This chapter provides an overview of Butte County, describing its regional location, landscape, history, economy, demographics and character.

A. Regional Location

Butte County lies in north central California at the northern end of the Sacramento Valley, approximately 150 miles northeast of San Francisco and 70 miles north of Sacramento. Butte County’s regional location is shown in
Figure BC-1. Butte County is bounded on the west by Glenn and Colusa Counties, with the Sacramento River and Butte Creek forming portions of the westerly boundary. To the north and northwest, the county adjoins Tehama County; to the east, Plumas County; to the west Glenn and Colusa Counties; and on the south and southeast, Sutter and Yuba Counties. The South Fork of Honcut Creek forms the southeast boundary with Yuba County. Aside from the lines of demarcation created by the Sacramento River, Butte Creek and Honcut Creek, the county’s boundaries do not reflect natural features or changes in landscape character.

B. Landscape

Butte County is located in the northeastern part of the Sacramento Valley and extends into the northern Sierra Nevada mountain range. The county’s total land area including incorporated municipalities is approximately 1,680 square miles (1,073,000 acres) and ranges in elevation from approximately 60 feet above sea level in the southwest corner of the county, adjacent to the Sacramento River, to 8,100 feet above sea level in the northeast corner of the county, near Butte Meadows. Humboldt Peak, located in northeastern Butte County, is the county’s highest point. The county’s three general topographical areas, the valley region, the foothills east of the valley and the mountain region east of the foothills, are distinct environments each with their unique wildlife and natural resources.

Defined by mountains, hills and rivers, the valley is where Butte County shows off its agricultural bounty. Occupying almost half of the county’s land, the valley is a wide and expansive green plain, neatly divided with hedge rows that protect acres of cropland, nut and fruit orchards, and meadows for livestock grazing. Late spring brings inundated wetlands with slim green rice stalks protruding from the water’s surface, and migratory birds rising in their flocks from the wetlands. Fresh water from the Sierra Nevada snowpack is fed
into the valley from the Feather River, the Sacramento River and Butte Creek, where wildflowers and butterflies bring color to the water’s edge.

A beautiful view of the Sacramento Valley is afforded from the foothill region, which encompasses a quarter of Butte County’s land area. One of the most picturesque views is along the Skyway, a scenic road with expansive views of the county’s palette of dark browns and greens, dusty oranges and yellows, and a backdrop of reds and blacks painted on the buttes. The foothill region is where the valley meets the forest. Winding forest roads lead to the Town of Paradise, as well as smaller communities tucked into the hillsides and under the tall canopy of the pine forest. In addition to humans, foothill residents include herds of migratory deer, bald eagles, the pallid bat and the American peregrine falcon. Feather Falls, the sixth tallest waterfall in the entire United States at 410 feet tall, is a hidden gem of the Butte County foothills. The foothill region also includes the red sand beaches and placid waters of the Lake Oroville State Recreation Area.
The mountain region makes up the remainder of Butte County and encompasses the majority of its eastern border. There is little urban development in this part of the county, and a large amount of the land is State- and federally-owned. Lassen National Forest is located at the northern tip of the county, named for Mount Lassen, a volcano that belongs to southern Cascade Range. Farther south is Plumas National Forest, which is famous for its old-growth trees including Coast Douglas Fir, Ponderosa Pine, White Fir, Red Fir and Jeffrey Pine.

### C. History

Butte County’s history is rich with Native American, early Spanish and Gold Rush roots.

1. **Native Americans**

The Native Americans were the first inhabitants of the Butte County area. The county included the territories of four groups of Native American peoples: the Maidu (mountain Maidu), the Nisenan (southern Maidu), the Konkow (northwestern Maidu) and Yana. Many Native Americans continue to reside in the area. The northern county was Maidu territory; they inhabited the mountain valleys from Honey Lake to Lassen Peak and generally at altitudes higher than 4,000 feet. The Nisenan territory was generally bounded by the Sacramento River in the west, the lower Feather River to the south, and the crest of the Sierra Nevada mountains to the east. The Konkow people inhabited the Feather River area, from west of Richbar almost to the Sutter Buttes, and the Sacramento River area from Butte City in the south to Butte Meadows in the north. The Yana people occupied a wide range of the county, from the edge of the Sacramento Valley to the crests of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada mountains.¹ The last member of the Yana tribe was a man called Ishi.

Ishi was also the last Native American in northern California to live the majority of his life outside of European American influence. Ishi and his ancestors occupied the foothill region near Mount Lassen, which is modern-day Butte County.

2. Spanish Exploration and Mining
Spaniards explored parts of the area now known as Butte County as early as 1808, in search of mission sites. Hunters and trappers, such as Jedediah Strong Smith and a group of Hudson’s Bay Company trappers, explored the present-day Butte County prior to the California gold rush of 1848. At that time, the region was outside the mainstream of both Mexican and American settlement and was scattered with just a handful of ranches on Mexican land grants.2

The discovery of gold in 1848 brought an influx of gold seekers to the region. Thousands of miners descended upon the area and set up transitory encampments, such as Bidwell Bar, Long Bar and Hamilton on the Feather River, and others along Butte Creek, where some gold was discovered. Mining camps established during the

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Gold Rush gradually developed into trading centers for mining and then for lumbering and agricultural goods.

3. **Settlement and Development**

In the latter part of the 19th century, the Gold Rush waned and the population steadied. The county’s economic emphasis shifted back towards agriculture, with many lucrative crops including rice, almonds, walnuts and peaches. In 1850, Butte County became incorporated into the State of California as one of the original 27 counties. In 1856, the county’s boundaries were redrawn to their current configuration. The County’s first municipality, the City of Chico, was incorporated in 1860. Biggs was incorporated in 1903, Gridley was incorporated in 1905, Oroville was incorporated in 1906, and Paradise was incorporated in 1979.

Railway transportation in California began in the mid-1800s. By 1864 there was a total of 147 miles of track, offering connections between the cities and population centers of San Francisco and San Jose; Folsom, Sacramento, Lincoln and Newcastle; and between Oroville and Marysville. The train from Oroville to Marysville was operated by the Northern Electric Railway, which later became the Sacramento Northern Railway Company. In 1870, a rail connection was made between Marysville and the City of Chico.³

The University now known as California State University, Chico was created by legislation enacted in 1887 and was originally called the Northern Branch State Normal School of California. John Bidwell of Chico donated the original plot for its development, and in 1889, the school opened its doors with 90 students enrolled.

Early migrants to the Richvale area quickly realized that the soil was heavy and clay-like, unlike the fertile soil of the San Joaquin Valley. Although the soil was unaccommodating for the crops the settlers were accustomed to growing,

Richvale soil was perfect for rice cultivation. In 1912, the first 1,000 acres of rice were planted in the Butte County community of Richvale, the birthplace of California rice cultivation.

Major roadways were another significant development for Butte County in the early 1900s. State Route 162, the major east-west connection in the county, connecting the Mendocino coast to the City of Oroville was established in 1919. State Route 99, the north-south highway running through Gridley and Chico, was paved and finished in the early 1930s, as was State Route 70, the north-south connection from Oroville to Marysville.

The need to secure water resources for the growing population in southern California prompted the State Legislature to pass the Central Valley Act in 1933. The Act authorized construction of various water projects, both local-serving as well as major State-wide developments that involved transporting from northern California to the south. The Act authorizes the construction of the tallest dam (770 feet) in the United States, the Oroville Dam. Construction of the Oroville Dam and Lake Oroville began in 1961.4

Since the 1970s there has been a sharp increase in the amount of development occurring throughout the foothill areas of the county. This development has been associated with an influx of retirement-age residents who moved to Butte County to enjoy its rural setting and take advantage of a relatively low cost of living. In the early 2000s, the unincorporated portion of Butte County experienced greater amounts of residential development spurred by the booming statewide demand for housing. This was especially the case in areas with municipal sewer service, such as Thermalito and southeast Oroville.

