



July 30, 2019

VIA EMAIL: SIPA@FRESNO.GOV

Ms. Jennifer Clark, Planning Director
c/o Marty-Sorge-Jauss, Executive Assistant
Development and Resource Management
2600 Fresno Street, Room 3065
Fresno, CA 93721

Governor's Office of Planning & Research

AUG 02 2019

STATE CLEARINGHOUSE

Dear Ms. Clark:

NOTICE OF PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT FOR THE
PROPOSED SOUTH INDUSTRIAL PRIORITY AREA SPECIFIC PLAN PROJECT,
SCH# 2019079022

The Department of Conservation's (Department) Division of Land Resource Protection (Division) has reviewed the Notice of Preparation for the proposed South Industrial Priority Area Specific Plan Project (Project). The Division monitors farmland conversion on a statewide basis and administers the California Land Conservation (Williamson) Act and other agricultural land conservation programs. We offer the following comments and recommendations with respect to the proposed project's potential impacts on agricultural land and resources.

Project Description

The City of Fresno is preparing the South Industrial Priority Area Specific Plan to facilitate opportunities for economic growth, job creation, and promote development of underutilized lands within the planning area. The proposed project would establish a planning framework to facilitate and guide future development within the 6,150-acre planning area through the year 2040.

The approximately 6,150-acre planning area, located in the southern portion of the City, is largely comprised of land within the City limits. However, the planning area also includes land within the City's Sphere of Influence (SOI) to the north, east, and west, and (as an option) land outside of the City's SOI to the south.

Department Comments

The Department recommends the following discussion under the Agricultural Resources section of the Environmental Impact Report:

- Type, amount, and location of farmland conversion resulting directly and indirectly from implementation of the proposed project.
- Impacts on any current and future agricultural operations in the vicinity; e.g., land-use conflicts, increases in land values and taxes, loss of agricultural support infrastructure such as processing facilities, etc.
- Incremental impacts leading to cumulative impacts on agricultural land. This would include impacts from the proposed project, as well as impacts from past, current, and likely future projects.
- Proposed mitigation measure for all impacted agricultural lands within the proposed project area.

Although direct conversion of agricultural land is often an unavoidable impact under CEQA analysis, mitigation measures must be considered. In some cases, the argument is made that mitigation cannot reduce impacts to below the level of significance because agricultural land will still be converted by the project, and therefore, mitigation is not required. However, reduction to a level below significance is not a criterion for mitigation under CEQA. Rather, the criterion is feasible mitigation that lessens a project's impacts.

All mitigation measures that are potentially feasible should be considered. A measure brought to the attention of the Lead Agency should not be left out unless it is infeasible based on its elements. The Department suggests that the City consider the adoption of an agricultural land mitigation program that will effectively mitigate the conversion of agricultural land.

Agricultural Mitigation Program

Agricultural conservation easements are an available mitigation tool that the City should consider. The Department highlights easements as a mitigation tool because of their acceptance and use by lead agencies as an appropriate mitigation measure under CEQA and because they follow an established rationale similar to that of wildlife habitat mitigation.

Programs that establish agricultural conservation easements and in-lieu fees for mitigation banking are most effective at conserving comparable quality agricultural land when the easement requirements or fees are determined concurrent with project approval. Should significant time elapse between initial approval and the applicant's receipt of a building or grading permit, conflict may arise over the agricultural quality or value of the land being converted.

Mitigation via agricultural conservation easements can be implemented by at least two alternative approaches: the outright purchase of easements or the donation of mitigation fees to a local, regional, or statewide organization or agency whose purpose includes the acquisition and stewardship of agricultural conservation easements. The conversion of agricultural land should be deemed an impact of at least regional significance. Hence, the search for replacement lands should not be limited strictly to lands within the project's surrounding area.

A source that has proven helpful for regional and statewide agricultural mitigation banks is the California Council of Land Trusts. They provide helpful insight into farmland mitigation policies and implementation strategies, including a guidebook with model policies and a model local ordinance. The guidebook can be found at:

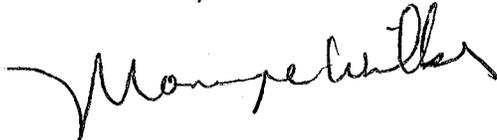
<https://www.calandtrusts.org/resources/conserving-californias-harvest/>

Another source is the Division's California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP), which has participated in bringing about conservation easements throughout the State of California involving many California land trusts. Any other feasible mitigation measures should also be considered.

Conclusion

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the Notice of Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report for the proposed South Industrial Priority Area Specific Plan Project. Please provide this Department with notices of any future hearing dates as well as any staff reports pertaining to this project. If you have any questions regarding our comments, please contact Farl Grundy, Environmental Planner at (916) 324-7347 or via email at Farl.Grundy@conservation.ca.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Monique Wilber". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the left.

Monique Wilber
Conservation Program Support Supervisor

