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## **3.2 AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES**

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### INTRODUCTION

This section of the EIR describes the agricultural resources of the project site and discusses potential impacts of the project, focusing on the conversion of farmland; conflicts with Williamson Act contracts; and other changes that could result in conversion of adjacent farmland. This examination is based on the *San Benito County General Plan*, the *San Benito County Important Farmland* map (2008) and the *Soil Survey of San Benito County* (1988).

#### 3.2.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

##### REGIONAL SETTING

The project site is located adjacent to the City of Hollister in the Hollister Valley. Agriculture is a significant economic activity in San Benito County, with a total agricultural commodity value of \$293,090,000 in 2008 (San Benito County Annual Crop Report, 2008). The fertile soils of the area produce orchard and field harvests of grapes, plums, almonds and alfalfa, among others.

##### PROJECT SITE CHARACTERISTICS

The project site is currently in agricultural use with cultivated hayfields predominating (**Figure 2-5**). A 23-acre walnut orchard is located near the two on-site residences in the northern portion of the project site. The project site is designated as "Rural" in the *San Benito County General Plan*. There are no Williamson Act land conservation contracts in effect on any portion of the project site (Department of Conservation, 2007).

In most years, and under current conditions, the majority of the project site is cultivated for hay, with the site left fallow and devoted to grazing about every fourth year. The 26-acre potential WWTP site to the east is used solely for grazing by cattle and horses. There is a 23-acre walnut orchard in the northern portion of the project site, the first 17 acres of which were planted in 1987, with an additional six acres planted in 1996. Current yields from this orchard are approximately one ton per acre. The expected productive life of these walnut trees is estimated to be 30 years. Approximately 1.0 to 1.5 acre-feet of water per acre per year is used to irrigate the walnut orchard (Anthony Guerra, landowner, 1998).

##### SURROUNDING LAND USES

The lands to the west across Fairview Road are largely occupied by existing residential uses, along with some agriculture and open fields (see **Figure 2-5**). The area between Santa Ana and Hillcrest Roads is occupied by a newer large-lot subdivision, several older rural residences fronting directly onto Fairview Road, an orchard and open fields. The area between Hillcrest and Sunnyslope Roads is developed with single-family subdivisions (Sunnyslope Villages) that are oriented inward and are bounded by continuous 6-foot masonry walls along the adjacent frontages of Fairview, Hillcrest and Sunnyslope Roads. Lands to the north of the project site include open fields, dispersed ranch complexes, and rural residential development. Lands to east of the project site consist of rolling rangeland traversed by the Santa Ana Creek channel and a parallel tributary known as Dry Creek. Rangelands exist adjacent to the southern boundary of the project site.

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### FARMLAND CLASSIFICATIONS

#### Land Capability Classification

The Land Capability Classification (LCC) system is used by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to determine a soil's agricultural productivity. The LCC indicates the suitability of soils for most kinds of field crops. Crops that require special management are excluded. The soils are grouped according to their limitations for field crops, the risk of damage if they are used for crops and the way they respond to management. Soils are rated from Class I to Class VIII, with soils having the fewest limitations receiving the highest rating (Class I). The "prime" soil classification indicates the absence of soil limitations, which if present, would require the application of management techniques (e.g., drainage, leveling, special fertilizing practices) to enhance production. Specific subclasses are also utilized to further characterize soils. A general description of soil classifications, as defined by the NRCS, is provided below in **Table 3.2-1**.

**TABLE 3.2-1**  
**LAND CAPABILITY CLASSIFICATION**

Class	Definition
I	Soils have few limitations that restrict their use.
II	Soils have moderate limitations that reduce the choice of plants, or that require special conservation practices.
III	Soils have severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants, require conservation practices, or both.
IV	Soils have very severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants, require very careful management, or both.
V	Soils are not likely to erode but have other limitations; impractical to remove soils that limit their use largely to pasture or range, woodland, or wildlife habitat.
VI	Soils have severe limitations that make them generally unsuited to cultivation and limit their use largely to pasture, or range, woodland, or wildlife habitat.
VII	Soils have very severe limitations that make them unsuited to cultivation and that restrict their use largely to pasture or range, woodland, or wildlife habitat.
VIII	Soils and landforms have limitations that preclude their use for commercial plant production and restrict their use to recreation, wildlife habitat, or water supply, or to aesthetic purposes.

Source: USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

#### Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

The Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) was established in 1982 by the State Department of Conservation (DOC) to continue the Important Farmland mapping efforts begun in 1975 by the NRCS. The intent of the NRCS was to produce agricultural resource maps based on soil quality and land use across the nation. As part of the nationwide agricultural land use mapping effort, the NRCS developed a series of definitions known as Land Inventory and Monitoring (LIM) criteria. The LIM criteria classifies the land's suitability for agricultural production; suitability includes both the physical and chemical characteristics of soils and the actual land use. Important Farmland maps are derived from the NRCS soil survey maps using the LIM criteria.

Since 1980, the State of California has assisted the NRCS with completing its mapping in the state. The FMMP was created by the DOC to continue the mapping activity with a greater level of detail. The DOC applied a greater level of detail by modifying the LIM criteria for use in California. The LIM criteria in California utilize the NRCS and Storie Index Rating systems, but also considers physical conditions such as a dependable water supply for agricultural production, soil temperature range, depth of the ground water table, flooding potential, rock fragment content and rooting depth.

Important Farmland maps for California are compiled using the modified LIM criteria, as described above, and current land use information. The minimum mapping unit is ten acres unless otherwise specified. Units of land smaller than ten acres are incorporated into the surrounding classification. The Important Farmland maps identify five agriculture-related categories plus two non-agriculture listings: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Local Importance, Grazing Land, Urban Land, and Other Land. The *San Benito County Important Farmland* map (2008) classifies the proposed project site mostly as "Farmlands of Local Importance" and the remainder as "Other Land." "Farmlands of Local Importance" are suited for the cultivation of dry crops, such as wheat, oats, safflower and grain hay; "Other Land" includes land not included in any other mapping category, such as low density rural development.

### 3.2.2 REGULATORY SETTING

#### WILLIAMSON ACT

The California Land Conservation Act, otherwise known as the Williamson Act, was enacted by the State Legislature in 1965 as a means of preserving California's prime agricultural lands from urbanization. Prime farmland under the Williamson Act includes land that qualifies as Class I and II under the NRCS classification of land. The Williamson Act involves voluntary contracts between landowners and a city or county in which they agree to retain their lands in agriculture or other open space uses for a minimum of ten years. In return for entering into this contract, the landowners receive property tax relief on the lands under contract. This relief is provided through the assessment of the lands based upon their income-producing value rather than their market value, which may be considerably higher. The contracts have ten-year terms, which are automatically renewed each year on a common anniversary date of January 1<sup>st</sup> unless they are cancelled or notice of non-renewal is given. If either party to a contract gives notice of non-renewal, the non-renewal process begins on the following anniversary with nine years remaining. During the remaining term of the contract after notice of non-renewal has been given, the property taxes increase gradually according to a formula that eventually brings them up to the same level as non-Williamson Act lands.

Currently, approximately 70 percent of the state's prime agricultural land is protected under this Act. Within San Benito County, approximately 583,522 acres are currently under Williamson Act contracts (DOC 2007).

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### SAN BENITO COUNTY GENERAL PLAN

The San Benito County General Plan includes the following policies regarding consideration of agricultural resources:

#### **Land Use Element**

**Policy 3** [Storie Index] Grade 1 soils as defined in the Soils Survey of San Benito County shall be the highest priority for the protection of soil resources.

**Policy 4** Development proposals adjacent to Grade 1 agricultural lands and soils suitable for the production of row crops, flowers, or orchards shall be required to mitigate potential land use conflicts with agricultural operations.

#### **Open Space and Conservation Element**

**Policy 23** **Avoid land use conflicts**

The County policy should be to assign compatible land uses adjacent to agricultural lands and selected mineral resource lands to ensure their protection. The County should encourage the use of the Williamson Act, as well as agricultural zoning and other legislative means to preserve large agricultural open space areas.

**Policy 25** **Legislative methods to protect agriculture and rural identity**

It is the County's policy to use the Williamson Act, agricultural zoning, and legislative means, where appropriate, to preserve agricultural resources, maintain a rural identity, and to define and shape the urban form. Residential growth should be directed to where services are already provided and to the least productive agricultural lands.

The project site is also designated as an 'Area of Special Study,' described in the Land Use Element, Land Use Plan of the General Plan as follows:

*This designation applies to areas of the County where a combination of the following criteria apply: 1) More concentrated development than is presently allowed may be desirable provided a comprehensive plan for public services and resource conservation is integrated in order of priority into a specific plan, community plan, or area plan. 2) As a result of prior, piecemeal subdivisions, a plan for integrated development and coordination of governmental services and/or community facilities is desirable. 3) The County has identified the area as a potential area for commercial, industrial, and/or residential development.*

*The intent would be to direct development from natural resources and environmentally hazardous areas, to provide for mixed land uses to reduce vehicle emissions, to effectively plan the design, development and financing of services, and to develop open space programs. Increased development density over base density may be awarded based on specified programs. New development will not be allowed within an Area of Special Study until there is full mitigation of public services, infrastructure and facility impacts.*

### 3.2.3 IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

#### STANDARDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The following thresholds for measuring a project's environmental impacts are based on the CEQA Guidelines and other standards of significance recognized by San Benito County. For the purposes of this EIR, impacts are considered significant if the following would result from implementation of the proposed project:

- 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 Resource Agency, to non-agricultural use;
- Convert [Storie Index] Grade 1 Farmland as defined by the Soil Survey of San Benito County;
- Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use;
- Conflict with a Williamson Act contract; and/or
- Involve other changes in the existing environment, which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use.

#### METHODOLOGY

Evaluation of potential agricultural impacts is based on site reconnaissance, the *San Benito County General Plan*, the *San Benito County Zoning Ordinance*, the *San Benito County Important Farmland* map (DOC 2008), the *Soil Survey for San Benito County* and the applicant's project description and application materials.

#### PROJECT IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

##### Conversion of Farmland

**Impact 3.2-1** Development of the proposed project would not result in the conversion to urban uses of Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance. This would result in a **less than significant** impact.

##### Soil Mapping

Under the *Soil Survey of San Benito County*, prepared by the NRCS, soils are classified according to eight broad 'Land Capability' classes, with Class I and II soils being the most fertile and well suited for cultivation. The SCS soil mapping indicates that there are five soil types on the project site including two Antioch loams (AnB and AnC2) which cover approximately 25 percent of the project site, two San Benito clay loams (SbD and SbE2) which cover approximately 60 percent of the site, and Rincon silty clay loam (RsC) which covers approximately five percent of the site (see **Figure 3.2**). These soils all have SCS agricultural capability ratings of Class III or IV, and thus do not qualify as prime by virtue of being Class I or II soils.

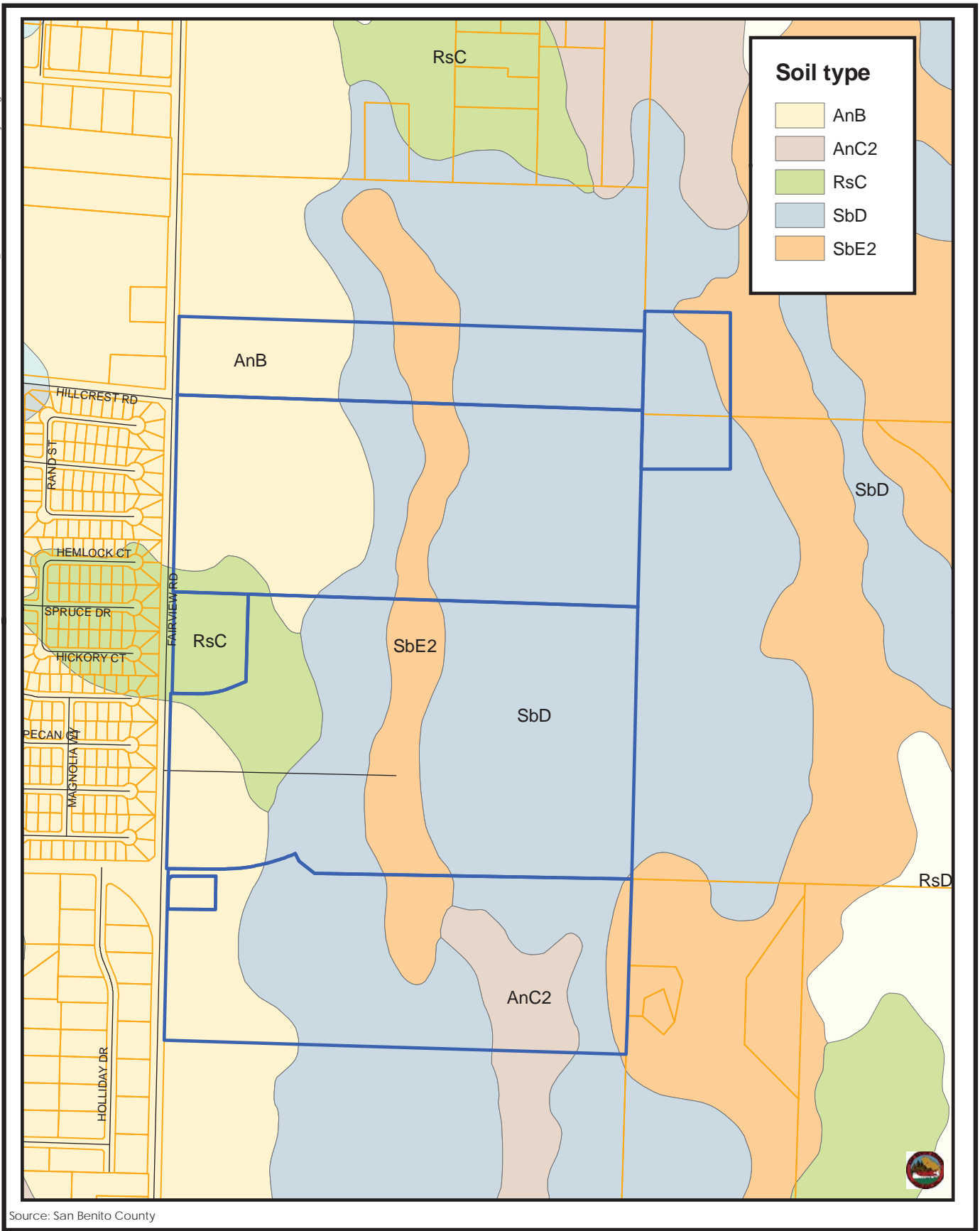
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### Storie Index Ratings

