

## C. AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

This section was prepared by Morro Group staff based on information obtained from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Soil Surveys, and publications from the County Agriculture Department and California Farm Bureau, and data from the California Department of Conservation (CDC) Farmland Mapping Program. Project site history and current conditions were determined based on interviews with CCSD staff, review of previous documents including the *East West Ranch Management Plan* and associated constraints analysis, and field reconnaissance.

### 1. REGULATORY SETTING

#### a. FEDERAL POLICIES AND REGULATIONS

##### 1) Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program

This Federal program (7 CFR Part 1491), finalized in 2003, repealed the Farmland Protection Program of 1996. It authorizes the Federal government to provide matching funds (but no more than fifty percent of the total cost) to state, local, or tribal land protection programs in order to purchase development rights to keep productive farms and ranches in use. This does not create new Federal holdings, but helps smaller jurisdictions find the finances to purchase large tracts of productive agricultural lands. Once purchased, the land is placed into a conservation easement, and a conservation plan, pursuant to 7 CFR Part 12, must be created to guide the management of the parcel.

In order to qualify for this program, the land in question must be part of a pending offer from one of the aforementioned institutions, be privately owned, large enough to sustain agricultural production, have access to markets for the commodities that it produces, contain adequate agricultural infrastructure to continue production, and be surrounded by productive agricultural parcels. In addition, the land must be cropland, rangeland, grass land, pasture land, or forest land that is incidental to an agricultural operation. Finally, the parcel must contain prime, unique, or other productive soils and/or historical or archaeological resources. The FRP would not likely qualify for this program because the parcels are surrounded by urban development, and the FRP is owned by the CCSD on behalf of the public.

#### b. STATE POLICIES AND REGULATIONS

##### 1) California Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act)

As defined by the CDC, the California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (Williamson Act) enables local governments to enter into contracts with private landowners for the purpose of restricting specific parcels of land to agricultural or related open space use. As an incentive, landowners receive lower property tax assessments based on agricultural or open space land uses, as opposed to the real estate value of the land. Local governments receive a subsidy for forgone property tax revenues from the state via the Open Space Subvention Act of 1971.

c. **LOCAL REGULATION AND POLICY**

1) **Agriculture and Open Space Element**

The Agriculture and Open Space Element of the San Luis Obispo County General Plan provides a background on agricultural and open space resources within the County. Through the goals, policies, implementation programs and measures provided within the document, the County's intent is, "To promote and protect the agricultural industry of the County, to provide for a continuing sound and healthy agriculture in the County, and to encourage a productive and profitable agricultural industry." There are currently 34 agricultural related policies in the document, with four most relevant to this analysis.

2) **San Luis Obispo County Right-to-Farm Ordinance**

The San Luis Obispo County "Right-to-Farm" Ordinance states that the use of real property for agricultural operations is a high priority and favored use. Ordinance No. 2561, added Chapter 5.16 to Title 5 of the San Luis Obispo County Code relating to Agricultural Lands, Operations, and the Right to Farm. Paragraph "b" of § 5.16.020 (Findings and Policy) states:

"Where non-agricultural land uses occur near agricultural areas, agricultural operations frequently become the subjects of nuisance complaints due to lack of information about such operations. As a result, agricultural operators may be forced to cease or curtail their operations. Such actions discourage investments in farm improvements to the detriment of agricultural uses and the viability of the County's agricultural industry as a whole."

The right-to-farm ordinance advises purchasers of residential and other property types adjacent to existing agricultural operations of the inherent potential problems associated with the purchase of such property. Concerns may include the noise, odors, dust, chemicals, smoke and hours of operation that may accompany agricultural operations.

**2. EXISTING CONDITIONS**

a. **REGIONAL CONDITIONS AND RESOURCES**

According to the California Farm Bureau, California is the leading agriculture-producing state, and is the sixth leading agricultural producer in the world. California produces over 250 commodities including dairy products, grapes, nursery products, cattle, and field crops, selling an average of \$18,000,000 in farm exports (California Farm Bureau, 2005). As of 2004, San Luis Obispo County ranked 17<sup>th</sup> in the state for overall agricultural production value (San Luis Obispo County Farm Bureau, August 31, 2004).

In San Luis Obispo County, vegetable production occurs primarily in the coastal valleys (mostly lettuce and cole crops) while irrigated field crops (mostly alfalfa and irrigated pasture) are predominate in the interior valleys. The high cost of pumping water has resulted in the gradual conversion to higher value crops such as vegetables and wine grapes. The expansion of vineyards from land used for dry farm grain production has been a major change in agricultural patterns. From 1991 to 2001, acreage of harvested vineyards has increased from approximately 8,000 acres to more than 21,000 acres.

