5.8 AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

Existing Activities

The planning area has a long history of agricultural use, including grazing, groves, dry grain, and truck crop production. Lands currently used for agriculture are concentrated in the eastern portion of the City. Agricultural land within the City is generally leased to farm operators. Few, if any of the farms within the valley are owner-operated. As of year 2002, four major types of agriculture took place in Moreno Valley: grazing, fruit orchards, dry grain farming, potato and fruit crop farming and poultry production. The poultry operations have since closed. Nearly all of the remaining agricultural use occurs in the rural eastern portion of the City.

Preservation of prime agricultural land is an important state and national goal and many of the soils in Moreno Valley are well suited in agricultural production. However, soil alone does not guarantee the success of an agricultural enterprise. The high cost of land, the high cost of water and energy, fragmented ownership patterns, and market conditions limit the potential return on investment. These economic factors are a disincentive to continued farming in Moreno Valley.

Important Farmland Categories

Through its Farming Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP), the California Department of Conservation produces agricultural resource inventories and maps based on soil quality and land use within California. These inventories and maps are updated every two years. **Figure 5.8-1** depicts the location of the important farmlands within the planning area. **Table 5.8-1** depicts the acreage for each category.

TABLE 5.8-1
PLANNING AREA AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

Agricultural Classifications	Approximate Acreage
Prime Farmland	1,639
Farmland of Statewide Importance	330
Unique Farmland	60
Farmland of Local Importance	10,781
Grazing Land	1,269
Other Land	12,109
Water	632

Source: California Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resources 2002.

Prime Farmland

Prime Farmland is defined by the California Department of Conservation as: "Land with the best combination of physical and chemical features able to sustain long term production of agricultural crops. This land has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields. Land must have been used for production of irrigated crops at sometime during the [past four years]."

As shown in **Figure 5.8-1**, the majority of the Prime Farmland in the planning area is located in the center of the planning area, north and south of Highway 60, with a few parcels scattered in the southern portion of the planning area. According to the State's 2002 data, there are approximately 1,639 acres of Prime Farmland in the planning area. Some of this land may have been developed or taken out of production in preparation of development, since the last State agricultural survey.

Farmland of Statewide Importance

Farmland of Statewide Importance is defined by the California Department of Conservation as: "Land similar to Prime Farmland that has a good combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the production of agricultural crops. This land has minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or less ability to store soil moisture than Prime Farmland. Land must have been used for production of irrigated crops at sometime during the past four years."

Compared to the other farmland categories, Farmland of Statewide Importance comprises a small portion (approximately 330 acres) of the total farmland acreage in the planning area. These areas are limited to the southwestern most portion of the planning area and a few parcels south of Highway 60 in the center of the planning area. Some of this land may have been developed, or taken out of production in preparation of development, since the last State agricultural survey.

Unique Farmland

Unique Farmland is defined by the California Department of Conservation as: "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."

Unique Farmland comprises the smallest segment of agricultural production in the planning area, with 60 acres. This land is located in the central portion of the planning area. Some of this land may have been developed, or taken out of production in preparation for development, since the last State agricultural survey.

