4.2 AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

This section evaluates impacts on agricultural and forestry resources from implementation of the proposed Specific Plan. Specifically, this section addresses consistency with state and local agricultural policies, conversion of forest land, and off-site conversion of agricultural land.

4.2.1 Setting

a. Overview of Regional Agriculture and Forest Lands. Butte County is divided into three agricultural regions—the valley, foothills, and timber lands. The valley region has rich alluvial soils and is the location of most of the intensive agriculture. The foothill region consists mostly of grazing lands, with limited crop production. The timber lands consist of timber harvesting and recreation in forested areas.

The total amount of plant cropland in Butte County was 475,784 acres in 2012. This farmland consists of 373,484 acres of field crops, 95,043 acres of fruit and nut crops, 6,468 acres of seed crops, and 789 acres of vegetable crops. Table 4.2-1 shows the 2011 and 2012 values of major crop groupings in Butte County. Estimated gross revenue sales of agricultural products in the County increased from approximately $644 million in 2011 to $721 million in 2012. The largest increases in crop values from 2009 to 2010 were in the fruit and nut crop and field crop groupings. Decreases in crop values occurred in the seed crop and nursery stock groupings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop Grouping</th>
<th>2011 Crop Value</th>
<th>2012 Crop Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apiary Products</td>
<td>$5,813,000</td>
<td>$7,340,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Crops</td>
<td>$160,306,000</td>
<td>$175,063,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit and Nut Crops</td>
<td>$416,935,000</td>
<td>$469,591,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock</td>
<td>$10,366,000</td>
<td>$11,421,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery Stock</td>
<td>$21,728,000</td>
<td>$21,558,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seed Crops</td>
<td>$18,648,000</td>
<td>$16,496,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetable Crops</td>
<td>$851,000</td>
<td>$872,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic Crops</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>$9,515,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$644,112,000</strong></td>
<td><strong>$721,434,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Butte County Agricultural Commissioner, 2012 Butte County Agricultural Crop Report, July 2013.

Timber resources are primarily located in the northeastern portions of Butte County at elevations between approximately 2,200 and 6,200 feet. The major vegetation community associated with timberlands in Butte County is westside mixed conifer (Sierra mixed conifer), which is dominated by sugar pine, ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, white fir, and incense cedar. In 2011, more than 45 million board feet of timber was produced in Butte County, with a value of approximately $9.5 million. In 2012, the value of timber production increased incrementally to approximately $9.6 million.
Regional Conversion of Farmlands. Conversion of farmlands is defined as the loss of farmlands due to development or land use changes that do not support agricultural production. The California Department of Conservation (DOC) has developed a classification system to categorize the quality of agricultural land resources. The DOC has implemented a Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP), which updates its maps biennially, to provide land use conversion information for decision makers to use in their planning for the present and future of California’s agricultural land resources.

Important Farmlands. The U.S. Soil Conservation Service Important Farmlands Inventory (IFI) system is used to inventory lands with agricultural value. This system divides farmland into classes based on productive capability of the land (rather than the mere presence of ideal soil conditions). The important farmlands map identifies five agriculture-related categories including prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, unique farmland, farmland of local importance, and grazing land. A description of each of these categories is provided below.

- **Prime Farmland.** Prime farmland is 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. The land must have been used for the production of irrigated crops at some time during the two update cycles prior to the most recent mapping date (the most recent map update for the region is 2008).

- **Farmland of Statewide Importance.** Farmland of statewide importance is land similar to prime farmland, but with minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or with less ability to hold and store moisture. The land must have been used for the production of irrigated crops at some time during the two update cycles prior to the mapping date.

- **Unique Farmland.** Unique farmland is land of lesser quality soils used for the production of the State’s leading agricultural crops (i.e., crops of high economic value, such as oranges, olives, avocados, rice, grapes, and cut flowers). This land is usually irrigated, but may include non-irrigated orchards or vineyards, as found in some climatic zones of California. The land must have been cultivated at some time during the two update cycles prior to the mapping of 2008.