Vineyards occur mostly on gently rolling land east of Paso Robles, west of Templeton and Paso Robles, and in the Edna Valley. Avocados, lemons and some other subtropical fruits are grown in the coastal foothills. Production of high value nursery stock and crop seed has also steadily increased, and includes propagation of fruit and nut trees and vegetable seedlings, as well as the production of cut flowers, indoor decoratives, and ornamental trees and shrubs.

## b. REGIONAL CONDITIONS AND RESOURCES

The majority of San Luis Obispo County's agriculture takes place in the flat, alluvial plains of the inland areas, such as the Arroyo Grande basin and the areas immediately surrounding the city of San Luis Obispo. The coastal areas are more sloped, with lower quality soils than can be found in the flood plains of the local rivers and creeks, and have historically been used for grazing both dairy and beef cattle.

### 1) Natural Resources Conservation Service Soil Classifications

The land capability classification system utilized by the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) classifies soil units based on limitations for field crop production, the risk of damage due to crop production, and how the soil responds to management. The system has three tiers, including capability classes, sub-classes, and capability units (refer to Table V-3 below). Capability classes range from I to VIII, sub-classes include erosion (e); water (w); shallow, droughty, or stony (s), and; very cold or very dry (c).

**TABLE V-3**  
**Land Capability Classifications**

Class	Definition
I	Slight limitations that restrict use
II	Moderate limitations that reduce the choice of plants or require moderate conservation practices
III	Severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants or require special conservation practices, or both
IV	Very severe limitations that restrict the choice of plants or require very careful management, or both.
V	Little or no hazard of erosion but have other limitations, impractical to remove, that limit their use mainly to pasture, range, forestland, or wildlife food and cover.
VI	Severe limitations that make them generally unsuited to cultivation and that limit their use mainly to pasture, range, forestland, or wildlife food and cover.
VII	Very severe limitations that make them unsuited to cultivation and that restrict their use mainly to grazing, forestland, or wildlife
VIII	Limitations that preclude their use for commercial plant production and limit their use to recreation, wildlife, or water supply or for esthetic purposes.

*Source: Soil Survey of San Luis Obispo County, California Coastal Part, United States Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service (September 1984)*

## 2) California Department of Conservation Classification

The CDC Division of Land Resource Protection developed the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) in 1984 to analyze impacts to California's agricultural resources. Land is rated based on the land capability classification system, Storie Index, and land use. Land designations include the following categories: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Local Importance, Grazing Land, Urban and Built-up Land, and Other Land. The CDC considers Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Local Importance to be Important Farmland. These technical definitions are described below.

- **Prime Farmland (P):** Farmland with the best combination of physical and chemical features able to sustain long term agricultural production. This land has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields. Land must have been used for irrigated agricultural production at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date.
- **Farmland of Statewide Importance (S):** Farmland similar to Prime Farmland but with minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or less ability to store soil moisture. Land must have been used for irrigated agricultural production at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date.
- **Unique Farmland (U):** Farmland of lesser quality soils used for the production of the state's leading agricultural crops. This land is usually irrigated, but may include non-irrigated orchards or vineyards as found in some climatic zones in California. Land must have been cropped at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date.
- **Farmland of Local Importance (L):** Land of importance to the local agricultural economy as determined by each county's board of supervisors and a local advisory committee.
- **Grazing Land (G):** Land on which the existing vegetation is suited to the grazing of livestock. This category was developed in cooperation with the California Cattlemen's Association, University of California Cooperative Extension, and other groups interested in the extent of grazing activities. The minimum mapping unit for Grazing Land is forty acres.
- **Urban and Build-up Land (D):** Land occupied by structures with a building density of at least one unit to 1.5 acres, or approximately six structures to a ten-acre parcel. This land is used for residential, industrial, commercial, institutional, public administrative purposes, railroad and other transportation yards, cemeteries, airports, golf courses, sanitary landfills, sewage treatment, water control structures, and other developed purposes.
- **Other Land (X):** Land not included in any other mapping category. 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 surrounded on all sides by urban development and greater than forty acres is mapped as Other Land.

c. WEST FRP – CONDITIONS AND RESOURCES

1) West FRP – Soil Types and Capabilities

The West FRP area is dominated by coastal bluffs, grassland, and pine forest. Soils on the West FRP include Briones-Pismo Loamy Sand, Concepcion Loam, and San Simeon Sandy Loam on slopes ranging from two to fifty percent (see Figure V-3, page V-10, and refer to Table V-4, page V-52). Information regarding soil types was obtained from the *Natural Resources Conservation Service Soil Survey, San Luis Obispo Coastal Part* (September, 1984).