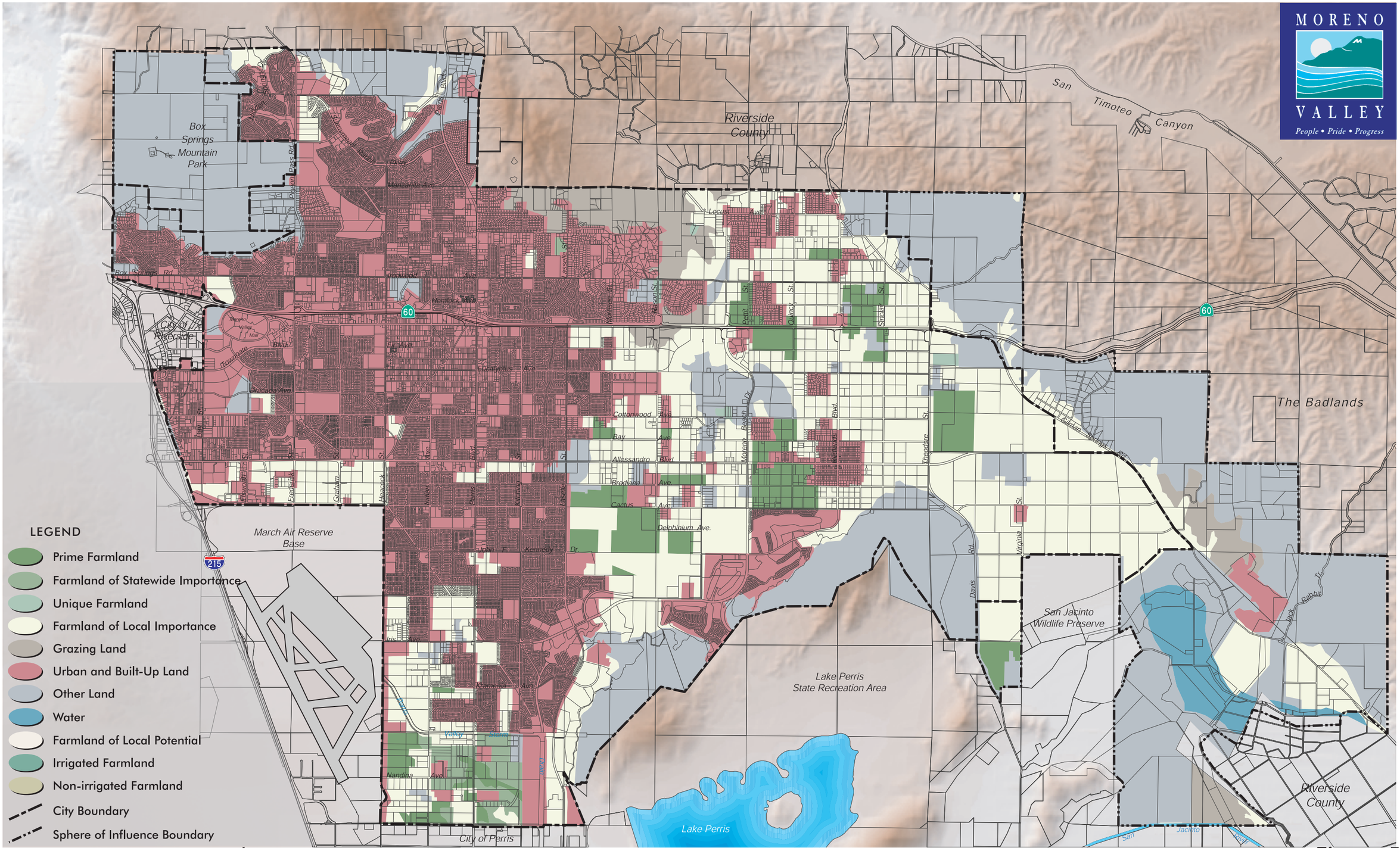

Figure 5.8-1
Important Farmlands

Farmland of Local Importance

Farmland of Local Importance for the County of Riverside is defined by the California Department of Conservation as:

- "Soils that would be classified as Prime and Statewide, but lack irrigation water. Lands planted to dryland crops of barley, oats, and wheat."

- "Lands producing major crops for Riverside County, but that are not listed as Unique crops. These crops are identified as returning $1 million or more dollars on the Riverside County Agricultural Report. Crops identified are permanent pasture (irrigated), summer squash, okra, eggplant, radishes, and watermelons."

- "Dairylands, including corrals, pasture, milking facilities, hay and manure storage areas if accompanied with permanent pasture of hayland of 10 acres or more."

- "Lands identified by city or county ordinance as Agricultural Zones or Contracts. Lands planted to jojoba, which are under cultivation and are of producing age."

Farmland of Local Importance comprises the largest portion of farmland within the planning area (approximately 10,800 acres). This category of farmland is mainly located along the edges of the planning area, with the largest portion located in the eastern portion of the planning area. Some of this land may have been developed, or taken out of production in preparation of development, since the last State agricultural survey.

Other Categories

Other portions of the planning area are classified as Urban and Built-up Land, Grazing Land, Other Land and Water.

Surrounding Agricultural Lands

As shown in **Figure 5.8-1**, significant amounts of important agricultural lands are located to the south of the planning area, including Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, and Farmland of Local Importance. Patches of Farmland of Local Importance are also located to the west, across Interstate 215, as well as to the northeast, along San Timoteo Canyon. Additional Prime Farmland is also located along San Timoteo Canyon.

Riverside County Agriculture Conversion

Table 5.8-2 depicts the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses within Riverside County from 2000 to 2002. As depicted in this table, the County experienced a net decrease of 15,339 acres of important farmland during this period. This trend is expected to continue as the increase in population continues to create pressure for new housing and other land uses.