- **Farmland of Local Importance.** Farmland of local importance to the local agricultural economy, as determined by each County’s Board of Supervisors and a local advisory committee. In Ventura County, farmland of local importance has been identified as soils that are listed as prime farmland or farmlands of statewide importance that are not irrigated, and soils growing dryland crops – beans, grain, dryland walnuts, and dryland apricots.

- **Grazing Land.** Grazing land is land on which the existing vegetation is suited to the grazing of livestock. The minimum mapping unit for this category is 40 acres.

The conversion of important farmlands in Butte County from 2006 to 2008 is based on information from the DOC and is illustrated in Table 4.2-2 below. As indicated in Table 4.2-2, Butte County has experienced a 0.6 percent decrease (1,494 acres) in important farmland from the
period of 2006 to 2008. Grazing land also decreased 1.4 percent during this period. The loss of grazing land is primarily the result of the development of low-density housing, farmsteads, rural commercial, mining facilities and the delineation of riparian areas in Butte County (DOC, 2011).

Table 4.2-2
Important Farmland Conversion in Butte County

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance Category</th>
<th>Acreage Inventoried</th>
<th>Percent Change (+/-)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prime Farmland</td>
<td>196,217</td>
<td>194,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmland of Statewide Importance</td>
<td>21,602</td>
<td>22,794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Farmland</td>
<td>24,236</td>
<td>23,077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmland of Local Importance</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important Farmland Subtotal</td>
<td>242,055</td>
<td>240,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grazing Land</td>
<td>407,680</td>
<td>401,859</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Land Total</td>
<td>649,735</td>
<td>642,420</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


b. Agricultural Uses in the Project Area. The entire 689-acre Specific Plan area consists of undeveloped land, portions of which have historically been used for grazing activities. The DOC has classified the entire Specific Plan area as grazing land (DOC, 2012). According to the DOC, grazing land is not considered important farmland because its soils do not support irrigated agricultural production. The project site is not under a Williamson Act contract nor are any of the parcels located immediately adjacent to the project site (Butte County Williamson Act Lands, 2010). In the vicinity of the Specific Plan area, grazing lands which currently support agricultural production are located east of SR 70. As noted, the applicant is planting walnut trees on approximately 293 acres of the project site (see Figure 2-14). This is an interim use and does not change the DOC classification.

c. Agricultural/Urban Interface Issues. Urban development in the Specific Plan area would place residential uses in proximity to existing grazing land to the west of SR 70 and interim agricultural uses on the site as discussed in Section 2.0, Project Description. Potential agricultural/urban land use conflicts can arise from the following activities:

Potential Concerns for Urban Neighbors.

- Use of pesticides/dust generation in vicinity of residential neighborhoods, particularly near schools.
- Odors and health concerns associated with fertilizer/pesticide application and livestock.
- Noise related to farming equipment or farm worker activities.
- Farm worker parking.
Potential Concerns for Agricultural Interests.

- Restrictions on activity arising from neighbor concerns/complaints
- Loss of revenue and competitiveness
- Competition for water and land
- Pilferage, trespassing, and littering
- Dust from adjacent construction activity

d. Regulatory Setting. Several regulatory measures intended to preserve agriculture have been adopted at the state and local levels. These include Williamson Act/Land Conservation Act (LCA) contracts, General Plan 2030 policies, and requirements for agricultural buffers in the Butte County Zoning Ordinance. Butte County has also adopted a Right to Farm Ordinance that protects existing agricultural lands against nuisance lawsuits from adjacent urban development. Existing programs and policies intended to preserve and protect agriculture in the region are described below.