Briones-Pismo loamy sand

The Briones-Pismo loamy sand unit is found on strongly sloping to moderately steep soils on foothills and mountains, and is usually vegetated with annual grasses and forbs, hardwoods, and brush. The Briones soil, which makes up approximately forty percent of the area of this soil type, is moderately deep and somewhat excessively drained, as it is formed from weathered, soft sandstone. Permeability is rapid, but available water capacity is very low to low. The soil is prone to water erosion, and very susceptible to wind erosion, due to the high sand content and rapid permeation of water. The Pismo soil is similar in character, but is usually shallower. Rooting depths are half that of the Briones soil, about eight to twenty inches, and both soil types

are commonly found with a surface layer of sand. These soils are typically used as rangeland, to which they are moderately to poorly suited due mostly to their erosivity and susceptibility to downhill movement. The soil is considered unsuited for agriculture based on its erosion potential and typical location on moderately steep slopes.

Concepcion loam

Concepcion Loam is most commonly found on marine terraces with gentle slopes of two to five percent. Typical vegetation includes annual and perennial grasses and some scattered brush. Water permeability in this soil type is very slow, and the available water capacity is moderate to high. This characteristic is due to high clay content, which contributes to its low erosion potential, but also gives the deeper soil horizons a high shrink-swell potential. It is well suited to rangeland use, but is subject to gully erosion, which can be prevented by maintaining a consistent plant cover. Depressions are subject to ponding in wet years due to the soil's slow permeability, and this can retard plant growth in these areas.

San Simeon sandy loam

The San Simeon Sandy Loam is found throughout the West FRP, on slopes ranging from two to fifty percent. While its underlying characteristics remain the same, the varying slopes can change its suitability to different uses, leading to its designation as four separate soil types in the Soil Survey and accompanying maps. The San Simeon soils are moderately deep and moderately well drained, although the permeability on all slopes is very slow and the available water capacity is very low or low. On the flatter areas, the soil has historically been used for dry

farming, as it is unsuited to grazing due to poor water movement and root penetration and its susceptibility to gully erosion. This susceptibility to gully erosion underscores the need to maintain a permanent vegetative cover.

**TABLE V-4  
Soils Classification**

Soil Name	Classification		Acreage
	Irrigated	Non-Irrigated	
Briones-Pismo loamy sands	N/A	VI e	64.64
Concepcion loam	IIIe-3	IIIe-3	48.54
Marimel silty clay loam	I	IIIc-1	27.66
Salinas silty clay loam	Ile-1	IIIe-1	48.00
San Simeon sandy loam	IVe-3	IVe-3	74.69
San Simeon sandy loam	IVe-3	IVe-3	37.98
San Simeon sandy loam	N/A	VIe	93.62
San Simeon sandy loam	N/A	VIe	59.40

*Source: Soil Survey of San Luis Obispo County, California Coastal Part, United States Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service (September 1984)*

## 2) West FRP – Historic Agricultural Uses

The coastal rangelands have historically been used as grazing land by dairy farmers. The Fiscalini Ranch supported a dairy farm in the 1900's, and a grazing contract for forty head of cattle continued on the West FRP until 2002, when it was revoked (personal communication, Ben Boer, CCSD FRP Manager, September 8, 2006). Historical numbers of cattle were probably higher, but due to the soil capabilities outlined above the land would not be able to sustain a much larger herd. The Fiscalini dairy operation included buildings, of which only the foundations remain. No other agricultural use has occurred on the property since the turn of the last century.

## 3) West FRP – California Department of Conservation Classification

None of the soils present on the West FRP are considered Prime Soils by the CDC, nor is the West FRP considered Farmland of Local Importance. All soils on the West FRP are restricted by their high erosion potential, with each of the soils possessing at least one other major restriction on agricultural use (please refer to the previous discussion for details on the individual soil types).

