

## ***4.8 AGRICULTURAL AND TIMBER RESOURCES***

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### ***Agriculture – Environmental Setting***

This section addresses the recent history and present state of agriculture and timber production in Sonoma County. Specific topics include conversions of agricultural and forest land; agricultural processing and the viability of vineyards, dairies, and other Sonoma agricultural production, and agricultural tourism issues resulting from wineries and special events. Current County, State, and federal regulatory oversight are explained. Some topics discussed in this section overlap with other sections of this EIR, including Sections **4.1 Land Use, Population, and Housing**; **4.5 Hydrology and Water Resources**; **4.7 Geology / Soils**; and **4.11 Visual Resources**. Agriculture impacts are most closely related to the *Draft GP 2020* Land Use and Agricultural Resources Elements.

#### **AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION**

Sonoma County remains one of the most productive farm counties, ranking 16<sup>th</sup> in California and 34<sup>th</sup> in the nation. It is the specialty food basket of the Bay Area, with farms and ranches producing a variety of crops and products. Some types of farms cover thousands of acres, such as dairy farms, vineyards, and apple orchards, while specialty crops like organic vegetables, peaches, blueberries, olives, and kiwi are grown on small-scale farms ranging from five to 20 acres. Except for vineyards, other agricultural commodities generally do not generate sufficient profit to justify agricultural land prices in the county. Local farmers have to rely more on specialty niche markets and creative marketing to be competitive.<sup>1</sup>

Sonoma County's agricultural history is based on soil types and a climate that has fostered a diversity of farm based production. Over the years the most valuable crop produced in the county has shifted several times: In the beginning of the last century, apples dominated the market, followed by a shift to poultry in the late 1920's, dairy products in the mid 1950's, and wine grapes in the late 1980's.<sup>2</sup> There are remnants of the great diversity of the early part of the last century: apples and prunes are only shadows of their peak importance; dairy farms are still present, although greatly reduced in number; growing vegetables has increased, with particular value in organic vegetables; the nursery industry has grown to supply the demand for varietal wine grape rootstock and other plants; and the livestock industry still has value, but greatly reduced are the number of egg ranches and sheep herds. Urbanization and changing economic conditions have also taken their toll.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Sonoma County agriculture digs in during tough time – farms, ranches confront sluggish economy, increasing regulations*, Tim Tesconi, Press Democrat, June 4, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Sonoma County Agricultural Crop Report—1999*, prepared by the Office of the Agricultural Commissioner, Sonoma County, California, April 2000.

<sup>3</sup> *Looking Back to the Future – the Last 100 Years in Sonoma County Agriculture*, Sonoma County Agricultural Commissioners, [http://www.sonoma-county.org/agcomm/agcomm\\_division/soco\\_ag\\_99.htm](http://www.sonoma-county.org/agcomm/agcomm_division/soco_ag_99.htm), July 2003.

**Exhibit 4.8-1** shows the relative production value of the major commodities in Sonoma County from 1985 to 2000. Wine grapes now account for 65 percent of the total farm income (approximately \$389,855,000). Because they are among the best grapes in the world, vineyards have replaced prune orchards, vegetable farms, and cow pastures.<sup>4</sup> Milk is the second leading commodity, valued at about \$90 million, or 15 percent of the total Sonoma County farm income. While production value for wine grapes has steadily increased, with an increase of 322 percent from 1985 to 2000, the value of milk (included in the category of *Livestock and Poultry Products*) has steadily declined 26 percent during the same period. In fact, with the exception of wine grapes and nursery production, all other categories have declined over the past 15 years in production value. Other major agricultural industries are poultry and eggs (included in the category *Livestock Production*), which comprise nine percent; nursery production (which includes grapevines), which is almost six percent, with other fruits and nuts, vegetable crops, and field crops each comprising about one percent of the total. Organic farming production value is growing statewide and in the county. The county agricultural sector has become more reliant on the predominant wine industry.

Timber production value has increased 287 percent since 1985; it comprises about three percent of the total agricultural and timber production value.

**Exhibit 4.8-1**  
**Sonoma County Total Timber and Agricultural Production Value (2000 Dollars)**

<b>Commodity</b>	<b>1985 (Dollars)</b>	<b>1991 (Dollars)</b>	<b>1995 (Dollars)</b>	<b>2000 (Dollars)</b>	<b>Percent of Total (2000)</b>	<b>Net Change (1985-2000)</b>	<b>Percent Change (1985- 2000)</b>
Timber	5,036,880	10,396,830	13,116,984	19,493,979	3.2	14,457,099	287.0
Fruits/Nuts (less wine grapes)	18,182,851	13,464,978	6,655,349	3,520,000	0.6	14,662,851	-80.6
Wine Grapes	92,342,717	186,869,746	179,459,518	389,853,900	64.4	297,511,183	322.2
Livestock Production	62,699,977	45,572,566	42,131,713	54,194,600	9.0	8,505,377	-13.6
Livestock and Poultry Products	121,931,726	100,619,039	93,901,541	90,818,300	15.0	31,113,426	-25.5
Nursery Production	18,795,083	38,731,472	35,022,587	33,270,400	5.5	14,475,317	77.0
Vegetable Crops	9,528,037	12,001,784	19,459,052	6,640,600	1.1	2,887,437	-30.3
Field Crops	14,958,481	12,911,966	10,314,938	7,178,400	1.2	7,780,081	-52.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>343,475,752</b>	<b>420,568,381</b>	<b>400,061,682</b>	<b>604,970,179</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>261,494,427</b>	<b>76.1</b>

Source: *Economics Discussion Paper: Agricultural Processing*, Economic & Planning Systems, Inc, June 12, 2002.

### **Soils**

Agricultural soils are typically deep, fertile soils with good drainage and minimal shrink-swell and erosion potential. Timber soils tend to be acidic, free of harmful salts, low in fertility, high in permeability, and well-drained. Generally, prime agricultural soils are those under Soil Capability Classes I and II. The factors that contribute to quality agricultural lands are quite similar to those

<sup>4</sup> *Sonoma County agriculture digs in during tough time – farms, ranches confront sluggish economy, increasing regulations*, Tim Tesconi, Press Democrat, June 4, 2003.

desired for development interests. As a result there is frequently direct competition between agricultural uses and development interests, particularly on soils in Capability Class I. Soils are discussed in further detail in *Section 4.7 Geology / Soils*.

### ***Farmland Classification and Farmland Conversion***

As of 2002, Sonoma County had approximately 583,274 acres of agricultural land (57 percent of the county), as determined by the State.<sup>5</sup> Of that total, 421,126 acres (41 percent) were designated as *grazing land* and 162,148 acres (about 16 percent of the county) were classified as *important farmlands* (using California Department of Conservation [CDC] definitions). Grazing land represents land where existing vegetation is suitable for grazing or browsing, whether grown naturally or through management. Important farmland categories represent the agricultural lands most suitable for cultivating crops, and include Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Local Importance, as described below. These four types of important farmland, plus grazing land, constitute the agricultural lands mapped by the State.

- *Prime Farmland* – Lands with the best combination of physical and chemical features able to sustain long term production of agricultural crops. The land must be cropped and be supported by a developed irrigation water supply that is dependable and of adequate quality during the growing season. Land must have been used for production of irrigated crops at some time during the two update cycles prior to the mapping date.
- *Farmland of Statewide Importance* – Lands similar to Prime Farmland but with minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or less ability to store soil moisture. These lands have the same reliable source of adequate quality irrigation water available during the growing season. Land must have been used for production of irrigated crops at some time during the two update cycles prior to the mapping date.
- *Unique Farmland* – Less quality soils used for production of the State’s leading agricultural crops. These lands are usually irrigated, but may include non-irrigated orchards or vineyards as found in some climatic zones of California. Land must have been cropped at some time during the two update cycles prior to the mapping date.
- *Farmland of Local Importance* – Land of importance to the local agricultural economy as determined by each county’s board of supervisors and local advisory committees. In Sonoma County, these farmlands include the hay producing areas of the Santa Rosa Plains, Petaluma Valley, and Tubbs Island Naval Reservation. Additional areas also include those lands which are classified as having the capability for producing locally important crops such as grapes, corn, etc., but may not be planted at the present time.
- *Grazing Land* – Lands of at least 40 acres on which the existing vegetation is suited to the grazing of livestock.

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<sup>5</sup> *California Farmland Conversion Report–2000 - 2002*, prepared by the staff of the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, California Department of Conservation, 2004. These maps depict actual conditions; they are updated every two years, using a computer mapping system, aerial photos, public review, and field reconnaissance. They do not reflect land use plan designations.

- *Urban and Built-Up Land* – Land occupied by structures with a building density of at least one unit to 1.5 acres, or approximately six structures to a ten-acre parcel.
- *Other Land* – Lands that do not meet the criteria of any other category.

The county’s supply of agricultural land, while increasing in several categories, has experienced a net decrease since 1992. As shown in **Exhibit 4.8-2**, between 1992 and 2002 the amount of Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance and Unique Farmland increased (gain of 16,349 acres), while the amount of Farmland of Local Importance decreased (loss of 22,812 acres) for a net loss of 6,463 acres of Important Farmland.<sup>6</sup> Part of this change is due to adjustments by the CDC to boundaries and corrections made to soil unit identification throughout the county. The primary reason for the increase in the amount of farmland is due to vineyard additions. The loss of Grazing Land (21,258 acres between 1992 and 2002) was primarily due to a reclassification of lands that were developed in previous years.<sup>7</sup> Neither the adjustments and corrections, nor the reclassification, was the result of farmland conversion during this period. As a result, it is likely that these data actually indicate a net increase in agricultural land.