Williamson Act/Land Conservation Act (LCA) Contracts. A primary tool to preserve farmlands is the California Land Conservation Act (LCA) or Williamson Act contract program, established in 1965. Under provisions of the Act, private landowners may voluntarily enter into a long-term contract (minimum of 10 years) with cities and counties to form agricultural preserves and maintain their property in agricultural or open space uses in return for a reduced property tax assessment based on the agricultural value of the property. The term of an LCA contract is generally ten years and the contract automatically renews itself each year for another ten-year period, unless a Notice of Non-Renewal is filed or the contract is cancelled. State Government Code Section 51282 provides specific findings that must be made for the approval of LCA contract cancellations. Currently, Butte County has 1,395 parcels under LCA contract, comprising a total of 218,695 acres (Butte County Williamson Act Lands, 2010). However, no parcels under an LCA contract occur within the Specific Plan area or its immediate surroundings.

Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program. The California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) develops statistical data for analyzing impacts to California’s agricultural resources. The FMMP program characterizes “Prime Farmland” as land with the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics that are able to sustain long-term production of agricultural crops. “Farmland of Statewide Importance” is characterized as land with a good combination of physical and chemical characteristics for agricultural production, but with less ability to store soil moisture than prime farmland. “Unique Farmland” is used for production of the state’s major crops on soils not qualifying as prime farmland or of statewide importance. The FMMP also identifies “Urban and Built-up Land”, “Other Land” that is not included in any other mapping category, and “Water.”

California Public Resources Code Section 12220(g). "Forest land" is land that can support 10-percent native tree cover of any species, including hardwoods, under natural conditions, and that allows for management of one or more forest resources, including timber, aesthetics, fish and wildlife, biodiversity, water quality, recreation, and other public benefits.
California Public Resources Code Section 56064. This section defines prime agricultural land and provides criteria used by LAFCO to determine whether specific actions under their jurisdiction and authority would adversely impact prime agricultural land.

Butte County Right to Farm Ordinance. Butte County has adopted a Right to Farm Ordinance (Butte County Code Chapter 35, Protection of Agricultural Land). This ordinance protects properly conducted agricultural operations in the unincorporated County against nuisance lawsuits, and requires annual disclosure to all property owners within the County of the right to farm. In addition, the ordinance requires disclosure to buyers of real property and as part of development approvals. While the County Right-to-Farm Ordinance specifically applies to commercial agricultural operations within the unincorporated area, all commercial agricultural operations that comply with agricultural standards currently are protected from nuisance claims under State law (Section 3482.5 of the California Civil Code), whether located within cities or unincorporated areas.

General Plan 2030 Policies. The Agriculture Element of the General Plan 2030 includes the following policies that would apply to new developments in agricultural areas. These are provided for reference but because the Specific Plan site is designated “Specific Plan to be Developed” in the General Plan, the policies do not directly apply to the project:

AG-P2.3. Redesignation and rezoning of land designated as Agriculture to an urban designation shall be allowed only when the applicant can demonstrate that the following criteria are met and mitigated:

a) The lot(s) for which conversion is requested is adjacent to uses other than agriculture or agricultural support uses (e.g. receiving plants, hulling plants).

b) The conversion will not be detrimental to existing agricultural operations.

c) The conversion land is adjacent to existing urban infrastructure and conversion will constitute a logical contiguous extension of a designated urban area.

d) No feasible alternative exists that is less detrimental to agriculture.

e) Full mitigation of impacts to the extent allowed under the law is provided, including, but not limited to, roads, drainage, schools, fire protection, law enforcement, recreation, sewage and lighting.

AG-P2.6. The County shall retain and protect agricultural lands through the use of proactive land use techniques, including, but not limited to, the following:

a) Clustered development projects, allowing a “clustering” of permitted densities in a compact configuration in order to protect agricultural land.

b) Density bonuses, permitting increased density on developable land in exchange for protection of agricultural land.