## 4) West FRP – County Designation

The West FRP is located within the Cambria Urban Reserve Line (URL), and is not considered important agricultural land. The URL defines growth areas where the county and city will actively coordinate plans, policies, and standards relating to building construction, subdivision development, public utility systems, and other issues associated to the orderly development of

urban areas. Any changes in the URL, or development beyond its boundary, require an amendment to the Land Use Element and Local Coastal Program, both of which must be approved by the Board of Supervisors and the Coastal Commission. The creation of the FRP as a community recreation area effectively ensures that this property will be kept as open space for the foreseeable future, as Cambria continues to develop within its identified URL.

d. EAST FRP – CONDITIONS AND CLASSIFICATIONS

1) East FRP – Soil Types and Capabilities

The soils of the East FRP are more suited to agriculture because of their elevated position on the marine terrace and the presence of Santa Rosa Creek, which historically provided alluvial deposits in the area designated for the active recreation community park. The East FRP supports riparian vegetation, grassland, scrub, and pine forest. Soils on the East FRP include Marimel silty clay loam and Salinas silty clay loam (refer to Figure V-3 and Table V-4).

Marimel silty clay loam

The primary soil within the area selected for the community park is Marimel silty clay loam, a deep, very well drained soil that occurs on nearly flat alluvial fans and in narrow valleys. The permeability of the soil is moderately slow, resulting in a high or very high available water capacity. The rate of runoff is slow, and this, combined with the nearly level topography, makes the erosion hazard due to water slight. This soil has very few agricultural limitations.

Salinas silty clay loam

The second soil type on the East FRP is the Salinas silty clay loam. It is a very deep and very well drained soil formed from sedimentary rocks, and naturally vegetated with annual grasses, forbes, and some hardwood. The soil's permeability is moderately slow, with a high to very high water availability. Erosion hazards are slight to moderate, and increase with the slope. The soil is well suited to irrigated pasture, dry farming, and rangeland, although the surface layers are subject to compaction. While restricted by its moderate erosion rates, this soil has very few agricultural limitations on the flatter areas of the valley floors.

2) East FRP – Historic Agricultural Uses

The East FRP was managed contiguously with the West portion of the land, and helped to support the same forty cattle that historically grazed the entire ranch. Up until 2006, a resident grazed a few horses, but the land has not supported agricultural uses since 2002.

3) East FRP – California Department of Conservation Classification

The Miramel sandy loam soil type generally is considered Prime Farmland by the CDC; however, the designation does not apply to the soils on the East FRP due to the fact that no agricultural activities have taken place in the last four years, one of the criteria for an area to be designated as Prime Farmland by the CDC. No other soils meet the CDC's criteria; therefore, no special designations apply to any of the soil classes on the property.

#### 4) East FRP – County Designation

The East FRP is located within the Cambria URL, and is not considered important agricultural land. Based on the *Cambria and San Simeon Acres Community Plans of the North Coast Area Plan*, the land use categories for the East FRP are Recreation and Open Space.

### 3. THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of potential agricultural impacts are based on thresholds identified within Appendix G of the CEQA *Guidelines* and San Luis Obispo County's Initial Study Checklist, which provides the following thresholds for determining impact significance with respect to agricultural resources. Agricultural impacts would be considered significant if the proposed project would:

- Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance to non-agricultural use.
- Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract.
- Involve other changes in the existing environmental, which due to their location or nature, could individually or cumulatively result in loss of farmland, to non-agricultural use.
- Impair agricultural use of other property or result in conversion to other uses.
- Conflict with any local, state, or federal policies or ordinances protecting agricultural resources.

### 4. IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND METHODOLOGY

Impacts to agricultural resources were assessed utilizing data and maps published by the United States Department of Agriculture, CDC, and County Agriculture Department, including soil information, farmland mapping, and economic data. The project was analyzed for the potential conversion of Important Farmland, loss of productive agricultural soils, incompatible land uses, and inconsistencies with regulations and policies intended to preserve agricultural resources.

The analysis of agricultural constraints included a review of Geographic Information System (GIS) maps, local and state literature and records, consultation with the County Agricultural Commissioner's Office and the San Luis Obispo County Department of Planning and Building, and field visits to the project study area and the surrounding region.

Documents used for the literature review included the County of San Luis Obispo 2005 Crop Report, the County of San Luis Obispo General Plan Agriculture and Open Space Element, and the Land Use Element for the San Luis Bay Inland Planning Area. Other documents included the Soils Conservation Service Soils Data for San Luis Obispo County, the State CEQA *Guidelines*, and the California Farmland Conversion Report published by the Department of Conservation.