TABLE 5.8-2
RIVERSIDE COUNTY
CHANGE IN LAND USE SUMMARY

Land Use Category	Total Acreage Inventoried		2000-2002 Acreage Changes			
	2000	2002	Acres Lost (-)	Acres Gained (+)	Total Acreage Changed	Net Acreage Changed
Prime Farmland	151,011	141,715	14,506	5,210	19,716	-9,296
Farmland of Statewide Importance	49,446	48,046	3,472	2,072	5,544	-1,400
Unique Farmland	40,950	39,049	6,441	4,540	10,981	-1,901
Farmland of Local Importance	243,414	240,672	20,044	17,302	37,346	-2,742
Important Farmland Subtotal	***484,821***	***469,482***	***44,463***	***29,124***	***73,587***	***-15,339***
Grazing Land	124,714	126,887	2,256	4,429	6,685	2,173
Agricultural Land Subtotal	***609,535***	***596,369***	***46,719***	***33,553***	***80,272***	***-13,166***
Urban and Built-up Land	254,816	262,866	13,145	21,195	34,340	8,050
Other Land	1,007,724	1,012,840	17,185	22,301	39,486	5,116
Water Area	62,541	62,541	0	0	0	0
Total Area Inventoried	***1,934,616***	***1,934,616***	***77,049***	***77,049***	***154,098***	***0***

Source: Farmland Conversion Report 20002002 (Department of Conservation, 2004).

Williamson Act

The Williamson Act (California Land Conservation Act, California Government Code, Section 51200 et.seq.) is a statewide mechanism for the preservation of agricultural land and open space land. The Act provides a comprehensive method for local governments to protect farmland and open space by allowing lands in agricultural use to be placed under contract (agricultural preserve) between a local governmental and land owner. Under this act, agricultural lands are taxed at their agricultural value rather than their value for higher valued uses. In exchange, the landowner enters into a contract to retain his or her land in agricultural use for at least 10 years. Once a "Notice of Nonrenewal" is filed, it is ten years until the contract expires. At the time that the first General Plan was adopted, hundreds of acres within the planning area were under Williamson Act contracts. Notices of Nonrenewal have since been filed for these areas. No land within the planning area is currently under a Williamson Act contract.

Moreno Valley General Plan

The General Plan policies support agriculture as an interim use; however, no land in the planning area is designated for agricultural preservation. To allow for the interim use of land for agricultural uses, the City identifies agricultural crops as an allowable use for all of its zoning categories. The proposed General Plan Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Element contains the following objective:

Objective 4.1: Retain agricultural open space as long as agricultural activities can be economically conducted, and are desired by agricultural interests (with some agriculture retained in long-term use), and provide for an orderly transition of agricultural lands to other urban and rural uses.

To support this objective, the City identifies policies to encourage grazing and crop production as a compatible part of a rural residential atmosphere. Additionally, where practical, the City plans to incorporate existing groves into the design of future development projects. These groves can help retain the agricultural character of the area as well as provide a buffer between different land uses.

THRESHOLD FOR DETERMINING SIGNIFICANCE

For the purposes of this EIR, a significant impact would occur if implementation of General Plan Alternatives 1, 2, or 3 would:

- *Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland) to non-agricultural use;*
- *Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract; 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.*

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

General Plan Land Use Alternatives 1, 2, and 3

Planning Area Farmland Conversion

Implementation of General Plan Alternatives 1, 2, or 3 will result in the eventual conversion of the majority of the agricultural uses within the planning area to urban uses. None of the General Plan Land Use alternatives proposes a land use designation that would provide for the permanent preservation of agricultural land. While majority of the planning area will eventually be converted to non-agricultural urban uses, some of the existing agricultural activities will continue as interim uses, as allowed under the City's existing Development Code for all zoning categories. Due to market factors, implementation of the various General Plan alternatives may result in different rates of conversion of agricultural land to urban uses since one land use alternative may be more economically desirable than the others. Since market forces change over time, it is not possible to determine with certainty which of the three General Plan Land Use alternatives would result in a quicker conversion of agricultural land.

While the three General Plan Land Use Alternatives allow for long-term agricultural production in areas designated for Open Space, the areas proposed for Open Space are not currently identified as important farmland by the state. As a result, this policy will not result in the preservation of existing important farmland.

The conversion of agricultural land to urban uses is a long and continuing trend within the planning area. Although it is difficult to quantify the amount of agricultural land that is under development pressure, such pressure exists and will continue with or without implementation of any of the three proposed General Plan Alternatives.

With the continuing urbanization of the planning area, the value of land for the remainder of the planning area will increase, which will in turn encourage the sale of farmland for conversion to urban uses. The increased value of land will make it difficult for farmers to buy or lease agricultural land in the area. Additionally, a net decrease in farmland under cultivation may have an indirect consequent increase in agricultural production costs such as transportation and labor. Agricultural activities tend to be incompatible with urban and suburban neighbors because of factors such as fugitive dust, chemical drift, odors, pesticide use, and machinery noise associated with normal farming operations. Some other factors which make agriculture economically infeasible in urbanized areas are increased incidences of theft and vandalism and increased distances to support services and processing facilities.

