

STAFF REPORT
City of Lancaster

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7/9/2024
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Date: July 9, 2024

To: Mayor Parris and City Council Members

From: Patti Garibay, Assistant Director - Community Development
Jocelyn Swain, Senior Planner - Planning & Permitting

Subject: Removal of Prime Farmland Mitigation from the Certified Final Program Environmental Impact Report for the Eastside Overlay Project (SCH # 2022100641)

Recommendation:

Adopt **Resolution No.** , removing the Prime Farmland Mitigation Measure from the certified Final Program Environmental Impact Report for the Eastside Overlay Project (SCH # 2022100641) and adopting the revised Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP)

G.C. Section 84308: No

Fiscal Impact:

None.

Background:

On August 22, 2023, the Lancaster City Council approved the Lancaster East Side Overlay Project and certified the associated Final Program Environmental Impact Report (EIR) (SCH #2022100641) with the required findings and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP).

As part of the Final EIR, mitigation measures were included to reduce impacts to less than significant levels for a variety of resource areas including potential impacts to Prime Farmland. The mitigation measure for Prime Farmland requires the replacement of Prime Farmland at a 1:1 ratio within Los Angeles County. Subsequent to the certification of the Final EIR, it has been determined that the mitigation measure for Prime Farmland is infeasible and unnecessary due to circumstances surrounding agricultural production in the Antelope Valley.

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines allow for the modification,

replacement, or removal of a mitigation measure from a CEQA document in accordance with the requirements of Section 15074.1(b). This section requires holding a noticed public hearing and adopting written findings that any “new measure is equivalent or more effective in mitigating or avoiding potential significant effects and that it in itself will not cause any potentially significant effects on the environment” based on substantial evidence.

Based on the 2018 Important Farmland Map (latest available) issued by the California Department of Conservation, the Antelope Valley has Prime Farmland scattered throughout western and eastern portions of the Valley with most of the Prime Farmland located between Avenue D, Avenue P, 40th Street East and 120th Street East. However, there is no way to confirm that the information on the published map is accurate as the 2020 and 2022 updates for Los Angeles County have not been published by the State. Wildlands, Inc. is a mitigation banking/conservation entity that provides mitigation banks and habitat conservation management in California, Oregon and Washington. The City has worked with them for the past 15 years on the acquisition of conservation habitat throughout the Antelope Valley. Based on information provided by Wildlands, there are approximately 19,000 acres in agricultural production in Los Angeles County and much of that is in nursery crops (indoors). This is less than 4% of the land area in Los Angeles County. Additionally, Prime Farmland requires the land to have the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields. The land must also have been utilized for irrigated agricultural production at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date.

The agricultural land in Los Angeles County, particularly in the Antelope Valley, is being converted to non-agricultural uses due to outside forces unrelated to proposed or future development within the Lancaster Eastside Overlay. Specifically, the availability of water in the Antelope Valley and the State mandates to provide for a substantial increase in housing are causing farmland to convert to other uses.

The Antelope Valley Ground Water Basin recently went through an adjudication process which limited the amount of groundwater that could be pumped by landowners and agricultural operations. This reduction in groundwater pumping makes agricultural production of alfalfa, onions, and carrots less feasible due to the water intensive nature of these crops. As a result, land owners are ceasing agricultural production which ultimately leads to the land no longer being eligible for listing as Prime Farmland by the State as it is no longer producing sustained high yields or being irrigated.

Additionally, the State has issued a number of housing mandates and approved legislation requiring a substantial increase in housing production and limited the City’s ability to have discretionary approval over these housing developments. Based on the last Regional Housing Needs Assessment (RHNA) and the City’s adopted Housing Element, the City of Lancaster is required to account for 9,023 new housing units between 2021 and 2029. This substantial increase over previous years RHNA numbers is putting additional pressure on available land for housing developments and making the conversion of agricultural land into non-agricultural uses more attractive. As this conversion is occurring independently of any proposed development within the overlay area, any potential project would not have a significant impact on agricultural resources (Prime Farmland), and no mitigation is warranted.

Staff is recommending that the City Council adopt the resolution removing the mitigation measure for Prime Farmland from the Final EIR and approving the revised MMRP.

JS/hb

Attachments:

A. Resolution No. 24-

B. Revised Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP)