

3.5 Agricultural Resources

This section discusses and evaluates the potential environmental impacts on agriculture and soil resources in the Study Area that may result from the buildout of the proposed Visalia General Plan Update.

Environmental Setting

PHYSICAL SETTING

Agriculture has been the predominant land use in the Planning Area as far back as the late 1800s. Due to the region's rich soils, water resources, and favorable geographic and climatic conditions, agricultural activity in and around Visalia is highly productive. Visalia's agricultural heritage has contributed significantly to the city's economy—much of the region's economic activity is related to the cultivation, processing, and distribution of agricultural products—as well as its visual and cultural character. Historically, Visalia's General Plan policies have acknowledged the value of the area's agricultural resources, and sought to preserve them through urban growth management strategies and monitoring despite a prevalence of development pressures on local landowners and a growing urban population.

Farmland Classification

The California Department of Conservation uses the Important Farmlands Inventory to classify farmland into five different categories based on soil type and current land use: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Local Importance, and Grazing Land. Two additional categories, Urban and Built-up Land and Other Land, are used for mapping purposes.

- *Prime Farmland* is land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for crop production. It has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields of crops when managed (including water management) according to current farming methods. Prime Farmland must have been used for the production of crops within the last three years.
- *Farmland of Statewide Importance* is land other than Prime Farmland that has a good combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the production of crops. It must have been used for crop production within the last three years.
- *Unique Farmland* is that which does not meet the criteria for Prime Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance, but which is currently used for the production of specific high eco-

nommic value crops (as listed in the last three years of *California Agriculture*, produced by the California Department of Food and Agriculture). It has the special combination of location, soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply to produce sustained high quality or high yields of a specific crop when treated and managed according to current farming practices. Examples may include oranges, olives, avocados, rice, grapes, and cut flowers.

- *Farmland of Local Importance* is either currently producing crops or has the capability to do so. It is land other than Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, or Unique Farmland, but it may be important to the local economy due to its productivity.
- *Grazing Land* is that on which the existing vegetation, whether grown naturally or through management, is suitable for livestock grazing. The minimum mapping unit for Grazing Land is 40 acres. This category does not include land previously designated as Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Local importance, of other lands where the terrain restricts the access and movement of livestock.
- *Urban and Built-up Land* is occupied by structures with a building density of at least one unit to 1.5 acres, or approximately six structures to a 10-acre parcel.
- *Other Land* includes 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 forty acres; and vacant and non-agricultural land larger than 40 acres and surrounded on all sides by urban development.

Existing Farmland

Farmland is the most prominent land use within the Planning Area, covering 39,518 acres or 65 percent of the total land. As shown in **Table 3.5-1**, the majority of the farmland within the Planning Area is classified as Prime Farmland by the State’s Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP). Lands designated as Prime Farmland make up 51 percent of the Planning Area. To the far northwest there is a band of land classified as Farmland of Statewide Importance. Many parcels immediately adjacent to urbanized Visalia are included in the Farmland of Local Importance category. Parcels used for animal raising or feeding are scattered in the farmland west of the city, while pockets of rural residential land are dispersed to the east. **Figure 3.5-1** maps farmland by type in the Planning Area.

Table 3.5-1: Farmland Classification in the Study Area

Type	Existing Acres	Percent of Study Area	Acres at General Plan Buildout	Percent of Study Area	Change
Prime Farmland	33,991	51%	21,501	32%	-12,490
Farmland of Statewide Importance	7,353	11%	6,954	10%	-399
Unique Farmland	181	0%	137	0%	-44
Farmland of Local Importance	1,630	2%	298	0%	-1,333

Chapter Three: Settings, Impacts, and Mitigation Measures
3.5 Agriculture and Soils

Table 3.5-1: Farmland Classification in the Study Area

Type	Existing Acres	Percent of Study Area	Acres at Gen- eral Plan Buildout	Percent of Study Area	Change
<i>Subtotal Important Farmland</i>	43,155	65%	28,890	44%	-14,265
		2%	908	1%	
Confined Animal Agriculture	1,218				310
<i>Total Farmland</i>	44,374	67%	29,798	45%	-14,576
<i>Planning Area</i>	66,644	100%	66,644	100%	

Sources: Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resource Protection, 2012; Dyett & Bhatia, 2012.

As of the 2007 Census of Agriculture, Tulare County was ranked second in the U.S. in terms of its total value of agricultural production, just behind Fresno County.¹ The county yields a wide range of agricultural products, including field crops (such as alfalfa, barley, and corn), fruit and nut crops, vegetables, nursery products (trees), apiary products (honey), seed crops (cotton), industrial crops (timber), and livestock and poultry.