A second land capability system applied by the California Department of Conservation, called the Storie Index, is specific to California. According to the *Soil Survey of San Benito County*, the on-site soils have Storie Index ratings ranging from 46 to 73, which are further classified as Storie Index Grades 2 and 3 for agricultural suitability. Since none of the soils on the project site have a rating of 80 or greater, they are not Grade 1 or prime soils under the Storie Index.

Finally, no portion of the project site contains Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance, as designated on the *San Benito County Important Farmland* map prepared by the Department of Conservation in 2008. Furthermore, while the site does support an irrigated orchard, the on-site soils do not meet the requirements for a prime designation. Therefore, conversion of the project site to residential and commercial uses would result in a **less than significant** impact.



Source: San Benito County

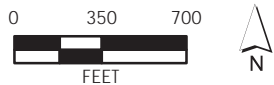


Figure 3.2  
Soil Types  
**PMC**<sup>®</sup>



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### Conflicts with Zoning for Agricultural Use

**Impact 3.2-2** The project site has a zoning designation of "Rural," and is located adjacent to lands zoned as "Rural" and "Rural Residential." Development of the project site with suburban uses could therefore result in conflicts with existing zoning which allows agricultural uses. This conversion is considered a **less than significant** impact.

#### Project Site

While the proposed project would conflict with the current zoning of the parcel as "Rural," the project applicant proposes to change the zoning of the project site to allow for residential, commercial and other proposed uses within the Santana Ranch Specific Plan. This proposed change would be consistent with the previous designation of the project site by San Benito County as an Area of Special Study, which designates the land for higher density residential and associated commercial uses through approval of a specific plan. Should the proposed zone change be approved, the project would not conflict with the applicable zoning designation.

#### Surrounding Parcels

The project site is surrounded by rangeland and rural residential development with zoning designations of "Rural" (to the south and west), and "Rural Transitional" (to the north). These parcels are currently used as grazing land. Agricultural uses are permitted within these zoning designations, and future agricultural uses on these properties could potentially conflict with the planned residential uses on the project site. Typical residential-agricultural land use conflicts include use of pesticides and agricultural equipment along the residential/agricultural interface, which can result in health hazards and nuisance complaints.

A variety of non-agricultural uses are also permitted on these surrounding parcels, however, including single-family residential at minimum densities of one unit per 5 and 2.5 acres, respectively. Further, the soils on these parcels are not designated as Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance, and do not carry the corresponding AP (Agricultural Productive) zoning designation of the County. Because the soils are not prime, are used for grazing, and are subject to residential subdivision under their current zoning designations, it is unlikely that these parcels will be used for intensive agriculture in the near or long term. Impacts typically associated with field preparation, application of pesticides and herbicides, and intensive harvesting techniques are therefore unlikely to occur with the project. Project conflicts with zoning that permits agricultural uses on the surrounding parcels are therefore anticipated to be **less than significant**.

