impacts related to agriculture would not occur.

Impact 3.2-2: Would the project result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use?

No Impact. The project site is not zoned as forest land (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 1220(g)), timberland (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 4526), or timberland zoned Timberland Production (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 51104 (g)). None of the lands within the project site are used for timber harvesting. However, a parcel that is part of the Cleveland National Forest separates Phase 1 (south parcel) and Phase 2 (north parcel). In addition, Cleveland National Forest lands are located to the north of Phase 2 (north parcel), to the south of Phase 1 (south parcel), and to the west of both Phase 1 (south parcel) and Phase 2 (north parcel).

The proposed project would not provide any improvements or construction to any lands within the Cleveland National Forest. All of the project improvements would be located on private lands, or within a public right-of-way, such as the Ortega Highway and Long Canyon Road rights-of-way. The proposed project would cluster development (Project Design Feature PDF-2) and concentrate open space on the western and northern portions of the project site to create a buffer between the proposed residential uses and the existing Cleveland National Forest lands. In addition, as included by Project Design Feature PDF-20, best management practices would be incorporated into the project to ensure that indirect impacts (i.e., edge effects) are avoided or minimized to the maximum extent possible. Lighting would be pointed away from offsite areas and ambient light levels would be minimized to the maximum extent practicable, which would reduce edge effects related to the proposed residential development. Furthermore, as included by Project Design Feature PDF-1, open space accounts for 414.6 acres or approximately 71 percent of the project site, which would be offered for dedication to the U.S. Forest Service. With the dedication of this 414.6 acres that is currently private land, the existing forestland in the project

area would be increased, which is a benefit of the proposed project. Thus, the proposed project would not result in the loss or conversion of forest land to non-forest use; conversely the project would provide for additional U.S. Forest Land. As a result, impacts related to the loss or conversion of forest lands would not occur.

3.2.5 Cumulative Impacts

The geographic scope for cumulative agricultural and forest impacts is southern Orange County, including the Cities of Rancho Santa Margarita, Lake Elsinore, and the Mission Viejo. Overall, cumulative growth in population would likely decrease the amount of agricultural and forest land in southern Orange County. However, the proposed project area does not include any Important Farmland or other agricultural resources, and would not result in a cumulative contribution to the overall loss of farmland. Conversely, the project would implement the proposed Agricultural Residential (AR) zoning and provide agricultural resources, in the form of vineyards. Grapes grown onsite would be maintained, harvested, and sold by the project's HOA, which is consistent with the intent of the proposed agricultural zoning classification. Overall, the project would provide agricultural production to an area where none currently exists, and cumulatively considerable adverse impacts related to agricultural resources would not occur from implementation of the project.

The proposed project is located on private lands adjacent to parcels within the Cleveland National Forest, and no project improvements would be located within forestland, and the project has been designed to reduce the potential of edge effects related to the proposed residential development. Additionally, the project would offer 414.6 acres of land to the U.S. Forest service, which would increase the amount of forestland in the area. Thus, the project would increase forestland and cumulatively considerable adverse impacts related to forestland would not occur from implementation of the project.