**Exhibit 4.8-2**  
**Farmland Conversion**

<b>CDC Farmland Classification</b>	<b>1992 (acres)</b>	<b>1994 (acres)</b>	<b>1996 (acres)</b>	<b>1998 (acres)</b>	<b>2000 (acres)</b>	<b>2002 (acres)</b>	<b>Net Change 1992-2002 (acres)</b>
Prime Farmland	34,000	34,248	34,269	35,689	37,035	36,377	2,377
Farmland of Statewide importance	15,145	15,549	15,684	16,790	18,921	19,747	4,602
Unique Farmland	21,803	22,087	22,163	25,052	30,289	31,173	9,370
Farmland of Local Importance	97,663	96,856	96,993	92,867	87,661	74,851	-22,812
<b>Important Farmland Total</b>	<b>168,611</b>	<b>168,740</b>	<b>169,109</b>	<b>170,398</b>	<b>173,906</b>	<b>162,148</b>	<b>-6,463</b>
Grazing Land	442,384	442,335	441,852	438,637	432,724	421,126	-21,258
<b>Agricultural Land Total</b>	<b>610,995</b>	<b>611,075</b>	<b>610,961</b>	<b>609,035</b>	<b>606,630</b>	<b>583,724</b>	<b>-27,271</b>

Source: California Farmland Conversion Reports 1992 through 2002, California Department of Conservation

**Farm Sizes**

Land for farming and ranching must be preserved in parcels sizes that are economically viable. In 1997, there were 2,745 farms in the county, averaging 208 acres per farm. Almost 57 percent of the county’s land area, or 570,804 acres were considered farms. Farm sizes vary: according to the United States Department of Agriculture, a farm is any place from which \$1,000 or more of agricultural products were sold, or normally would have been sold, during the census year. Smaller farms on parcels ranging from two to ten acres are making an increasingly important contribution to agriculture. The growth in demand for vegetables and other crops, including organic produce, contributes to this

<sup>6</sup> *California Farmland Conversion Reports*, California Department of Conservation, 1992 through 2002.

<sup>7</sup> *Farmland Conversion Reports*, California Department of Conservation, 2000 through 2002. While some of the low density uses on these lands were new, a significant portion had been developed in previous years and is now visible using high resolution digital photography.

trend.<sup>8</sup> Ranches that raise cattle and sheep range are much larger. Most county vineyards are small and privately owned many by family corporations. Forty percent of the Sonoma County Grape Growers Association members have vineyards less than 20 acres, and 80 percent have vineyards less than 100 acres. Grape production is one of a few crops to provide sufficient revenues to support small farm operations.<sup>9</sup>

### **Organic Agriculture**

Organic agricultural production has declined in Sonoma County over the last decade. While in 1993 there were 475 organic producers farming 3,541 acres, there were 247 individual organic registrants in 2002, farming 2,631 acres. The number of producers, which peaked in 1994 at 545, however, has been steadily increasing since the low of 1998 (167 producers) to the current figure of 247.<sup>10</sup> The County Economic Development Board and Agricultural Commissioner's Office promote an awareness of Sonoma County agricultural products that are produced and / or processed using sustainable organic practices.

### **Vineyards**

Sonoma County has a strong history of wine production and wine grapes have been one of the county's leading commodities over the past century. Since the late 1980's, wine grapes have been listed as the most valuable crop. In the 1990's the number of new vineyards and wineries increased, existing vineyards and wineries expanded, and the capacity and size of the wineries grew. It is estimated that acreage increased 77 percent from 1988 to 2000, with an estimated annual growth rate of almost five percent and 2,000 average new acres for the same time period. In 2001, nearly 174,000 tons of grapes valued at \$374 million were produced on about 44,000 acres of bearing vineyards with about 14,500 acres of non-bearing land (for a total of approximately 58,500 acres, or six percent of county land area). Wine grapes comprised 64 percent of the Sonoma County total agricultural production value.<sup>11</sup> There were an estimated 191 bonded wineries in 2000, up from 58 in 1969. In the same year, there were 794 growers.<sup>12</sup>

As shown in **Exhibit 4.8-3**, there were a little over 30,000 acres of grapes grown in Sonoma County when the existing *General Plan* was adopted in 1989. As of 2001 that acreage has reached approximately 58,500 acres.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Rural Residential Lands as Agriculture, CAC memo, Greg Carr, PRMD, September 19, 2002.*

<sup>9</sup> Sonoma County Grape Growers Association, <http://www.sgcca.org>, August 2003.

<sup>10</sup> *Sonoma County Agricultural Crop Report-2002*, prepared by the Office of the Agricultural Commissioner, Sonoma County, California, April 2003.

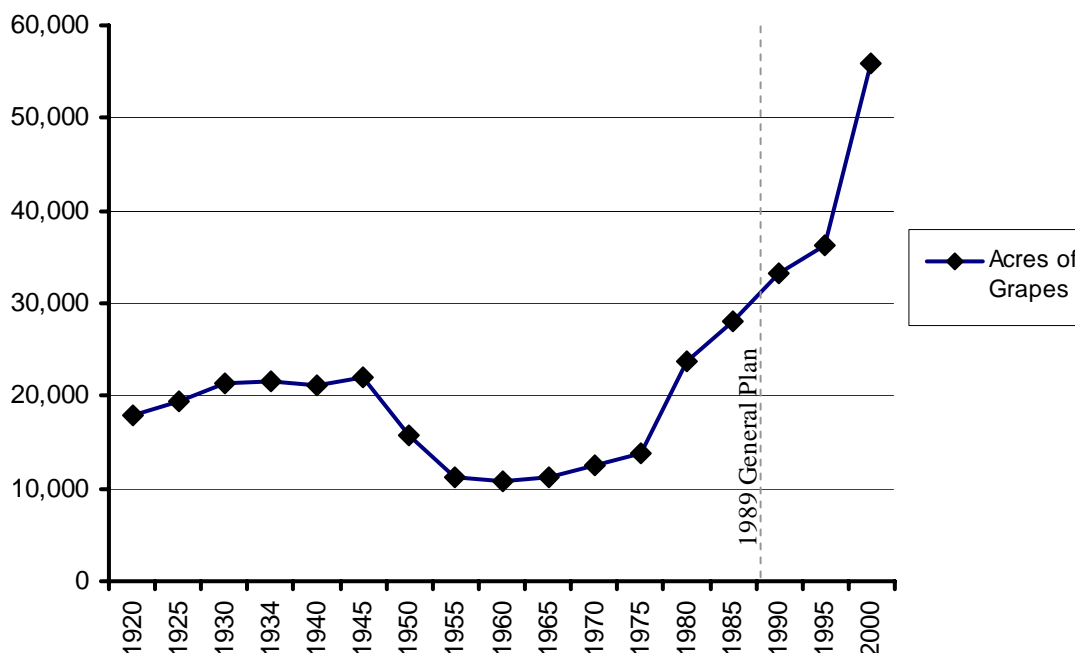
<sup>11</sup> *Economics Discussion Paper: Agricultural Processing*, Economic & Planning Systems, Inc., June 2002.

<sup>12</sup> *Sonoma County's Wine History*, Sonoma County Grape Growers Association, <http://www.sonomagrapevine.org/>, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> *Winegrape Facts; Grape Production and Values, Sonoma County*, Sonoma County Grape Growers Association. March 24, 2003.

The county’s wine industry is currently moving into the third year of a down cycle, with analysts predicting the industry has hit bottom and is slowly moving toward recovery. The industry is well-known for its business cycles, with boom periods lasting about a decade and bust cycles lasting about four years. In particular, pinot noir and cabernet sauvignon grapes account for much of the 15,000 acres of vineyards that will be coming into production in 2003 and 2004. <sup>14</sup>

**Exhibit 4.8-3**  
**Acreege of Grapes (Including Non-Bearing) in Sonoma County, 1920-2000**



Source: *Winegrape Facts; Grape Production and Values, Sonoma County*, Sonoma County Grape Growers Association. March 24, 2003.

**Dairies**

The dairy industry in Sonoma County is following statewide trends: California has become the nation’s top dairy state, with more cows concentrated on fewer farms. <sup>15</sup> Marin and Sonoma counties contain an important concentration of smaller dairies in the state, with about 80 <sup>16</sup> dairies in Sonoma County and 40 in Marin County (as of 2001). The average dairy has 330 milk cows, with the largest at

<sup>14</sup> *Wine industry inching toward recovery*, Tim Tesconi, Press Democrat, June 8, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> *California Farm Employers: 25 Years Later*, Don Villarejo, Ph.D., <http://www.usdavis.edu>, August 2003.

<sup>16</sup> *Sonoma County agriculture digs in during tough time*, Tim Tesconi, Press Democrat, June 4, 2003.

1,100 milk cows and the smallest at 110 milk cows.<sup>17</sup> The dairy industry has been challenged by increased costs, including those for water quality and manure management requirements.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to increased production costs, Sonoma County dairy farmers are struggling for financial survival as a nationwide milk surplus pushes producer prices to the lowest levels in 30 years. Some dairy farmers are making value-added products like cheese and others are making the transition to organic milk, which brings a premium price.<sup>19</sup>

## **AGRICULTURAL PROCESSING<sup>20</sup>**

The relationship between production and processing has become increasingly important as consumer demands for fresher, more convenient, and specialized products have increased. These products include certified organic food and dairy items, fresher packaged foods, and frozen meals. Many growers and distributors are trying to move away from commodity-only sales toward value-added products that bundle commodities and services.

Agricultural processing in Sonoma County utilizes both local and imported crops. The predominant segment of local crop processing is the wine industry, though imported grapes are also processed locally. The County currently allows agricultural processing to be located on agricultural lands when related to the primary agricultural activity in the area. Current practice generally interprets this policy to mean that at least 50 percent of the product should come from Sonoma County. Industry representatives are in favor of this policy because it affords flexibility regarding the source of grapes during different economic cycles. According to an assessment by County staff, the importation of grapes for processing in Sonoma County is estimated to be about half of the existing production capacity of Sonoma County wineries. This would be consistent with the existing policy. The majority of the imported grapes may be attributed to the comparatively small number of the larger wineries in the county that produce some wines with the *California* designation. Sonoma County grapes are also exported to other producers outside the county, including Napa County, where they are blended with local grapes or used for Sonoma County appellation bottlings. Smaller wineries tend to produce and market their wines with the federal labeling requirements for *Sonoma County*, *Sonoma County appellation*, and / or *Sonoma County Estate* wines that would preclude using grapes not grown locally.