AG-P5.3. The Zoning Ordinance shall require that a buffer be established on property proposed for residential development in order to protect existing agricultural uses from incompatible use conflicts. The desired standard shall be 300 feet, but may be adjusted to address unusual circumstances.
Agricultural Buffer Policy. Pursuant to Policy AG-P5.3 from the General Plan 2030, Butte County has adopted Article 17 of the Zoning Ordinance which requires buffers between existing agricultural land and new residential development. This article applies to residential structures in all agricultural buffer areas. The agricultural buffer is applied to the following areas of the county:

a) All lands zoned Agriculture;

b) Other zones within 300 feet of the boundary of Agriculture zones; and

c) Areas inside and within 300 feet of sphere of influence boundaries for incorporated cities, where the boundary abuts parcels zoned Agriculture.

The required setback distance for dwellings within an agricultural buffer area is 300 feet from any property line that abuts Agriculture zones.

Butte County Residential/Agricultural Buffer Implementation Guidelines. Pursuant to Section 24-286(c)(2) of the Butte County Code, agricultural buffer guidelines are intended to help implement the 300-foot buffer required by Butte County Code Section 24-286 and to provide guidance to address requests for modification to the 300’ agricultural buffer requirement. These guidelines are intended to support implementation of General Plan Policy AG-P5.3 identified above. Design guidelines for maintenance of the 300 foot transition areas between urban and agricultural areas are incorporated into the Specific Plan to ensure interface concerns referenced above are managed as the Specific Plan is developed.

Butte County Agriculture Mitigation Ordinance. This draft ordinance is intended to protect Butte County’s agricultural lands from conversion to nonagricultural uses, establish provisions for agricultural conservation easements granted in perpetuity as a means of mitigating loss of agricultural land and establish standards for the acquisition and long-term oversight of agricultural conservation easements. The ordinance is included herein for reference purposes. As noted, it is in draft form and scheduled to be reviewed by the Board of Supervisors in Fall, 2014. However, because the project site is designated “Specific Plan to be Developed” in the Butte County General Plan 2030, this draft ordinance would not apply per Section 2(b)(i).

4.2.2 Impact Analysis

a. Methodology and Significance Thresholds. The proposed Specific Plan was evaluated for consistency with regulatory requirements, impacts on forestry resources, and off-site impacts on agricultural land.

Significance criteria found in Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines provide a means to identify potentially significant impacts. Impacts to agriculture would be significant if implementation of the Specific Plan would:

a. Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland) to nonagricultural use
b. Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract
c. Conflict with existing zoning for, or cause rezoning of, forest land, timberland, or timberland zoned Timberland Production
Section 4.2 Agriculture and Forestry

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d. Result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use

e. Involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland, to non-agricultural use or conversion of forest land to non-forest use

In addition to the Appendix G criteria, agricultural impacts would be considered significant if the proposed Specific Plan is inconsistent with applicable state and local regulations addressing agricultural and forestry resources.

b. Project Impacts and Mitigation Measures. The following impacts have been identified with respect to agricultural resources.

Impact AG-1  The proposed Specific Plan is consistent with the Williamson Act, the General Plan 2030, and the County’s Zoning Ordinance. Impacts related to applicable agricultural regulations would be Class III, less than significant.

The proposed Specific Plan would be subject to state regulations and County policies referenced herein that pertain to agriculture and forestry resources. As discussed, the site has historically been used for grazing purposes and is not designated prime, unique or farmland of statewide importance. The Williamson Act requires that lands under LCA contract remain in agricultural use for the duration of the contract. As discussed, no parcels under LCA contract are located within or near the Specific Plan area. Thus, these resources would not be affected by the proposed project. The construction of backbone infrastructure serving the initial development phase could involve conversion of agricultural land off-site. Specifically, the third alternative route for a wastewater conveyance system to the Specific Plan area, as shown in Figure 2-12, would traverse farmland north of Palermo Road and west of Baggett Palermo Road. Nevertheless, according to the County’s most recent map of properties under LCA contract, this potential sewer route would not cross Williamson Act lands (Butte County Williamson Act Lands, 2010). Therefore, the initial development phase including 200 residences and backbone infrastructure would not conflict with the Williamson Act.

