

Introduction

This section provides a description of local agricultural resources on parcels that will be traversed by the proposed project and in the project vicinity. The impact analysis evaluates the project's potential to adversely affect existing agricultural resources.

The proposed project has been designed to minimally affect agricultural land. However, some farmland, grazing land, and Williamson Act lands will be temporarily affected—and, in limited instances, permanently affected. Considering the amount of agricultural land available within San Benito and Monterey Counties, as well as PG&E's landowner compensation process, the negligible amount of land that will be permanently affected by the proposed project is considered a less-than-significant impact.

Methodology

Various documents were reviewed to complete this agricultural analysis; including California Department of Conservation (CDC) Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) data, aerial photographs, city/county general plans and zoning ordinances/maps, web searches, discussions with city and county planners, and environmental impact reports for other projects in the area. In addition, field visits were conducted along the power line route and at the substation sites where public access was available, as well as on private parcels where access was granted.

Affected Environment

Regulatory Setting

No federal regulations related to agriculture apply to the proposed project.

State of California

California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

The CDC, under the Division of Land Resource Protection, has set up the FMMP. This program monitors conversion of the state's farmland to and from agricultural use. The map series identifies eight classifications and uses a minimum mapping unit size of 10 acres. The map categories are defined by the FMMP as follows:

- **Prime Farmland:** Land which has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the production of crops. It has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields of crops when treated and managed, including water management, according to current farming methods.
- **Farmland of Statewide Importance:** Land that is similar to prime farmland but with minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or less ability to hold and store moisture.
- **Unique Farmland:** Land of lesser quality soils used for the production of specific high economic value crops. It has the special combination of soil quality, location, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high quality or high yields of a specific crop when treated and managed according to current farming methods. The land is usually irrigated but may include non-irrigated orchards or vineyards, as found in some climatic zones in California. Examples of crops include oranges, olives, avocados, rice, grapes, and cut flowers.
- **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. Examples include dairies, dryland farming, aquaculture, and uncultivated areas with soils qualifying for prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance.
- **Grazing Land:** Land on which the existing vegetation, whether grown naturally or through management, is suitable for grazing or browsing of livestock.
- **Urban and Built-Up Land:** Land used for residential, industrial, commercial, construction, institutional, and public administrative purposes; railroad yards; cemeteries; airports; golf courses; sanitary landfills; sewage treatment plants; water control structures; and other development purposes. Highways, railroads, and other transportation facilities also are included in this category.
- **Other Land:** Land that is not included in any of the other mapping categories. Common examples include low-density rural developments; brush, timber, wetland, and riparian areas not suitable for livestock grazing; confined livestock, poultry, or aquaculture facilities; strip mines; borrow pits; and water bodies smaller than 40 acres.
- **Water:** Water areas with an extent of at least 40 acres.

The FMMP maintains an inventory of state agricultural land and updates its “Important Farmland Series Maps” every 2 years (CDC 2007a). The FMMP also produces a biannual report on the amount of land converted from agricultural to non-agricultural use.

The FMMP is an informational service only and does not have regulatory jurisdiction over local land use decisions. Three categories of farmland—prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, and unique farmland—are considered valuable, and any conversion of land within these categories typically is considered an adverse impact. Several properties along the alignment are designated as prime farmland (Figure 4.2-1).

Williamson Act

The California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (Williamson Act) enables local governments to enter into contracts with private landowners for the purpose of restricting specific parcels of land to agricultural or related open space use. Its intent is to preserve agricultural and open space lands by discouraging premature and unnecessary conversion to urban uses. In return, landowners receive property tax assessments which are much lower than normal because they are based on farming and open space uses as opposed to full market value. Local governments receive an annual subvention of foregone property tax revenues from the state via the Open Space Subvention Act of 1971. The vehicle for these agreements is a rolling-term, 10-year contract (i.e., unless either party files a “notice of nonrenewal,” the contract is automatically renewed annually for an additional year). Several parcels within the project vicinity are currently under Williamson Act contract (Figure 4.2-2).

Government Code 51238 states that electrical facilities are a compatible Williamson Act use. Placement of power poles and towers on land currently under Williamson Act contract will not remove the land from Williamson Act contract status. Moreover, except for the Proposed River Crossing, the reconducted power lines will replace an existing power line in an existing power line corridor that is already on Williamson Act lands. The new line segment for the Proposed River Crossing will permanently affect approximately 0.01 acre under Williamson Act contract.

Project Setting

San Benito County

Approximately three-fourths of the productive agricultural land in the county is located north of Tres Pinos to the county line and from Hollister west to Highway 101, in the San Juan Valley (County of San Benito 1994). In 2006, San Benito County earned approximately \$271 million in the production of agricultural goods, an increase of about 1% from 2005. Vegetables and row crops, and cattle and calves were the top commodities in San Benito County, producing approximately \$168.2 million and \$21 million, respectively, in 2006

(County of San Benito 2007). In the proposed project area, the alignment currently crosses through agricultural land that produces deciduous fruits and nuts, nursery, and berry crops (Figure 4.2-3).