Agricultural specialization and growth in the local food processing industry indicates that there are a number of opportunities for new directions in Sonoma County agricultural production. Food processing, with the growth of organic and natural food products as an important component, has made important strides in recent years. National trends show that organic farming has been one of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Frequently Asked Questions*, University of California Cooperative Extension, Dairy Science, <http://cesonoma.ucdavis.edu/DAIRY/faq.htm>, August 2003.

<sup>18</sup> *Looking Back to the Future – the Last 100 Years in Sonoma County Agriculture*, [http://www.sonoma-county.org/agcomm/agcomm\\_division/soco\\_ag\\_99.htm](http://www.sonoma-county.org/agcomm/agcomm_division/soco_ag_99.htm), July 2003.

<sup>19</sup> *Sonoma County agriculture digs in during tough time*, Tim Tesconi, Press Democrat, June 4, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> The information in this section is based upon:  
*Agricultural Processing and Support Services*, CAC memo, Greg Carr, PRMD, February 20, 2003; and *Economics Discussion Paper: Agricultural Processing*, Economic & Planning Systems, Inc, June 2002.

fastest-growing segments of U.S. agriculture during the 1990s. Also, nationally-certified organic cropland more than doubled during the 1990's, while organic production of eggs and dairy grew even more rapidly. These national trends show the opportunities for growth in these sectors locally.<sup>21</sup>

Food processing is an emerging sector in Sonoma County, with employment increasing 15 percent from 1997 to 1999, while the food processing sector has grown by almost 30 percent over a recent four year time period. An estimated 3,000 people are employed in local food processing. Many local food processors now offer natural and / or organic foods. Almost half the respondents of a recent survey indicated they produced foods that are certified *organic*. This shift to organic food processing could help diversify the agricultural industry and increase the productivity of the sector.

Recent research indicates the two-thirds of local food processors produce fruit-based products, dairy-based products, or pastry / baked goods. Other reported categories include tortillas, olives, eggs, seafood, cooking oil, organic coffee, vinegar, condiments, and specialty gourmet. While 53 percent of the businesses surveyed use national retail stores for product sales, 50 percent use local and / or regional retail sales. In addition, methods of distribution include the internet (40 percent), mail order (38 percent), and on-site sales (37 percent), among others. The survey did not collect data on the origin of raw commodities bought by local processors.<sup>22</sup>

### **AGRICULTURAL TOURISM<sup>23</sup>**

Sonoma County has experienced a growing demand for visitor-serving uses, such as weddings, special events, retail sales, and farm tours, as *value added* support for agricultural production and processing. These uses can conflict with existing farming operations, neighboring residents, rural character, and the long term viability of agriculture.

A primary goal of the existing *General Plan* is to protect agriculture. Visitor-serving uses on agricultural lands designated in the existing *General Plan* must support agriculture, but be secondary to production and processing. Such uses are limited to tasting rooms, stands for sale of agricultural products grown or processed in the county, bed and breakfast inns, and campgrounds. Other existing *General Plan* rural lands allow agricultural tourism uses, but at a much more limited scale than agricultural lands.

Since 1989, there has been a marked increase in the number of wineries, family farms, and other producers who have added new activities to market and promote their agricultural products. At many locations, the simple practice of providing customers with a tour, a sample, and an opportunity to buy direct from the farm has evolved to selling other foods, gifts, merchandise, and arts and crafts; overnight accommodations; weddings; and special events for both promotional and charitable

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<sup>21</sup> *Food Processing: Sonoma County's Emerging Center of Innovation*, Sonoma County Economic Development Board, Spring 2002.

<sup>22</sup> *Food Processing: Sonoma County's Emerging Center of Innovation*, Sonoma County Economic Development Board, Spring 2002.

<sup>23</sup> The information in this section is based upon:  
*Agricultural Tourism*, CAC memo, Greg Carr and Scott Briggs, PRMD, March 20, 2003; and *Economics Discussion Paper: Agricultural Processing*, Economic & Planning Systems, Inc, June 2002.

purposes. The escalating property values tend to force some rural property owners to seek to convert to or to add these higher earning, tourist uses.

### **URBAN / RURAL CONFLICTS**

Urban / rural conflicts occur at the interface of agricultural and non-agricultural uses. Development introduces new residents who are exposed to and / or interfere with agricultural operations. Depending on the types of nearby agricultural operations, visitor's and resident's complaints typically involve dust, odors, noise, presence of pests, manure, or spray drift where agricultural chemicals are applied. Agriculturists' complaints generally include trespass, vandalism, and theft. Even when people move to an area expressly for its rural character, these conflicts can occur as a result of their expectations, urban values, and essentially residential (not agricultural) activities.

In Sonoma County, residents, trail users, and visitors most frequently complain about the use of pesticides, dust from cultivation, noise, and odors from agricultural operations. Noise complaints often result from the use of frost protection wind turbines in the winter and bird control guns during harvest season, while dairies can result in odor complaints. In addition, it is becoming more common to conduct harvest activities at night which leads to additional noise complaints.<sup>24</sup>

Sonoma County has undertaken several actions to reduce urban / rural conflicts including the enactment of a Right to Farm ordinance and the establishment of agricultural setbacks (see discussion of Right-to-Farm ordinance, below). Urban / rural conflicts are discussed in *Section 4.1 Land Use, Population and Housing*.

### **AGRICULTURAL PRESERVATION – WILLIAMSON ACT AND CONSERVATION EASEMENTS**

As the urbanized parts of Sonoma County continue to expand, the pressure for development on agricultural lands is increasing. The many factors that might make a piece of property ideal for farming are similar to the factors that might make a piece of property attractive for development. A handful of programs are available to assist farmers in the county who wish to continue using their lands for agricultural purposes.

The most common methods include the use of the California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (also known as the Williamson Act) and the purchase of conservation easements.<sup>25</sup> Currently, it is estimated that about 300,000 acres of agricultural land in Sonoma County are under Williamson Act contracts (of which 31 parcels totaling 2,658 acres have filed for non-renewal). Using easements or fee title, approximately 30,000 acres of agricultural land are protected by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District. The Sonoma Land Trust protects 2,667 acres of agricultural land and 1,134 acres of sustainable forestry land. Agricultural easements specifically identified by the County Assessor's Office protect approximately 400 acres in the county, a figure not reflective of the above-noted acreages, because most recorded easements are termed conservation,

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<sup>24</sup> Nichols • Berman communication with Gail Davis, Agriculture and Vineyard Conservation Coordinator, Office of the Agricultural Commissioner, July 2002.

<sup>25</sup> The Williamson Act is further discusses in the State Regulations section contained in the Regulatory Setting.

open space, or scenic easements.<sup>26</sup> Additional agricultural and timber lands may be protected where lands are protected by other types of easements, including conservation, open space, and scenic easements.

### **SONOMA COUNTY AGRICULTURAL PRESERVATION AND OPEN SPACE DISTRICT<sup>27</sup>**

The Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOSD) was initiated by the passage of two measures that established the SCAPOSD and a one-quarter percent sales tax for its funding. The SCAPOSD, a special district covering the entire county, works with willing landowners to protect agricultural, open space, natural resource, and recreational lands.

The SCAPOSD acquires two types of real property interests: conservation easements (partial interest) and land in fee (full interest). Some easements are required to be dedicated to the SCAPOSD through the county planning and permitting process. Conservation easements allow farmers and ranchers to obtain cash payment and continue in agricultural pursuits on the property, in exchange for limiting the future development potential. A conservation easement is a legally binding agreement that runs with the deed and restricts the use of the land in perpetuity. The landowner voluntarily limits development and some other uses of the property, which generally results in property tax savings for the landowner. The easement governs the use of the property no matter who owns it in the future, allowing the property to be sold, leased, or bequeathed. Other financial benefits to landowners may include income, capital gains, and / or estate tax reductions, as well as property tax advantages. Landowners who have sold conservation easements have been motivated by the desire to continue in agriculture, with the cash often seen as a way to achieve both preservation of their way of life, including their home; the landscape values of the property; and other goals including saving for retirement and making farm improvements.

As of September 2002, the SCAPOSD had secured a total of approximately 56,200 acres through conservation easements, fee acquisition, and permit requirements. This total includes agricultural easements, as well as greenbelt, natural resources, and recreation easements and acquisitions. The SCAPOSD has protected more than 30,000 acres of agricultural land. In southwest Sonoma county more than a dozen dairy and livestock ranches, totaling more than 8,700 acres, have been protected. Greenbelt agricultural lands provide separation between and around the county's nine cities. Several of the SCAPOSD greenbelt properties are leased to small farmers. Protected greenbelt lands that provide for continued agricultural production include the Morrison Brothers Dairy, Stony Point Ranch, and the Knudtsen and Aggio properties along the US 101 corridor, as well as the Silacci Dairy, Cloudy Bend, and Sleepy Hollow properties south of Petaluma. The SCAPOSD protects land in other agricultural areas, including the Alexander, Knights, Dry Creek, Sonoma, and Russian River Valleys.

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<sup>26</sup> Nichols • Berman communication with Ed Rogers, Sonoma County Assessors Office, December, 2002; and *SCAPOSD Land Rights Inventory*, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, February 20, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> The information in this section is based upon: *Acquisition Plan – A Blueprint for Agricultural and Open Space Preservation*, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, 2000; *California Farmers and Conservation Easements: Motivations, Experiences, and Perceptions in Three Counties*, University of California Agricultural Issues Center, December 2000; and *SCAPOSD Land Rights Inventory*, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, February 20, 2002.

One of the largest conservation easements protects the 7,877 acre Santa Angelina Ranch in Knights Valley.<sup>28</sup>

## **TIMBER**

### ***Timber Production / Harvesting***<sup>29</sup>

Timber production value has increased steadily in Sonoma County. In 1985, timber production value was a little over five million dollars, while by 2000; it was valued at almost \$20 million. This figure reflects the increasing cost of wood products as well as the amount of harvesting that occurred. In Sonoma County there are approximately 229,475 acres of timberland.<sup>30</sup> The commercial timber species include redwood, Douglas fir, and several other conifer species; timberlands tend to be concentrated in northwestern Sonoma County where conifer and conifer/hardwood forests dominate.

From 1989 through 2001, a total of 58,381 acres of timberland were approved for timber harvesting in Sonoma County, under the guidance of California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) and the timber harvest plan (THP) review process (see discussion of State forestry regulations, below). These harvested acres are concentrated in the remote areas of the northwest part of the county. There also have been some small timber harvesting activities (less than three acres) that have been carried out in conjunction with minor timber conversions and THP exemptions typically closer to developed areas.

### ***Timberland Conversion Trends***<sup>31</sup>

Timberland is considered by the State and the County to be different than agricultural land. Timberlands are not included in the State farmland mapping. The County has created different land use policies for agriculture and timberlands. Converting timberland to an agricultural use is different than a crop rotation, in that once the effort and expense is made to convert timberland to cropland; it is seldom, if ever converted back and is permanently lost from the timberland inventory.

CDF keeps records of the large timberland conversions and small conversion exemptions. Large conversion requests are those greater than three acres in size while small conversion requests are those less than three acres in size. Based on these records, from 1989 through 2004, 19 of the 22 large

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<sup>28</sup> *A Decade of Preservation*, Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOSD), 2002.

<sup>29</sup> The information in this section is based upon:  
*Regulating the Location of Timber Harvest Activities*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, June 20, 2002; and *Economics Discussion Paper: Agricultural Processing*, Economic & Planning Systems, Inc, June 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Timberland is generally defined as “land which is available for, and capable of, growing a crop of trees of any commercial species used to produce lumber and other forest products.”

<sup>31</sup> The information in this section is based upon:  
*Regulating the Conversion of Timberlands to Nontimber Uses*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, June 20, 2002; and *Supplemental Information Regarding Timber Conversions and Timber Harvest Plans*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, PRMD, July 18, 2002.

conversion requests approved were to accommodate vineyards.<sup>32 33</sup> The remaining approved large conversions were the Sea Ranch Reservoir, a soil dump, and a sewage treatment plant for the Gualala Community Services District.

During this period, a total of 851 acres of timberland were approved for conversion. Of this total, 425 acres were converted through large acreage conversions. All but 56 of these acres, developed as the reservoir, soil dump, and sewage treatment plant previously described, were for vineyard uses. In addition, 426 acres were approved through small conversion exemptions. A significant number of these small acreage conversions were approved between 1992 and 1994. This is attributed to the fact that log prices increased significantly during that period and conversions were routinely approved as ministerial permits. A Timber Harvest Plan (THP) prepared by a registered professional forester (RPF) was not required until 1996, the same year that Sonoma County began requiring a zoning permit for these conversions.

As of September 2004, CDF had six large timber conversion applications pending for an additional 369 acres, all of which were for vineyards. If approved, these would raise the 15 year total for timber conversion to 1,220 acres.<sup>34 35</sup>

The loss of timberland through the conversion process may be partially offset by new lands brought into timber production. The CDF reports that from 1989 to 2001, a total of 732 acres were planted to commercial timber species. These plantings occurred primarily in the area of the 1978 Creighton Ridge fire near Cazadero.

With the increasing profitability of the wine industry in the past decade, the conversion of timberlands to vineyards has become a growing concern for some residents, particularly in the northwest portion of the county where much of this conversion is taking place. The last few years have seen an increased interest in locating vineyards within the coastal timberland regions due to desirable soils for pinot noir grapes. The acreage of pinot noir grapes has almost tripled since 1996. Whether or not this trend will continue depends on a variety of factors, including economic concerns such as market surplus and demand.

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<sup>32</sup> Nichols • Berman communication with David Schiltgen, Planner III, Sonoma County PRMD, December 2004.

<sup>33</sup> *Sonoma County Timberland Conversion Permit Statistics*, California Department of Forestry, September 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Nichols•Berman communication with David Schiltgen, Planner III, Sonoma County PRMD, December 2004.

<sup>35</sup> *Sonoma County Timberland Conversion Permit Statistics*, California Department of Forestry, September 2004.

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## **Agricultural and Timber Resources – Regulatory Setting**

### **COUNTY REGULATIONS**

#### **Zoning**<sup>36</sup>

The Sonoma County Zoning Regulations include three agricultural use categories: Land Intensive Agriculture (LIA), Land Extensive Agriculture (LEA), and Diverse Agriculture (DA). Each category permits the full range of agricultural uses. The categories differ primarily in the types and intensities of agricultural support services, visitor-serving uses, and residential densities.

Most of the county's timberlands are zoned Timber Production (TP) or Resources and Rural Development (RRD), which allow land management for commercial production including controlled burns, and timber management for noncommercial purposes including harvesting and incidental milling, subject to the requirements of the CDF.

As of March 2002, the County had approximately 94,000 acres zoned TP. The designated TP parcels contain approximately 69,000 acres of timberland or about 30 percent of the 230,000 acres of timberland in the county.

#### **Right to Farm Ordinance**

Sonoma County's Right to Farm ordinance was originally adopted in 1988 and revised in 1999 to include stronger disclosure requirements. The basic intention of the ordinance is to provide public policy support for maintaining the viability of agriculture in Sonoma County. Two of the major features of the Right to Farm ordinance are the farmers' right to conduct agricultural operations, and that legal, properly conducted agricultural operations will not be considered a nuisance. Neighbors retain the right to file complaints regarding agricultural activities. The protections afforded by the ordinance apply only to agricultural operations on land designated as LIA, LEA, or DA.<sup>37</sup>

Right to farm ordinances generally affect code enforcement activities and have the purpose of reducing the opposition of urban neighbors to commercial agriculture as a nuisance generator. Landowners within the unincorporated county are required to disclose the Right to Farm ordinance provisions to prospective buyers as part of real estate transactions, at the close of escrow and in a recorded document. Also, notice is also sent in annual tax bills countywide in the unincorporated area. Notice also must be given to developers in connection with new development.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The information in this section is based upon:  
*Regulating Location of Timber Harvest Activities*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, June 20, 2002; and *Regulating Conversion of Timberlands to Nontimber Use*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, June 20, 2002.

<sup>37</sup> Sonoma County Ordinance No. 5203, approved by the Board of Supervisors, October 19, 1999.

<sup>38</sup> *County Right-to-Farm Ordinances in California: An Assessment of Impact and Effectiveness*, Matthew Wacker et al, University of California Agricultural Issues Center, May 2001.

### ***Vineyard Erosion and Sedimentation Control Ordinance***

Effective as of March 2000, Sonoma County's Vineyard Erosion and Sedimentation Control Ordinance (VESCO) requires growers to submit erosion and sediment control plans for all new vineyards planned for slopes exceeding ten percent on highly erodible soils or 15 percent on all other soils. The ordinance also applies to replanting desired on slopes exceeding 15 percent on highly erodible soils or 30 percent on all other soils. Planting is limited on slopes greater than 50 percent. VESCO is designed to protect water quality and conserve soil through the use of riparian setbacks, maximum slope allowed for vineyard planting, and other requirements. VESCO, as it relates to soil erosion and water quality, is further discussed in *Section 4.5 Hydrology and Water Resources*.

### ***Agricultural Setbacks***

The County Zoning Code establishes agricultural setbacks that provide a buffer between agricultural operations on lands designated agricultural in the existing *General Plan* and adjacent non-agricultural land uses. Generally, the buffer is defined as a physical separation of 100 to 200 feet on the development side.<sup>39</sup>

### ***Timber Harvest Operations***

Although the Forest Practice Act preempts local authority to regulate the conduct of timber operations, courts have not yet determined whether the FPA precludes the County from enacting zoning regulations to govern the location of timber operations outside of designated TPZs. Because of the current state of flux in case law regarding this, it is impossible to accurately pinpoint the extent of the County's regulatory authority. A preliminary survey of existing case law, however, shows that the County may have the following authority:

*Within TPZs* The county has approximately 94,000 acres in TPZ. Of this amount, 69,000 acres are timberland. Within these areas, it is the intent of the Timberland Productivity Act (TPA) that timber operations conducted in compliance with the FPA not be restricted or prohibited due to conflict or apparent conflict with surrounding land uses. As State law preempts local regulation, the current regulatory setting does not provide the County any authority to regulate the location or the conduct of timber operations in this zone

*Outside of TPZs* There are approximately 161,000 acres of timberland outside of TPZs. Within these areas, localities may be able to regulate the location of timber operations, but only to the extent that the County's regulations do not conflict with State law. The courts are still weighing this issue. As such, the County could not impose zoning restrictions on the hours of operation, noise, pesticide application or similar aspects timber harvest operation. However, the County may be able to require a setback for timber harvesting and / or timber yarding from residential or other existing incompatible uses. The County may also be able to disallow timber harvesting activities as permitted uses in specific zoning districts.

### ***Timber Conversions***

On county lands zoned Timber Production or Resource and Rural Development, the County permits both timber production and other compatible uses. Landowners may convert timberlands to

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<sup>39</sup> Sonoma County Ordinance No. 4101, approved by the Board of Supervisors, November 7, 1989.

agriculture or other non-timber uses on these lands as long as required rezoning, conversion permits, and Timber Harvest Plans are obtained from the CDF. The County has limited authority under the Forest Practice Act to regulate timber conversions as long as such regulations do not usurp State regulation of timber harvest operations.