### Conflicts with Existing Williamson Act Contract

**Impact 3.2-3** The project site is not encumbered by an existing Williamson Act contract, therefore, no conflicts with an existing Williamson Act contract would occur. **No impact** would result.

There are no Williamson Act contracts or conflicts with any other farmland conservation plans on the project site. Therefore, **no impact** will result.

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### Conversion of Farmland

**Impact 3.2-4** The project would result in the conversion of land used for dry farming and walnut production to urban uses. This would result in a **less than significant** impact.

While farming activities do take place on the project site, the project site does not meet the criteria for "Farmland" as defined within the CEQA thresholds of significance. According to these thresholds, "Farmland" is defined as "Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance." The project site is designated as "Farmland of Local Importance and Other Farmland." As stated within Policy 25 of the San Benito County General Plan, however, important goals of the County include preservation of agricultural resources and the maintenance of rural identity within the County. Conversion of the project site to suburban uses would result in a loss of the project site as an agricultural and rural resource.

Policy 25 further states, however, that residential growth should be directed to where services are already provided and to the least productive agricultural lands. As discussed earlier within this section, the project site has been designated as an Area of Special Study, which is a means of implementing Policy 25. This is because Areas of Special Study are designated in order to direct growth to where services already exist, consistent with this policy. Further, the project site is less productive agriculturally than other lands within the County that are classified as Prime or Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance.

The implementation of Policy 25 and the Area of Special Study designation serves to protect the highly productive farmland resources of the County. Because the project is consistent with these policies, it is consistent with the County goals to preserve agricultural resources and rural identity. A **less than significant impact** as a result of the conversion of farmland on the site is therefore anticipated.

**Impact 3.2-5** The project could place development pressure on abutting parcels zoned as Rural and Rural Transitional. This is considered a **less than significant** impact.

The development of the project site would result in the extension of the Hollister urban area further west of its current boundary of Fairview Road. This extension could encourage development on adjoining lands east of the project site. This land, however, is not used for farming, and is not designated as Prime or Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance. Further, the steep topography of the adjoining sites and the proximity of the Santa Ana creek bed make these sites less suitable for farming or development. Lands to the north of the project site are designated as Rural Transitional, and are currently developed with ranchettes, making current or future use of these lands for productive farming infeasible. Finally, lands to the south, similar to the project site, are within a designated Area of Special Study, and therefore determined suitable for future growth in accordance with the County rural and agricultural development preservation strategy. Development pressure on lands abutting the project which could result in the loss of farmland is therefore considered a **less than significant impact**.

### CUMULATIVE IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

#### Cumulative Conversion of Farmland

**Impact 3.2-6** The project, in combination with other past, present and reasonably foreseeable, probable future projects on adjacent land within the Fairview Road corridor, will contribute to the cumulative loss of Farmland of Local Importance within San Benito County. This impact is considered to be **less than significant**.

Portions of the project site, as well as lands extending north to Santa Ana Valley Road, and south to approximately Maranatha Drive, have been classified as Farmland of Local Importance by the San Benito County Important Farmland map. The conversion of the project site from dry farming and orchard uses to suburban uses will result in the loss of this farmland, and will contribute incrementally to the loss of farmland as a result of past, present and reasonably foreseeable, probable future development on lands to the north and south of the project site, as well as probable future development of lands to the south of the project site. This is considered a **potentially significant cumulative impact**.

While agricultural uses are permitted on the project site and lands to the south under the "Rural" land use designation, and the project site is currently used for dry farming and a walnut orchard, the project site and lands to the south have been previously designated by San Benito County as an "Area of Special Study," which would allow for higher-density residential projects through implementation of a specific plan. The purpose of this designation is to protect the existing natural resources in the County, which would include productive agricultural farmland areas, by directing urban growth to areas in the County more suitable for urban uses. Further, the soils on the project site and lands to the south are not classified as Prime or Unique Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance. Because the project is consistent with the County's agricultural preservation strategy, does not propose development in areas not previously planned for future development, and does not contain prime soils, the proposed project's contribution to the cumulative loss of farmland in the region would be considered **less than significant**.

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### REFERENCES/DOCUMENTATION

California Department of Conservation (DOC), Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program. *San Benito County Important Farmland map*. 2008.

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