## 5. WEST FRP – IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

The West FRP contains what were historically the primary grazing areas of the Fiscalini Dairy, and consists of 364 acres of grassland, mixed with small stands of Monterey Pine and a few small riparian areas. No agricultural activities currently exist on the property; therefore no impacts from the use of the FRP property for recreational use will occur. The West FRP is bordered to the west by the Pacific Ocean, to the east by Highway 1, and to the north and south by residential neighborhoods. Allowing primarily passive recreational use on the West FRP will not conflict with surrounding agricultural uses or operations, as none of the surrounding land uses are agriculturally oriented. The Agriculture and Open Space Element of the San Luis Obispo County General Plan states that some of the benefits of preserving agricultural land are the preservation of ecosystem functions and open space, both of which will be met by the proposed open space use and focused recreational impacts of the trail network.

Based on the lack of recent or current agricultural use on and adjacent to the West FRP, implementation of the proposed project would not negatively impact agricultural resources. Public access on the West FRP will be primarily on marked trails, preventing serious impact to the soil resources, and avoiding any major degradation of the pastures and grasslands of the area. Focusing recreational activity on trails in specific areas will ensure that the land remains in relatively pristine conditions, allowing for the possibility of future agriculture at such time as it may become necessary. Unlike the impacts of urban development, the effects of recreational use will not cover or degrade the soils to such an extent as to make the land unproductive in the future. Goats may be used on the property for vegetation control, which will have similar impacts to a small grazing herd, but are considered components of the fire and vegetation management programs, and are not considered production agriculture. Similarly, impacts from recreational equestrian activities are not considered production agriculture, and the impacts associated with these uses will not be discussed in this section.

## 6. EAST FRP – IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

The 74 acres of the East FRP area contain soil types recognized by the State and County as potentially productive soils, but the lack of recent agricultural activity in the last four years precludes an official CDC designation as Prime Farmland. Currently, there are no agricultural operations currently underway on the East FRP. Surrounding land uses include residential neighborhoods, commercial/retail uses, and Highway 1 providing the boundaries for the property. The proposed community park may include a number of groomed playing fields, a multi-use court, as well as surfaced trails and small parking lots. This type of development may preclude potential future use of the area for agriculture due to the disturbance of topsoil from grading and resurfacing. The more active recreational facilities proposed for the East FRP are more developmentally intense, and will change the character and nature of the area due to grading and the installation of playing fields and courts.

### a. EAST FRP – IMPACTS TO POTENTIALLY PRODUCTIVE SOILS

Implementation of the proposed community park would result in the permanent conversion of 27.66 acres of Marimel silty clay loam, a soil designated as Class III (non-irrigated) and Class I (irrigated). The construction of these active recreational facilities would require grading and resurfacing, modifying both the topography and soil characteristics of the site. This is not

considered a significant impact due to the lack of recent or current agricultural use on or in close proximity to the proposed site. In addition, the East FRP is within the urban area of Cambria, and is currently designated for open space and recreational uses (Cambria and San Simeon Community Plans, 2006). The community plan language currently under consideration by the Coastal Commission. Although agriculture is allowed within these land use designations, implementation of the project would not result in a significant impact to agriculturally productive soils.

**AG Impact 1**      **Proposed improvements on the East FRP would result in the conversion of 27.66 acres of potentially prime, productive agricultural soils within an identified urban area, resulting in a less than significant impact.**

AG/mm-1            Upon application for land use and construction permits from the County of San Luis Obispo for development of the *Community Park Master Plan*, the CCSD or its designee shall submit grading plans incorporating soil capping of potentially productive agricultural soils, where feasible.

Residual Impact    With implementation of mitigation, the impacts to agricultural resources would be further minimized, and the impact is considered *less than significant, Class III*.

## 7. CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

The project will have no significant cumulative impacts to agriculture, based on the lack of current or recent agriculture on the site, and the lack of any surrounding agricultural uses. The FRP has been used as a recreational area for some time, and maintaining the rural nature and expanses of open space on the West FRP will not preclude the possibility of future agricultural use at such time that it may become necessary. The active recreational areas of the East FRP will involve grading and surfacing of high quality soil, but the lack of current and historic agriculture on the property precludes any impacts to on-site or neighboring agricultural resources. The project will not significantly contribute to the loss of agricultural land in the County.

**LIST OF ABBREVIATED TERMS**

Abbreviation	Term
CCSD	Cambria Community Services District
CDC	California Department of Conservation
CEQA	California Environmental Quality Act
EIR	Environmental Impact Report
GIS	Geographic Information System
FMMP	Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program
NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
URL	Urban Reserve Line

This page intentionally left blank.