## **STATE REGULATIONS**

### ***Williamson Act***<sup>40</sup>

The California Land Conservation Act, known as the Williamson Act, allows counties to establish agricultural preserves with landowners who are engaged in commercial agricultural operations. It is intended to help conserve agricultural lands as an important economic resource, to assist in insuring adequate food supply for future generations, and to encourage the preservation of lands with unique open space or habitat value. In signing a contract with Sonoma County, the landowner agrees to retain his or her land in agricultural or open space uses for at least ten years, and the contract will run with the land when it is sold. Lands under Williamson Act contracts are appraised by the County Assessor based on their agricultural productivity rather than on their market value, which can greatly reduce tax obligations for the landowner. Lands under Williamson Act contracts must meet specific requirements including county zoning limitations, minimum lot size, and minimum annual gross returns from the agricultural use. The contract is for a minimum of ten years and automatically renews annually until either the County or the landowner submits a non-renewal request. Except under exceptional circumstances, the contract will then phase out over the course of the remaining nine-year period.

In 1998 the State passed the Farmland Security Zone law, sometimes known as the Super Williamson Act. Under the law, farmers can receive an additional 35-percent reduction in the land's value for property-tax purposes. To earn the additional tax reduction, farmers must agree to keep their land in the conservation program for 20 years, twice as long as required by the Williamson Act. Sonoma County adopted the Super Williamson Act through a county resolution on October 2, 2001, but has not yet received any applications for properties under that act.

### ***California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA)***

The California Organic Foods Act (COFA) of 1990, enacted at the behest of the organic industry, established standards and labeling requirement for products represented as organic or organically produced. The law divides responsibilities between CDFA, which oversees fresh products, and Health Services, which covers processed products. The program coordinates with the Organic Food Advisory Board, coordinates county investigation efforts, collects registration fees, subvenes funds to counties, and acts as a resource for information on the California Organic Law. Other activities include training

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<sup>40</sup> The information in this section is based upon:  
*Terms and Concepts; Agricultural Preserve*, Sonoma County Assessor, [http://www.sonoma-county.org/assessor/html\\_documents/termsconcepts/agpreserve/ag\\_preserve.htm](http://www.sonoma-county.org/assessor/html_documents/termsconcepts/agpreserve/ag_preserve.htm), December, 2002; *Ag Alert: 'Super Williamson Act' is Constitutional*, Dave Kranz, California Farm Bureau Federation, Communications/News Division, March 24, 1999; and Nichols • Berman communication with Traci Tesconi, Planner III, Sonoma County Permit and Resource Management Department, December, 2002.

county biologists, initiating complaint investigations, and registering private certification organizations.<sup>41</sup>

### **Forest Practice Rules** <sup>42</sup>

In 1973, in response to difficulties arising from the conflicting logging rules that had been enacted by jurisdictions at the local level, the State Legislature adopted the Z'berg-Nejedly Forest Practices Act (FPA) regulating the conduct of timber operations. In passing the FPA, the legislature expressly preempted the ability of local jurisdictions to regulate the conduct of timber harvesting operations and gave this authority to the State Board of Forestry and the California Department of Forestry (CDF), who were to adopt and implement Forest Practice Rules (FPR). It was the intent of the legislature that timber operations conducted in a manner consistent with the Forest Practice Rules not be restricted by local governments' regulations.

The FPR for the Coast District, which includes Sonoma County, address such operational concerns as fire prevention, soil erosion, water quality, watershed and flood control, stocking, protection of young growth, soil productivity, control of insects, pests and disease, protection of natural and scenic qualities, stand density, reforestation methods, soil movement, debris disposal, wind throw, noise, treatment of slash and debris, hours of operation, and silvicultural methods.

The FPR include procedures and requirements that must be met before timberlands can be converted to non-timber uses. The requirements for conversions differ depending on whether or not the conversion exceeds three acres and whether or not it is in a Timberland Production Zone (TPZ - see below). Single conversions involving less than three acres are exempt. To convert timberland within the TPZ, applicants must obtain a Timberland Conversion Permit and prepared a Timber Harvest Plan (THP) that has been approved by the CDF. Outside of a TPZ, the findings necessary to approve the conversion are less burdensome.

### **Timberland Production Zones (TPZ)** <sup>43</sup>

In 1976, the legislature adopted the Forest Taxation Reform Act. That Act requires counties to provide for the zoning of parcels used for the growing and harvesting of timber as Timberland Production Zones (TPZ). A TPZ restricts the use of the land to the growing and harvesting of timber and compatible uses approved by the County in return for tax assessment benefits. The County subsequently designated many parcels as TPZ in the late 1970's.

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<sup>41</sup> *California Organic*, California Department of Food and Agriculture, <http://www.cdfa.ca.gov/is/fveqc/organic.htm>, August 2003.

<sup>42</sup> The information in this section is based upon:  
*Regulating Location of Timber Harvest Activities*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, June 20, 2002.

<sup>43</sup> The information in this section is based upon:  
*Regulating Location of Timber Harvest Activities*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, June 20, 2002

### **Timberland Productivity Act <sup>44</sup>**

In 1982, the State Legislature adopted California Timberland Productivity Act (TPA). The TPA was intended to protect properly conducted timber operations from being prohibited or restricted due to conflict or apparent conflict with surrounding land uses. To accomplish this goal, the TPA directed counties to designate and zone lands for the primary use of timber production. Sonoma County applied local Timber Production (TP) zoning to all the parcels that were previously placed in the above TPZs. Within the TP district, land uses are limited to the growing and harvesting of timber and compatible uses. However, timber harvest operations may also be conducted on timberlands outside of the TP zone in compliance with a THP that has been approved by CDF (see *Zoning* above).

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### **Agriculture and Timber Resources – Significance Criteria**

The agricultural analysis uses criteria from the *State CEQA Guidelines* and local conditions. According to these criteria, the project would have a significant agricultural impact if it would:

- Convert Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Local Importance as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Department, to non-agricultural use;
- Convert parcels designated Diverse Agriculture, Land Extensive Agriculture, or Land Intensive Agriculture on the Land Use Plan Map to a non-agricultural land use designation;
- Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract; and
- Involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of farmland, to non-agricultural use.

The timber analysis uses criteria developed as part of the *Draft GP 2020* policy analysis. Accordingly, a project would have a significant impact on timber resources if would:

- Convert a significant acreage of the county's timberlands to non-timber uses.

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<sup>44</sup> The information in this section is based upon:  
*Regulating Location of Timber Harvest Activities*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, June 20, 2002

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## **Agricultural and Timber Resources – Impacts and Mitigation Measures**

### **Impact 4.8-1 Conversion of Agricultural Lands to Non-Agricultural Uses**

*Implementation of the Draft GP 2020 would result in conversions of both County and State designated farmlands to non-agricultural uses. This would be a less-than-significant impact. (LTS)*

A major impact on agriculture is the loss of productive land due to its conversion to other uses. Escalating property values and economic conditions in Sonoma County lend themselves to a continued and increasing pressure to convert agricultural lands to residential or other urban uses. The equity value of an acre of land designated residential use in Sonoma County can be substantially higher than that of agricultural land.

The most common way that agricultural land is converted to non-agricultural use is by the expansion of urban boundaries. Lands around the existing city limits of Santa Rosa, Petaluma, Windsor, and other cities are planned for annexation by those cities. Much of this land is either in agricultural production or would be designated for agricultural use by the *Draft GP 2020*. Similarly, some lands within and around some of the unincorporated communities with urban services such as Sonoma Valley, Forestville, Geyserville, and Penngrove are either in agricultural production or would be designated for agricultural use by the *Draft GP 2020*. The *Draft GP 2020* and the general plans of the cities could result in the conversion of lands from agricultural to a non-agricultural use as these urban areas expand.

The State Department of Conservation Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) measures farmland conversions in two year intervals through aerial photography. As previously stated, much of the State designated important farmland within Sonoma County lies in close proximity to urban areas. According to the FMMP, urban lands (including both those of the cities and unincorporated urban service areas) have increased by a total of 9,975 acres from 1992-2002, a rate of approximately 1,000 acres per year.<sup>45 46</sup> Urbanization and the increased mapping capability by the FMMP were the major causes of agricultural land conversion, a loss of 27,271 acres during this same period.<sup>47</sup> As mentioned in the setting section, the primary reason for the relatively large decrease in acreage experienced by grazing and ranchland between 2000 and 2002 was the improved mapping of existing rural ranchettes and not the conversion of farmland to development.

Problematic to this analysis is the fact that the FMMP data does not delineate between county and city lands, nor does it directly correlate with Sonoma County agricultural land designations. Furthermore it does not quantify how much conversion is the result of development occurring within adopted urban growth boundaries.

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<sup>45</sup> *California Farmland Conversion Reports*, California Department of Conservation, 1992 through 2002.

<sup>46</sup> The FMMP data likely underestimates the amount of conversion occurring within the county. The FMMP maps do not include urban development on parcels less than ten acres in size that are entirely surrounded by farmland, certain types of low density residential development, nor does it map a small percentage of private lands.

<sup>47</sup> *California Farmland Conversion Reports*, California Department of Conservation, 1992 through 2002

As sufficient data are not available to determine precisely where State designated important farmlands would be converted in the unincorporated portion of the county, any attempt to quantify such conversion would be speculative. However, based on the location of these lands in close proximity to urban areas, it would be reasonable to expect that a portion of this conversion would continue to occur within the unincorporated portion of the county along the urban fringe. Further analysis of this cumulative impact is considered in *Section 6.2 Cumulative Impacts*.