As a result, while there are existing pressures that would result in the conversion of agriculture within and adjacent to the planning area with or without implementation of any of the three proposed General Plan Alternatives, the General Plan will result in a significant and unavoidable impact associated with the conversion of existing agricultural land to non-agricultural uses.

Potential mitigation measures exist which would reduce the impact related to the loss of agricultural resources within the planning area. These potential mitigation measures include:

- Enrolling productive agricultural land, not presently under contract, under a Williamson Act contract;
- Providing protection to on-going agricultural operations from complaints and nuisance complaints from adjacent new development;
- Protecting productive agricultural land subject to conversion through the purchase or transfer of its development rights;
- Purchasing conservation easements on existing agricultural land to ensure that the land is never converted to urban uses; and
- Donating funds to a regional or statewide program that promotes and implements the use of agricultural land conservation easements.

As stated above, General Plan Land Use Alternatives 1, 2, and 3 contain policies to encourage the interim use of land for agricultural activities. However, even with these measures, there are existing pressures that would result in the conversion of agriculture within and adjacent to the planning area with or without implementation of any of the three proposed General Plan Alternatives. Therefore, a significant and unavoidable impact to agriculture as a result of the implementation of General Plan Land Use Alternatives 1, 2, or 3 will remain.

Since the Williamson Act program is a voluntary program for private property owners, the City can only encourage owners of agricultural land to enter into contracts. While encouraging property owners to enter into Williamson Act contracts will result in the short-term preservation of the farmland, property owners have the option of non-renewal of their contract at any time, and after the ten year contract period ends, the agricultural land will be available for conversion to urban uses. Providing protection for on-going agricultural activities from new development, such as requiring buffers between agricultural operations and new development or requiring disclosure to the purchasers of adjacent property of the potential impacts of agricultural activities on residential uses, will not result in the permanent preservation of the farmland. These potential mitigation measures only serve to provide farmers with the option to continue farming as long as they desire without fear of complaints and nuisance suits from new adjacent residents.

Since the use of Williamson Act contracts and regulations protecting interim agricultural activities will not result in the permanent preservation of farmland, the purchase or transfer of development rights, purchase of conservation easements, or donation of funds to assist in the conservation of farmland would need to be implemented to ensure the permanent preservation of farmland. These measures are economically infeasible and not consistent with the objectives and land uses of General Plan Land Use Alternative 1, 2, or 3. As there is no feasible mitigation measure consistent with the objectives and land uses of General Plan Land Use Alternative 1, 2, or 3, no mitigation measure is proposed and the impact will be significant and unavoidable.

Williamson Act

The planning area contains no land under a Williamson Act contract; therefore, implementation of any of the three General Plan alternatives could not result in significant impact associated with this issue.

Conversion of Agricultural Lands Due to Environmental Changes

As discussed above, by reducing the amount of land in the planning area in agricultural production, the project would have the indirect effect of increasing development pressure and accelerating the loss of the remainder of existing agricultural land, including adjacent agricultural lands. A net decrease in farmland under cultivation in an area has a consequent increase in agricultural production costs such as transportation and labor. Agricultural activities tend to be incompatible with urban and suburban neighbors

because of factors such as dust, odors, pesticide use and machinery noise associated with normal farming operations.

While implementation of General Plan Land Use Alternatives 1, 2, and 3 will increase development pressures on adjacent farmland, resulting in its conversion to urban uses, this conversion will be a continuation of an existing trend in the planning area and county, as described above and shown in **Table 5.8-2**. Based on this current trend and land use planning, development pressures will continue to affect adjacent agricultural lands whether or not General Plan Land Use Alternative 1, 2, or 3 is adopted and implemented.

Since adjacent agricultural land outside of the planning area is not under the jurisdiction of the City of Moreno Valley, the City is limited as to the control is has in reducing the potential impact to agricultural resources resulting from the implementation of General Plan Land Use Alternatives 1, 2, or 3. Mitigation measures, such as encouraging Williamson Act participation, transfer of development rights, or imposing fees on new development to be used for the preservation of existing agricultural lands, can not be imposed by the City on adjacent land outside of the City limits. As a result, the only way the City can mitigate the impact of implementing General Plan Alternatives 1, 2, or 3 is to mitigate for the loss of farmland within the planning area, as discussed above, thereby reducing development pressure on adjacent farmlands. Since the feasible mitigation measures that are available to reduce the impact to loss of farmland within the planning area are not consistent with the project objectives and land uses of the General Plan alternatives, no mitigation measure is proposed and the impact will be significant and unavoidable.

MITIGATION MEASURES

No feasible mitigation measure consistent with the General Plan Land Use Alternatives 1, 2, and 3 project objectives and land uses has been identified. As a result, no feasible mitigation measures have been identified.

IMPACT AFTER MITIGATION

Significant and unavoidable.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

None.