Nevertheless, the prime agricultural regions of the county have maintained their productivity and remain economically viable. These lands have been

protected from development through a variety of means, including the Williamson Act, which Butte County adopted in 1967; the Chico Area Greenline, created in 1982; the Agricultural Element, adopted in 1995; and the Agricultural Buffer Ordinance, adopted in 2007.

D. Economy

Agriculture has a major influence on the Butte County landscape and its economy and was the County’s primary industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Manufacturing and service industries also flourished during the twentieth century, as exemplified by the Diamond Match Company, canning, lumber and wood-processing enterprises. Other local industries included the manufacture of lead tube containers and prefabricated houses, structural steel fabrication, olive processing, sugar manufacturing, rice milling, walnut and almond processing and dairy processing.

Agriculture generates considerable economic activity and, as discussed in the Economic Development Element, trends indicate that agriculture will maintain a strong position within Butte County’s economy. Agriculture also supports other industrial sectors in Butte County, such as manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, which all generate a significant portion of the total sales volume in unincorporated Butte County. Other strong sales sectors in unincorporated Butte County are construction, wholesale and retail trades, and educational services.

Beginning in 2008, and continuing at the time that this General Plan is published, Butte County, like the rest of the state and country, has been experiencing a significant economic downturn. This recession affects virtually all of the business sectors in Butte County, and has caused significant fiscal strains on the County government.
E. Demographics

As of January 2009, the population of unincorporated Butte County was approximately 83,900 people. Although the population of the unincorporated portion of Butte County has generally been declining since 1990, the total county population has been increasing. The root cause for the unincorporated population decrease is annexation to all of Butte County’s municipalities.

In 2007, the median household income for the unincorporated county was approximately $41,900, which was higher than the overall county median household income of approximately $38,300, but lower than the statewide median household income of approximately $55,800. The median age of unincorporated Butte County residents is approximately 40 years, which is higher than the overall county and statewide median age of approximately 35 years. This higher median age in the unincorporated area is attributable to a relatively high percentage of the population that is over 55 years of age, as retirees find Butte County an appealing retirement home location. Over 83 percent of the total county’s population is white. People who identify themselves as two or more races or a race that is not listed by the Census make up about 10 percent of the population, and the remaining 7 percent consists of African American, American Indian, Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander people.

F. County Character

Historically, overall land use patterns in Butte County have been closely related to the natural characteristics of the county’s main geographic areas,
with population concentrated near the richly productive agricultural land on the valley floor, and more scattered populations in the foothills and mountains.

Urban lands have historically constituted a proportionally small share of total land area in Butte County, although the amount has been increasing over the years, as in other rural California counties. Most of the county’s urban land uses, including four of five of the incorporated municipalities, are located in the valley region.

Urban uses in the foothills are concentrated in and adjacent to the incorporated communities of Paradise and Oroville. The slopes east of Oroville have attracted both rural and urban development. In the Paradise area, development is dispersed over the ridges within the Town of Paradise, Paradise Pines, Magalia, and in other unincorporated communities to the north. Much of the new development in these areas is fueled by in-migration of retirees from more urbanized regions of California, attracted by the recreational opportunities, relatively low land and housing costs, and rustic, wooded environment in the foothills. Although no major urban settlements are located in the mountains, smaller communities are distributed throughout the area, including many former mining camps that are now centers of rural residential development or linked to the tourism industry.

Butte County’s small towns and communities are displayed in Figure BC-2, and were developed surrounding valuable resources. Farming and ranching towns developed within the valley floor, reflecting the rich agricultural soils and mild climate, proximity to transportation links, and available water supply. Foothill communities originally developed from popular mining camps, where 49ers struck gold or other valuable mineral resources. Small communities still exist in these historic locations.

Outside of the defined community areas, there is also rural residential, agricultural-industrial and scattered commercial development. Residential development mostly consists of single-family residences, many of which are
associated with active farming activities on the same or adjacent parcels. Some smaller parcels have been converted into rural home sites where active farming has been discontinued. Small industrial and commercial complexes, such as feed or machinery sales, well-drilling services, spray operations and food processing are dispersed throughout the valley. Gas stations, small food markets, local-serving retail stores and professional offices also make up some of the non-residential scattered rural land uses.