As noted above, urbanization is the most common form of land conversion. However, productive lands can also be lost to other uses. The *Draft GP 2020* would permit non-agricultural land uses to occur on lands designated LEA, LIA, and DA such as housing, surface mining operations, recreational uses (e.g., campgrounds), and community services facilities (e.g., churches, schools, and granges). Development of such uses would convert some portion of agricultural lands within the unincorporated area to these non-agricultural uses.

Data are not available to quantify the acreage that might be affected by these uses. However, these uses would not be expected to result in a substantial conversion or loss of agricultural land as they tend to be small and scattered throughout agricultural production areas. As such, they generally would not result in the conversion of all agricultural uses on every property. One exception to this would be surface mining operations, but the County's *Aggregate Resources Management Plan* limits the acreage that can be converted to mining uses.

Farmland could also be lost to future agricultural use as a result of riparian corridor and biotic habitat protection policies contained in the *Draft GP 2020*. These policies would not cause the loss of existing crops but could limit future agricultural production along streams and in other designated biotic resource areas. While this loss of future agricultural use is not typically considered to be conversion under CEQA, it is important to include in this discussion as a large acreage may be affected by these policies. The *Draft GP 2020* Open Space and Resource Conservation Element would increase stream conservation zones on agricultural land from about 9,000 to about 70,000 acres.

In addition to the loss of agricultural productivity, the conversion of these lands to non-agricultural uses could also result in adverse economic impacts. Much of the economic gain experienced by local communities from urban development of agricultural lands could be short-term, generated by the initial development and construction activities. Farmland conversion hurts local economies because of agriculture's economic multiplier effects. That is, each dollar earned by agricultural production stimulates additional indirect economic activity in the agricultural processing and tourism sectors. Agricultural production supports more than 10,000 jobs or five percent of the total county employment yet generates jobs well past this amount due to related agricultural processing and visitor-serving uses.<sup>48</sup>

Agricultural lands also provide open space as they comprise the majority of the county's Community Separator and Greenbelt areas. This resource is valued by the residents of Sonoma County as it improves the quality of life through the contrast of its visual and aesthetic properties with those of urban congestion. Visual resources are addressed in *Section 4.11 Visual Resources*.

As described in *Chapter 3.0 Project Description*, the *Draft GP 2020* proposes amendments to existing Land Use Plan designations. **Exhibit 4.1-2** shows the proposed land use designation changes by

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<sup>48</sup> *Sonoma County Land Use Audit*, Economic and Planning Systems, Inc. October 2003.

Planning Area and **Exhibit 4.1-3** shows the existing and proposed acreage for all of the land use designations.

Analysis of the proposed Land Use Amendments indicates implementation of the *Draft GP 2020* would result in the following:

- There would be no conversion of State Designated Important Farmland and no redesignation of County agricultural land use (i.e., LEA, LIA, or DA) in five of the nine Planning Areas (the Sonoma Coast / Gualala Basin, Russian River, Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, and the Rohnert Park / Cotati Planning Areas);
- Expansion of the USA boundary for Geyserville (Amendment 2-16) would allow 5.1 acres of State designated Prime Farmland to be annexed to the sewer district. However the land is already zoned for commercial use;
- In the Healdsburg Planning Area, several amendments could affect agricultural lands. Amendment 3-4 would increase agricultural lands by 82 acres, although a few acres may be used for a winery. Amendment 3-6 would also increase agricultural land but allow a small area for commercial use. Amendment 4-5 would change 304 acres of agricultural land to public use. This amendment would recognize a previously approved project to develop a regional park on a reclaimed surface mine;
- Amendment 8-4 in the Petaluma Planning Area would recognize a previous decision by the City of Petaluma to develop a wastewater recycling project on lands currently designated for agricultural use; and
- In the Sonoma Valley Planning Area, Amendment 9-5 would convert 4.5 acres of State designated Important Farmland to a recycling facility. This land is currently designated for rural residential use.

In summary these land use amendments would result in only 9.6 acres of State designated farmland being converted to non-agricultural use. Similarly, only a few acres of County designated agricultural land would be lost, as virtually all of the Land Use Amendments proposed by the *Draft GP 2020* to recognize previously approved conversions for public uses.

The *Draft GP 2020* contains policies to reduce the amount of conversion of agricultural land that would occur through several mechanisms. These include the economic promotion of Sonoma County agricultural goods to increase farm profitability, an urban centered growth strategy to stabilize the urban fringe, and maintaining low rural development densities.

Policies **AR-1a** through **AR-1d** would improve agricultural economics and promote the agricultural products of Sonoma County. These policies would assist and promote agriculture through advertising and marketing assistance as well as promoting brand recognition and food safety to the consumer. These programs could increase the profitability and identity awareness of county agricultural products, and would therefore maintain the viability of Sonoma County farms and reduce the likelihood of their conversion. Policies **AR-1e** and **AR-1f** would specifically support programs to promote sustainable and organic products in the overall marketing of Sonoma County as a reflection of consumer demand for these foods.

The *Draft GP 2020* would employ an urban centered growth strategy and contains policies designed to stabilize the urban fringe. Urban Service Boundaries and policies in the Land Use Element would

support this strategy. These policies would limit development opportunities to a relatively small number of landowners and would produce more compact development, thereby reducing the amount of agricultural land converted to urban or permitted land uses. Policy **AR-2a** would limit residential and commercial or industrial growth in agricultural areas by prohibiting the extension of necessary urban services into these areas except as allowed in Community Separators policy **OS-1c** and where extension of urban services would be required to solve a health and safety problem (e.g., where septic systems have contaminated the groundwater). Policy **AR-4a** would require that the primary use of agricultural lands be agriculture. This policy, while recognizing that some non-agricultural uses would be allowed, protects against the conversion of these lands.

Policy **AR-2d** would limit conversion by using voluntary purchase of development rights (PDR) or transfer of development rights (TDR) programs in order to limit intrusion of residential development on agricultural lands. When used, amendments of the land use map would not be allowed to lower density in anticipation of conferring transfer or purchase rights.

In addition to the *Draft GP 2020* policies, the Sonoma County Agricultural and Open Space Preservation District (SCAOSPD) would reduce conversion impacts to agricultural resources through continuation of its *Acquisition Plan 2000*. As previously stated in the environmental setting section, the SCAOSPD has preserved some 30,000 agricultural acres in perpetuity through the application of conservation easements and in fee purchases.

The *Acquisition Plan 2000* focuses on two priority areas within Sonoma County. The first is coastal grazing lands with high grassland productivity that support dairy, poultry, and cattle within the southwest portion of the county. The second is Greenbelt Agriculture and the promotion of the Small Farms Initiative where the district leases land primarily fee owned Greenbelt properties to farmers who grow vegetables, flowers, herbs and berries, a growing amount of which is organic. As these greenbelts occur at the urban fringe, their continued acquisition and use would prevent conversion to non-agricultural uses as well as having the added benefit of supporting sustainable communities.

In conclusion, while cumulative development consistent with both the *Draft GP 2020* as well as those of the general plans of the county's nine cities could result in the conversion of State and County designated farmlands, it is important to distinguish that the *Draft GP 2020* limits such conversion to lands within the Urban Service Boundaries. Lands within the unincorporated USAs would primarily be reserved and designated to accommodate projected population growth through 2020 but this growth would mostly be infill of existing developed land. As a result of this urban centered growth strategy and the policies described in the Agricultural Resources and Land Use Elements of the *Draft GP 2020*, significant agricultural resource areas would be protected in the unincorporated area.

Further, as previously noted, adoption of land use amendments in the *Draft GP 2020* would not result in the substantial conversion of State or County designated agricultural land. The *Draft GP 2020* would include over 800,000 acres of land available for agricultural use. The FMMP indicates that over 600,000 acres of State designated farmland (e.g., Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, etc.) are currently available for agricultural use. Voter approved Urban Growth Boundaries would minimize the potential for urban sprawl into agricultural areas. Loss of agricultural use on lands protected by riparian corridor and biotic habitat designations and policies would represent the greatest acreage of agricultural land conversion. While this total of about 61,000 acres would be much greater than the losses to urban and rural development, it would remain a very small percentage of the county's inventory of land available for agriculture. For these reasons, the relatively minor conversion of agricultural lands to non-agricultural uses that would occur through implementation of the *Draft GP 2020* would be a less-than-significant impact at a countywide scale.

**Mitigation Measure 4.8-1** None Required

**Impact 4.8-2 Agricultural Processing and Support Uses**

*Implementation of the Draft GP 2020 would result in the development of agricultural support uses including processing services and storage on agricultural lands and would therefore remove a portion of the county's agricultural lands from agricultural production. However, due to the limited acreage that would be removed as well as policies and programs contained in the Draft GP 2020 regulating such development, this would be a less-than-significant impact. (LTS)*

As previously mentioned, the development of agricultural processing and other support uses would be of substantial benefit in keeping agricultural operations economically viable as well as preventing the loss of these lands to expanded residential development or other land uses permitted by the *Draft GP 2020*. However, the increasing number, size, and concentration of these uses have raised concerns about the conversion of agricultural land, the loss of agricultural production, and the long-term viability of agriculture. Since 1989, the county has seen a substantial increase in processing and support uses on agricultural lands. With respect to agricultural processing facilities, these include: an increase in the number of wineries, the expansion of existing wineries, and an increase in the capacity and size of some of the new wineries. Conversion pressure has intensified as a significant portion of the existing industrial lands that could accommodate processing facilities in the county are being developed by high-tech businesses.