Williamson Act Parcels and FMMP-designated important farmlands are found in San Benito County. In the proposed project area, the alignment currently crosses through FMMP-designated prime farmland, grazing land, and urban and built-up land (Figure 4.2-1). The alignment also currently crosses through Williamson Act parcels designated as prime and non-prime farmland (Figure 4.2-2). In addition, the alignment currently traverses lands designated in the San Benito County General Plan Land Use Element as Agricultural Productive (approximately between tower locations 5/34 through 30/195 and pole locations 13/01 through 13/13) as well as lands designated as Agricultural Rangeland (approximately between the Hollister Substation through pole location 13/14). Public utility facilities are permitted uses in both of these County land use designations (County of San Benito 1993). The new line segment for the Proposed River Crossing will cross additional FMMP-designated farmland, a Williamson Act parcel, and land with agricultural zoning that currently does not include public utility facilities.

Table 4.2-1 shows the acres of farmland in San Benito County, as well as the amount of recent farmland conversions.

Table 4.2-1. Farmland Conversion in San Benito County (2004–2006)

Land Use Category	Total Acres Inventoried		2004–2006 Acreage Changes		
	2004	2006	Acres Lost	Acres Gained	Net Change
Prime farmland	32,085	30,462	1,918	265	-1,653
Farmland of statewide importance	9,464	9,106	463	105	-358
Unique farmland	2,625	2,580	213	168	-45
Farmland of local importance	27,389	26,482	3,021	2,114	-907
Grazing land	603,616	605,731	1,732	3,847	2,115
Agricultural land total	675,179	674,331	7,347	6,499	-848

Source: CDC 2007b.

City of Hollister

Surrounding Hollister are large tracts of agricultural land, some of which are classified by the CDC's Division of Land Resource Protection as prime farmland or farmland of statewide importance. In the proposed project area, the alignment currently crosses areas designated as prime farmland within the Hollister sphere

of influence (Figure 4.2-1). With increased development in the city, conversion of some land that is currently in agricultural production may take place. Within the sphere of influence, the alignment currently crosses through agricultural land that produces deciduous fruits, nuts, field, nursery, and berry crops (Figure 4.2-3). The City aims to protect agricultural lands by maintaining parcels large enough to sustain agricultural production, preventing conversion to non-agricultural uses, and prohibiting uses that are incompatible with long-term agricultural production (City of Hollister 2005).

City of San Juan Bautista

The San Juan Bautista Planning Area encompasses about 3,000 acres, including 449 acres within the city limits. Agriculture is by far the predominant use, covering 81 percent of the total area. Agricultural uses include row crops, orchards, dryland farms, grazing and rangeland, pasture, and fallow fields. Row crops include broccoli, onions, cabbage, garlic, and cauliflower. The main orchard crop is apples, with the major concentration along Lucy Brown Road (San Benito County 1994). Grazing land is found south of the city, and prime farmland and farmland of statewide importance are found to the north (Figure 4.2-1).

Monterey County

Agriculture, consisting of crop farming and livestock grazing, is the largest industry in the county and makes a significant contribution to Monterey County's economy. Out of approximately 1.3 million acres of County land dedicated to agriculture, most of this area (approximately 80%) is used for grazing. The most productive and lucrative farmlands in the County are located in the North County, Greater Salinas, and Central Salinas Valley Planning Areas. The main crops in the County are cool season vegetables, strawberries, wine grapes, and nursery crops. (County of Monterey 2006). Existing land use in the project alignment area is designated as native vegetation (Figure 4.2-3).

Within Monterey County, the alignment currently passes through both FMMP-designated grazing land and other land, and Williamson Act Parcels considered non-prime farmland (Figures 4.2-1 and 4.2-2).

Table 4.2-2 shows the acres of farmland in Monterey County, including the most recent conversion information.

Table 4.2-2. Farmland Conversion in Monterey County (2004–2006)

Land Use Category	Total Acres Inventoried		2004–2006 Acreage Changes		
	2004	2006	Acres Lost	Acres Gained	Net Change
Prime farmland	169,369	167,636	2,711	978	-1,733
Farmland of statewide importance	44,546	43,402	1,585	441	-1,144
Unique farmland	26,479	25,104	2,025	650	-1,375
Farmland of local importance ^a	0	0	0	0	0
Grazing land	1,066,538	1,065,577	5,826	4,865	-961
Agricultural land total	1,306,932	1,301,719	12,147	6,934	-5,213

^a Farmland of local importance is land of importance to the local economy, as defined by each county's local advisory committee and adopted by its Board of Supervisors. For Monterey County, the Board of Supervisors made a determination of no farmland of local importance in the county.

Source: CDC 2007c.

Environmental Effects

This section discusses project-related impacts on agriculture. It identifies the thresholds used to conclude whether an impact would be significant and applicant-proposed measures to ensure that impacts on agricultural resources are less than significant.

Significance Criteria

For this analysis, an impact on agriculture was considered potentially significant under CEQA if it would result in any of the following environmental effects; these criteria are based on Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines (14 CCR 15000 et seq.):

- Convert a significant amount of Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland), as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use;
- Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract; or
- Involve other changes in the existing environment that, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of farmland to non-agricultural use.

Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Temporary and permanent conversions of prime farmland and other lands to non-agricultural use: less-than-significant impact

Construction Impacts

Because the construction staging areas, pull sites and crane pads, and new access roads are located on agricultural land (crops and grazing land), project construction will temporarily disturb the amount of land currently designated for agricultural purposes by approximately 104.16 acres; approximately 1.36 acres will be permanently converted to non-agricultural use. Of the total acreage that will be disturbed, approximately 22.11 acres are classified by the FMMP as prime farmland; approximately 82.05 acres are classified by the FMMP as grazing land; and the remaining acres include other land, as well as urban and built-up land. The FMMP-designated land that would be permanently converted to utility use is entirely grazing land. Of the total affected area, approximately 72.47 acres are also within Williamson Act parcels; however, only approximately 0.92 acre of Williamson Act lands will be permanently converted to non-agricultural use.

Due to the large amount of land available for, and currently supporting, agricultural purposes in the immediate project vicinity and in the affected counties, the small amount of acreage that will be permanently reduced will not substantially affect agricultural production in the area. Specifically, approximately 1.36 acres will be permanently converted to non-agricultural use. The majority of PG&E's use of agricultural land for power line construction will be temporary, property owners will be compensated (see APM AG-1 [Compensate for reduced agricultural production and loss of use]), and most of the lands will be reclaimed and returned to agricultural production or grazing land after construction.

Along the Hollister Tower Segment, approximately five temporary staging areas and seven temporary pull sites will be established, and along the Hollister Pole Segment approximately six temporary staging areas and 12 temporary pull sites will be established (see Chapter 3 figures in Appendix A for preliminary proposed locations). Along the Hollister Pole Segment, the staging areas and pull sites are located in areas designated as important farmland by the FMMP; along the Hollister Tower Segment, the staging areas and pull sites are in areas designated as grazing land by the FMMP. The staging areas and pull sites along the Hollister Tower Segment also are within designated non-prime Williamson Act parcels. As noted in Chapter 3, PG&E will negotiate easements with private landowners for the temporary use of these areas. Upon completion of the project, the areas will be left as specified in the individual lease agreements. The change in land use will be temporary (construction of each segment will last approximately 12–13 months), and the land can be replanted after construction.

Impacts associated with reduced agricultural production and temporary loss of use during construction are considered less than significant. Implementation of APM AG-1 (Compensate for reduced agricultural production and loss of use) described below will further ensure that impacts are less than significant.

Operations Impacts

The project has been designed to avoid permanent effects on farmland to the extent possible. Like the existing power line, the project will use a very small amount of agricultural land for the pole and tower foundations and short segments of permanent access roads. Approximately 1.36 acres of grazing land will be permanently converted to a non-agricultural use for the project. The small reduction of FMMP-categorized farmland (less than 10 acres) due to this project is negligible in the context of available farmland in San Benito and Monterey Counties. As noted in Table 3-1 in the Project Description, the majority of towers and poles in the alignment already exist and are being replaced in kind; therefore, the only new permanent disturbance is associated with the Proposed River Crossing. The actual area of new permanent disturbance likely will be less than the estimates presented in this analysis, as these estimates represent a worst-case scenario.

The general plans of both counties include strong agriculture preservation policies. Furthermore, PG&E will compensate the property owners for the small amounts of agricultural and grazing land that will be removed because of this project to ensure that any impacts are less than significant (see APM AG-1 [Compensate for reduced agricultural production and loss of use]).

Of the total acreage that will be permanently dedicated to the power line (noting the caveats stated above), a small percentage is designated as Williamson Act lands that will be used for pole/tower foundations and permanent access roads. Government Code 51238 states that electrical facilities are a compatible Williamson Act use. Placement of power poles and towers on land currently under Williamson Act contract will not remove the land from Williamson Act contract status. Thus, the proposed Project will not affect the Williamson Act status of any disturbed land.

The project will not conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, as it will replace an existing power line in an existing utility corridor. Agriculture is generally a compatible land use with utility corridors. Expansion of the right-of-way easements will not change or conflict with existing agricultural zoning under or adjacent to the power line. For these reasons, the project will result in a less-than-significant impact on FMMP-designated lands. In addition, property owners will be compensated for any temporary or permanent loss of agricultural use. With implementation of APM AG-1 (Compensate for reduced agricultural production and loss of use), impacts related to permanent conversions of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses will be less than significant.

APM AG-1: COMPENSATE FOR REDUCED AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION AND LOSS OF USE.

PG&E will offer appropriate compensation for land held in private ownership as part of the acquisition of temporary construction easements or permanent utility easements. PG&E will compensate property owners for removal of any structures, crops, or agriculture-related improvements required to construct the project. PG&E will negotiate easements with private landowners for the temporary or permanent use of agricultural areas. Upon completion of the project, the areas will be left as specified in the individual agreements. In addition, PG&E will prepare a SWPPP (see APM HYDRO-1 [Prepare and implement a Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan] in Section 4.8, “Hydrology”) to ensure that areas affected by construction are restored to pre-construction conditions.

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