As noted, the Specific Plan site is currently zoned Agriculture-80. General Plan 2030 designates the Specific Plan site as “Specific Plan to be Developed”. As part of the entitlement process for the proposed project, the site would be rezoned to accommodate the land use designations identified in the Specific Plan. No prime, unique or farmland of statewide importance occurs on the site; thus, the project would not conflict with applicable General Plan policies related to agricultural conversion.

As discussed in the project description, the applicant is proposing to develop an interim agricultural use on the site as part of the Phase I development. The Specific Plan provides methods that would be used to manage the urban and agricultural interface consistent with Article 17 of the County’s Zoning Ordinance and Section 24-286(c)(2) of the Butte County Code. Further, the Specific Plan provides a method that defines how the transition from agricultural to residential (and related uses identified in the Specific Plan) would occur during development of subsequent phases to minimize adverse impacts to residents within and adjacent to the Specific

County of Butte

4.2-7
Plan area. Therefore, implementation of the Specific Plan would have less than significant impact related to consistency with state and local agricultural policies.

**Mitigation Measures.** This impact would be less than significant without mitigation. No mitigation is required.

**Significance After Mitigation.** This impact would be less than significant without mitigation.

**Impact AG-2**  
The Specific Plan area primarily consists of grassland with small clusters of oak woodland as well as riparian vegetation along two arroyos. The project site does not include forest land and is not zoned as such. Impacts related to forest land are Class III, less than significant.

Forest land in Butte County is generally located at higher elevations in mountainous areas. By contrast, the project site is located at the intersection of the Sacramento Valley and Sierra Nevada foothills, where the natural landscape is dominated by grassland with occasional oak woodlands. Although the Specific Plan area includes oak woodland along riparian corridors and Pacific Heights Road, its predominant landscape is grassland. Pursuant to Section 12220(g) of the California Public Resources Code, “forest land” is defined as supporting 10-percent native tree cover of any species under natural conditions. Within the Specific Plan area as a whole, the tree cover is less than 10 percent. Furthermore, as discussed in Section 4.1, Aesthetics and Visual Resources, the Specific Plan would protect and enhance existing oak woodland on the project site within natural open space and residential areas. Therefore, the proposed project would not substantially affect forest land, either in the near term or at full build out. Furthermore, the Specific Plan area is currently zoned for agricultural use rather than timber production. Impacts related to forest land would be less than significant.

**Mitigation Measures.** This impact would be less than significant without mitigation. No mitigation is required.

**Significance After Mitigation.** This impact would be less than significant without mitigation.

**Impact AG-3**  
Implementation of the Specific Plan could involve construction of water and sewer lines through agricultural land off-site. However, important farmland would not be affected, and any disturbance of agricultural activities would be temporary. Therefore, impacts related to the conversion of other agricultural land outside the Specific Plan area would be Class III, less than significant.

In addition to converting grazing land to urban uses within the project site, implementation of the Specific Plan could disturb off-site agricultural uses during construction of sanitary sewer and water lines that would serve the Specific Plan. Three potential routes for sewer lines are outlined in Section 2.0, Project Description. The preferred route for a connection to the existing
sewer system, as shown in Figure 2-10, would not cross agricultural land. Therefore, impacts related to the conversion of farmland outside the Specific Plan area would be less than significant.

As shown in Figure 2-11, Alternative Route 2 would require construction of a sewer force main north along Pacific Heights Road and then east along Georgia Pacific Road to the existing pump station located near the intersection with Merlo Avenue. As shown in Figure 2-12, Alternative Route 3 would involve construction of a sewer force main from Palermo Road northward along Occidental Avenue and continue off-road to Baggett Palermo Road and Baggett Marysville Road before connecting with an existing line extending from Palm Avenue. According to DOC’s Important Farmland Finder, these routes would traverse land suitable for grazing south of Georgia Pacific Road and between Occidental Avenue and Baggett Palermo Road, and to the north/northwest of Baggett Marysville Road. No prime farmland occurs within this area.