Agricultural support services are businesses that provide services purchased by farmers. Storage facilities not linked to either an agricultural product or a processing facility also have been requested at times. Because of these, and other factors, support services and storage facilities have been problematic land uses because their location in agricultural areas has a less direct dependency on agricultural production than processing. Uses such as farm equipment repair or case goods storage at a winery have been routinely accommodated by County permits. However, uses such as tractor sales, manufacture and sales of fencing, and stand-alone warehouses are less connected to the farm and can more easily be converted to non-agricultural activities.<sup>49</sup>

Goal **AR-5** of the Agricultural Resources Element would encourage the development of new agricultural processing facilities and support services in some agricultural areas as value added support to agricultural production. Implemented by Policy **AR-5a**, the *Draft GP 2020* would permit the development of facilities that process agricultural products provided at least 50 percent of the product being processed is grown or raised on-site or in the local area. While policies contained in Section 2.5 of the Agricultural Resources Element would limit the size and intensity of these uses, Policy **AR-5a** would create a tension between those policies that promote the development of agricultural processing uses with those policies intended to protect land needed for agricultural production.

Estimating the amount of land needed for support uses that could occur on agricultural lands with implementation of the *Draft GP 2020* was accomplished through PRMD consultations with various representatives from the county's agricultural sectors. As the primary demand for this type of development would likely come from viticulture, the projected demand for new or expanded wineries was estimated as a function of vineyard acreage increases described in *Impact 4.8-1 Conversion of Agricultural Lands to Non-Agricultural Uses*. The projected amount of development of processing

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<sup>49</sup> *Agricultural Processing and Support Services*, CAC Memo, Greg Carr and Scott Briggs, Sonoma County PRMD, February 20, 2003.

and related support is shown in **Exhibit 4.8-4**. Impacts resulting from the development of visitor-serving uses are discussed separately in *Impact 4.8-3 Agricultural Tourism*.

County staff, in a collaborative effort with the Agricultural Commissioner's Office and the Sonoma County Grape Growers (SCCG), devised the following methodology to estimate new winery development. First, the total grape production of the projected 16,000 acre increase in new or expanded vineyard plantings was calculated based upon the average grape production per acre in Sonoma County in 2000. Based on an SCCG conversion factor of approximately 64.5 cases of wine per ton of grapes, and using assumptions with respect to both winery capacities and the projected level of imported grapes, the total case production for new plantings was estimated for 2020.<sup>50</sup>

It was then assumed that 50 percent of the increased case production would be accommodated by the expansion of existing wineries and that the remaining 50 percent would be processed in new wineries built within the same geographic locations where the projected new plantings were located. The projected 2020 case production was then converted to winery square footage assuming 0.75 square feet of facility per case of wine.

As shown in **Exhibit 4.8-4**, with implementation of the *Draft GP 2020*, the number of wineries could grow from 127 facilities with an area of 9,324,000 square feet in 2000, to 239 facilities, with a total estimated area of 16,912,000 square feet in 2020. While these increases to both the number and area of wineries do not reflect actual development projects, they do represent the best estimate of wineries that would be required to process grape production associated with projected vineyard expansion.

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<sup>50</sup> Nichols • Berman communication with Scott Briggs, Environmental Review Division Manager, Sonoma County PRMD, September 2004.

**Exhibit 4.8-4  
 Comparison of Agricultural Processing and Visitor-Serving Uses Associated with  
 Vineyard Development**

<b>Planning Area</b>	<b>Existing 2000</b>		<b>Projected 2020</b>	
	<b>No. of Wineries <sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Area (Square Feet)</b>	<b>No. of Wineries <sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Area (Square Feet)</b>
Sonoma Coast / Gualala Basin	2	18,375	6	424,000
Cloverdale	34	3,704,425	71	6,464,000
Healdsburg	37	1,932,450	56	2,740,000
Russian River	11	541,250	16	947,000
Santa Rosa	14	506,625	21	963,000
Sebastopol	5	525,000	12	1,057,000
Rohnert Park - Cotati	0	0	4	253,000
Petaluma	0	0	10	632,000
Sonoma Valley	24	2,095,875	43	3,432,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>9,324,000</b>	<b>239</b>	<b>16,912,000</b>
		Increase from 2000 Level	+112	+7,588,000
		Percent Increase	+88%	+81%

a "Wineries" includes associated uses (i.e., storage and bottling) and visitor-serving (i.e., tasting rooms and event centers).

Source: Sonoma County PRMD, 2004.

While the exact locations where such development would occur are unknown, a significant portion would likely occur on County and / or State designated agricultural lands. This would result in the loss of agricultural production on these lands. The development of winery and related facilities that would result from projected vineyard increase could reach an additional 7,588,000 square feet, or approximately 174 acres, by 2020. However, it would be reasonable to expect that the actual amount of agricultural land lost to this type of development would be higher as these projections only account for support uses and do not account for related access roads and parking lots that would be constructed.

The *Draft GP 2020* contains policies intended to reduce the impact through regulating the type, size, and intensity of this development. Policy **AR-5a** would provide for processing facilities on all three agricultural land use categories only where it can be clearly demonstrated that at least 50 percent of the

product would be grown on site or in the local area.<sup>51 52</sup> This would prevent the development of processing facilities clearly not associated with or vital to Sonoma County agriculture and thereby reduce the impact of agricultural land loss. Additional criteria contained in this policy would require the processing operation be dependent upon a long-term commitment to purchasing Sonoma County products, that a demonstrated processing need exists, that size be proportional and minimal to accomplish processing, that future use of the facility would be limited to consistent uses in the event the agricultural product is no longer available, and that accessory space would be limited within such facilities.

Policies **AR-5b** and **AR-5c** would reduce impacts by limiting the size and intensity of processing facilities to that which would actually be required to meet the demands of the growing operation. Policy **AR-5b** would establish zoning code standards limiting the amount of impermeable surface area and requiring that the facility be proportional to the total area of the parcel. Furthermore, policy **AR-5c** would require that the processing facility not exceed the needs of the growing operation as well as that the zoning code differentiate the need between on-site storage required for processing versus that required to store the finished product (e.g., cases of bottled wine).

Policies **AR-5d** through **AR-5f** would limit development of non-essential support facilities that otherwise could be located on non-agricultural lands. Policy **AR-5d** would continue to define agricultural support services as those uses clearly tied to agricultural operations. Policy **AR-5e** would require that such uses be subordinate to on-site agricultural production and would not adversely affect the agricultural production in the area. The criteria used to determine whether the standard is met would require County staff to examine the ratio of service area to production area, the ratio of service employees to agricultural production employees, the historical production of the site, and the potential for the service facility to be converted to non-agricultural uses. Policy **AR-5f** would continue to apply restrictive criteria to the zoning or permit review process. This would reduce cumulative impacts to agricultural resources and public services as uses that require the extension of water and sewer lines, detract from on-site or local agricultural production, result in a concentration of such uses in a localized area, or result in conflicts with adjacent residential areas would be prohibited.

Policy **AR-5g** would further reduce cumulative impacts resulting from the concentration of processing, support and storage facilities within a given transportation corridor or localized area through the application of additional project screening criteria. Factors that would be considered include whether the use would: be inconsistent with or exceed service level objectives described in the Circulation and Transportation Element; interfere with other area wells; exceed prescribed density limits; or be detrimental to the county's rural character.

The intent of these policies (primarily the requirement that 50 percent of the product being processed be grown within the county) would be to ensure that if local farmland is taken out of production for a processing facility, the facility is used to meet the needs of Sonoma County farmers. However, while loss of agricultural lands to processing and support uses promoted in the *Draft GP 2020* would be reduced by these policies, both State and County designated farmlands would still be lost to these uses.

In spite of this loss of approximately 200 to 300 acres of agricultural land to support uses, this would be considered a less-than-significant impact as over 600,000 acres of State designated farmland (e.g.,

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<sup>51</sup> The "local area" has been further interpreted to mean Sonoma County.

<sup>52</sup> *Dissenting Opinion, Agricultural Processing*, CAC Memo, Scott Briggs, Sonoma County PRMD, February 20, 2003.

Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, etc.) and 800,000 acres of County designated agricultural land would be available for agricultural use. Since these support uses would be critical to protect the future agricultural use of these lands, the loss of such a relatively small area would not significantly detract from future agricultural use in the unincorporated area.

However, one way to further reduce the extent of these uses on designated agricultural lands would be to require that a higher percentage of the product being processed is grown onsite or within the local area. If a more stringent requirement that 75 percent of the product being processed comes from the site or local area, the amount of processing and the amount of agricultural land lost would be reduced. Furthermore, such a policy would likely ensure that if agricultural land were developed for processing facilities, it would increase the support for Sonoma County farmers by encouraging the purchase of agricultural products grown within the county. This alternative policy is analyzed in **Section 5.4 Alternative 3 – Mitigated Alternative**.

**Mitigation Measure 4.8-2** None required.

**Impact 4.8-3 Agricultural Tourism**

*Implementation of the Draft GP 2020 would result in the development of visitor-serving uses on agricultural lands and would therefore convert a portion of the county's agricultural lands to these uses. However, due to the limited acreage that would be lost as well as policies and programs contained in the Draft GP 2020 regulating such development, this would be a less-than-significant impact. (LTS)*

The agricultural tourism industry has grown in recent years as agricultural operations seek to utilize the added value of tourism uses in order to maintain long-term economic viability. While this type of development could be accommodated on lands designated Recreation and Visitor-Serving Commercial (RVSC), as discussed in the setting above, there are relatively few areas left in the unincorporated area where such new development could occur.

Goal **AR-6** of the Agricultural Resources Element would support the development of new visitor-serving uses and facilities on agricultural lands. Implemented by Policy **AR-6a**, the *Draft GP 2020* would allow various visitor-serving uses such as tasting rooms, bed and breakfasts, direct on-site sales, and others provided they are incidental and secondary to local agricultural production. While the intent of Section 2.6 of Agricultural Resources Element would be to limit these uses in size and intensity, this policy (similar to **AR-5a** which encourages agricultural processing uses) creates a tension between those policies that would promote the development of visitor-serving uses with those policies intended to assure that agricultural production remains the primary use of these lands.

The demand for visitor-serving uses would primarily affect agricultural lands designated Land Intensive Agriculture (LIA), Land Extensive Agriculture (LEA), and Diverse Agriculture (DA). The Agricultural and Residential (AR) and Resource and Rural Development (RRD) categories areas would also allow agricultural tourism uses, but at a more limited scale.

It is acknowledged that this type of development would have a beneficial economic impact on Sonoma County agriculture and therefore support the county's agricultural preservation efforts. However, the continued growth of this industry would still convert agricultural land to non-agricultural uses.

Additionally, development of visitor-serving uses on agricultural lands in unincorporated Sonoma County could generate land use conflicts with agricultural production on adjacent land. Land use conflicts resulting from this type of development are discussed in **Section 4.1 Land Use, Population, and Housing**. Of special concern would be the concentration of such uses in close proximity to one

another (e.g., multiple events along the same transportation corridor on the same weekend) as conversion pressures would increase in locations where visitor-serving uses are clustered. Ultimately, this type of development, if unregulated, could threaten the long-term viability of Sonoma County agriculture.

Although any estimate of the total amount of visitor-serving development that could occur on agricultural land through 2020 would be speculative, it would be reasonable to expect a significant amount of such development would occur in support of projected winery development described in *Impact 4.8-2 Agricultural Processing*. Many winery projects include a tourism component. While the projections described in **Exhibit 4.8-4** do not differentiate between processing uses like wineries and visitor-serving uses such as tasting rooms and event centers, it would be reasonable to assume that visitor-serving uses would represent a portion of this development. Therefore, the development of visitor-serving uses on agricultural lands would result in the conversion of County and State designated agricultural lands and an associated loss of agricultural production.

However, Section 2.6 of the Agricultural Resources Element contains policies designed to limit the type, intensity, and location of such visitor-serving development on agricultural lands. Policy **AR-6a** would reduce impacts from visitor-serving uses on agricultural lands by allowing only those uses that promote agricultural production within the county and that are secondary and incidental to local agricultural production. Additionally, recreational uses, campsites of 30 or fewer sites, and bed and breakfast inns of five or fewer rooms would be not be allowed on agricultural lands designated Land Intensive Agriculture as these uses could result in a substantial loss of agricultural productivity and hinder the primary use of the land. These uses would be permitted on lands designated both Land Extensive Agriculture and Diverse Agriculture where the conflicts between visitors and agricultural practices would be less severe due to the greater amount of land available to separate the activities. Policy **AR-6b** would further reduce the impact of conversion by limiting the expansion or intensification of those restaurants and lodging facilities that have already been approved or exist.

Policy **AR-6c** would continue to prevent the application of non-agricultural land use categories to areas surrounded by agricultural land use categories for the purpose of permitting visitor-serving uses. This policy would support the preservation of interior agricultural areas thereby reducing the conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses as well as steer tourism uses to more suitable locations within the Urban Service Area.

Policy **AR-6d** would limit conversion of agricultural lands through the application of specific guidelines for visitor-serving uses during the review of project applications. These include requirements that the use would promote agricultural products grown or processed in the local area and that the use be compatible and secondary or incidental to agricultural production. Additional criteria would include that the project not require the extension of urban services, be compatible with existing uses, and that lodging uses would not be included as part of the project. Implementation of this policy would prohibit the construction of hotels and resorts which could convert substantial amounts of agricultural land to a non-agricultural use. Finally, the policy would reduce the likelihood that projects would result in cumulative traffic impacts or operate at higher than permitted levels by requiring participation in a visitor tracking and event coordination program as condition of approval for qualified projects.

Policy **AR-6f** would further reduce potential cumulative impacts resulting from a concentration of visitor-serving uses within a given transportation corridor or localized area through the application of additional project screening criteria. Factors to be considered include whether the use would be inconsistent with or exceed service level objectives described in the Circulation and Transportation

Element, interfere with other area wells, exceed prescribed density limits, or detrimental to the county's rural character.

Policy **AR-6g** would require that compatible visitor-serving uses, their permissible sizes and intensities be defined in the zoning code. However, as the policy does not describe specifically how these uses would be regulated, it is unclear how effective it would be in reducing the conversion impact.

Accordingly, while these policies would do much to reduce this impact, development of visitor-serving uses would still occur on some portion of the county's productive agricultural land and these uses could have a substantial beneficial impact on the economic viability of Sonoma County agriculture. In the long-term, this economic viability would more effectively reduce conversion of farmland to non-agricultural use. Therefore, further limitations on visitor-serving uses through proposed mitigation measures may not be as effective in achieving project objectives and therefore may not be feasible. In addition, as mentioned in *Impact 4.8-2 Agricultural Processing and Support Uses*, the acreage of agricultural land that would likely be utilized for visitor-serving uses would be relatively small compared to the total agricultural land available under either the State or County designation. As long as the *Draft GP 2020* policies would be successful in avoiding the concentration of these uses, the impact of the loss of these lands would not be significant on a countywide scale. Therefore, this would be a less-than-significant impact.

**Mitigation Measure 4.8-3** None required.

**Impact 4.8-4 Timberland Conversion**

*Implementation of the Draft GP 2020 could result in the conversion of timberland to non-timber uses. However, the acreage of timberland converted to non-timber uses would be relatively small and would be a less-than-significant impact. (LTS)*

The conversion of timberland to agricultural, residential, and other non-timber uses is permitted under both the existing *General Plan* as well as the zoning code. Pursuant to State law, lands designated Timber Production Zones (TPZ) are effectively protected by tax provisions and restrictions on conversion to non-timber use. While this zoning has historically protected the county's conifer forests and oak woodlands, lands designated TPZ only comprise approximately 30 percent of the county's timberlands. The vast majority of the county's timberland lies within other land use categories which allow conversion to take place.

Despite the fact that less than one percent of the county's timberland has historically been converted to non-timber uses since the passage of the Forest Practice Act, there appears to be an increasing pressure to convert these lands to non-timber uses, primarily vineyards. As described in the setting section, nearly all of the large timber conversion requests in recent years have been to accommodate vineyard development. Through September 2004, the CDF had six timber conversions applications pending that, if approved, would result in the conversion of 369 additional acres to vineyards.

This recent increase in conversion requests suggests a trend that could threaten the county's timber base as these conversions effectively represent a permanent loss of timber productivity on lands on which they occur. In addition, the size of the conversion requests may be increasing. While vineyard

conversions have typically ranged in size from tens to hundreds of acres, one company recently considered a vineyard conversion of approximately 5,000 acres of timberland in the coastal area.<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, the true inventory of timberlands available for harvesting may actually be less than the acreage suggests because not all owners of timberland seek to log their lands. Increased restrictions on logging near streams and other sensitive areas within timberlands may further limit the availability of timber as well. Also, if new vineyard development in the coastal timberlands proves successful, the demand for high quality wine grapes would likely lead to additional conversion requests.<sup>54</sup> In view of this developing trend and potential for significant loss of timber resources, the *Draft GP 2020* contains goals, objectives, and policies to preserve, sustain, and restore timber resources for their economic, conservation, recreation, and open space values (Goal **OSRC-12**). Adoption and implementation of these policies would reduce the extent of adverse environmental affects associated with timberland conversions.

Policy **OSRC-12e** relates specifically to the conversion of timberlands to other uses on lands designated RRD. This policy would revise the zoning districts which implement the RRD land use category to prohibit uses that result in the conversion of timberlands unless the request meets certain criteria. Conversions to agricultural and other uses would be permitted provided they qualified for a timber conversion exemption pursuant to the Forest Practices Rules, provide a significant public benefit (e.g., the construction of the Sea Ranch Reservoir), or result in no net loss of timberland. Furthermore, these exceptions would not be allowed if the conversion would result in habitat fragmentation. This policy, if adopted and implemented, would give greater protection to approximately 180,000 acres of the 230,000 acres of timberland in Sonoma County and would greatly reduce both the amount of conversion as well as the severity of associated impacts previously described.<sup>55</sup>

Policy **OSRC-12a** would apply the RRD category to include all lands within a Timber Production Zone. This policy would afford the protection of zoning regulations to timberlands which includes provisions for limited number of permitted uses (e.g., single family dwellings) at densities lower than 20 acres per unit. The RRD designation prioritizes the protection of natural resources and acknowledges significant constraints to development such as the lack of infrastructure, conflicts with resource conservation, and hazards.

Policies **OSRC-12b** through **12d** would implement a review and commenting process for Timber Harvest Plans (THPs). This would enable County staff to review timber harvest plans for compatibility with *GP 2020* policies and comment in support of increased protection of Class III streams, and in opposition to prevent clearcutting within riparian corridors. Specifically, Policy **OSRC-12d** would encourage the CDF to reduce clearcutting of timber within streamside conservation areas. If approved, this policy would encourage the retention of at least 50 percent of either the overstory canopy or the understory vegetation within the riparian corridor to mitigate the impacts to streams. While the ability of County staff to regulate timber harvest plans is limited, this policy would afford some additional protection to streams and riparian corridors when THPs are considered.

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<sup>53</sup> *Company scales back plan for biggest vineyard on coast*, Tom Chorneau, Santa Rosa Press Democrat January 3, 2003

<sup>54</sup> *Timber Conversions*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, Sonoma County PRMD, June 5, 2003.

<sup>55</sup> *Timber Conversions*, CAC memo, David Schiltgen, Sonoma County PRMD, June 5, 2003.

These policies, if adopted and implemented, would reduce the amount of timberland that would be permanently converted to non-timber uses. As previously noted, the total amount of timberlands converted would increase to 1,220 acres if all pending applications were approved. This amount represents approximately one half of one percent of Sonoma County's 230,000 acres of timberland, which does not represent a significant portion of Sonoma County timberlands. Therefore, this would be a less-than-significant impact and no mitigation would be required.

**Mitigation Measure 4.8-4** None required.