Using a conservative assumption that construction of a sewer main would disturb a corridor 40 feet in width, Alternative 2 could affect approximately 3.2 acres of grazing land; Alternative 3 could affect approximately 5.79 acres of grazing land. However, the disturbance would be temporary and after construction existing activity could resume on the surface.

The water line would be constructed generally from the SR 70/Pacific Heights/Ophir Road intersection east on Ophir Road approximately 3,500 feet. Per the DOC Important Farmland Finder, grazing land occurs in this area. There are no LCA or prime, unique or farmlands of statewide importance. The water line could disturb up to 3.2 acres; however, this would be temporary.

As discussed above, decisions required by LAFCO to approve annexations would be evaluated per California Code Section 56064 to determine whether LAFCO-approved actions would adversely impact prime farmland. The criteria define prime agricultural land as meeting one or more of the following qualification:

(a) Land that qualifies, if irrigated, for rating as class I or class II in the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service land use capability classification, whether or not land is actually irrigated, provided that irrigation is feasible;

(b) Land that qualifies for rating 80 through 100 Storie Index Rating;

(c) Land that supports livestock used for the production of food and fiber and that has an annual carrying capacity equivalent to at least one animal unit per acre as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture in the National Range and Pasture Handbook, Revision 1, December 2003;

(d) Land planted with fruit or nut-bearing trees, vines, bushes, or crops that have a nonbearing period of less than five years and that will return during the commercial bearing period on an annual basis from the production of unprocessed agricultural plant production not less than four hundred dollars ($400) per acre.
(e) Land that has returned from the production of unprocessed agricultural plant products an annual gross value of not less than four hundred dollars ($400) per acre for three of the previous five calendar years.

The Specific Plan site is zoned Agricultural 80; however, as described above, soil characteristics and productive capacity of the land are best suited for grazing purposes. There is no active agricultural production on the site. The project applicant is proposing to plant walnut trees on the site to provide a source of revenue while the Specific Plan is being constructed. The applicant is proposing to install a well and temporary piping system to irrigate the walnut trees. The trees and irrigation system will be removed as needed to accommodate development and maintain at least a 300 foot transition buffer between urban and agricultural uses. The primary purpose of the site is to accommodate development of the Specific Plan rather than agricultural production. Thus, even with active walnut production, the site would not meet the above criteria within the period of time required to complete the annexation process.

**Mitigation Measures.** This impact would be less than significant without mitigation. No mitigation is required.

**Significance After Mitigation.** This impact would be less than significant without mitigation.

c. **Cumulative Impacts.** By the year 2017, the proposed Specific Plan would involve the construction of backbone roadways, utilities, and up to 200 residences and interim agricultural production west of SR 70. Concurrent with this development, cumulative projects as defined in Table 3-1 may also be constructed. Cumulative development would result in the conversion of agricultural land south of the City of Oroville. In particular, the Powerhouse Mine expansion would involve long-term open-pit extraction on more than 450 acres of agricultural land to the south of the Specific Plan area, adjacent to SR 70. Approximately 265 acres of the Powerhouse Mine site (53 percent) consists of prime farmland that would be disturbed, although with reclamation of other land on-site, this project would result in a net loss of 12 acres of prime farmland (Butte County, Power House DEIR, 2012). The Planning Commission approved the project under the environmentally superior alternative that avoided the 12-acre loss of prime farmland.

Cumulative development is assumed to occur in accordance with buildout of the General Plan 2030 and regulations applicable to the site and project. The General Plan 2030 EIR projected that buildout of the General Plan would result in redesignating approximately 4,700 acres of important farmlands for non-agricultural uses, representing a significant and unavoidable agricultural impact. Nevertheless, the proposed Specific Plan would only require the conversion of grazing lands, which the DOC does not classify as important farmland. Therefore, the Specific Plan would not contribute to a cumulative loss of important farmland. Impacts would be less than significant.