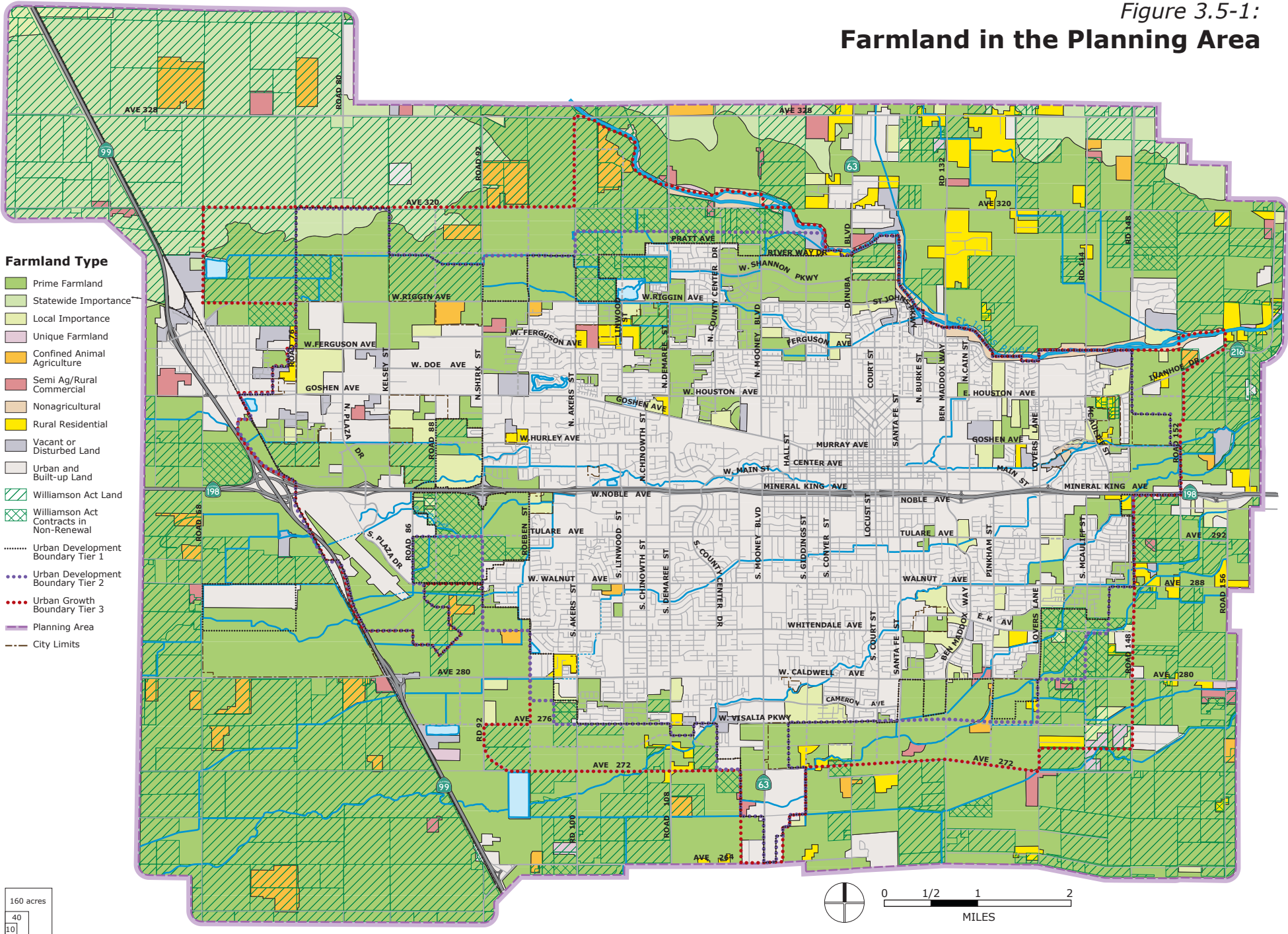
Milk is the county’s highest-grossing agricultural product, and has been for well over a decade. In 2011, Tulare County’s milk production was valued at nearly \$2.1 billion. Also that year, the Tulare County Economic Development Office announced that the county was ranked the largest annual producer of milk both statewide and nationally. The next-highest grossing products are oranges (\$576 million), cattle and calves (\$547 million), and grapes (\$532 million).²

In 2011, the total harvested acreage given to production was 1,644,885, and the total value of the county’s agricultural activities was \$5.6 billion. This marked an overall increase in agricultural value from nearly \$4.9 billion the previous year. Of the total harvested acreage, 79 percent was used for field crops, 20 percent for fruit and nut crops, 0.3 percent for vegetables, and 0.03 percent for seed crops.

¹ US Department of Agriculture, National Agriculture Statistics Service, 2007 Census of Agriculture.

² Tulare County Agricultural Commissioner/Sealer, *Tulare County Annual Crop and Livestock Report*, 2011.

Figure 3.5-1:
Farmland in the Planning Area



Williamson Act Land in the Planning Area

A Williamson Act contract represents an agreement to restrict the land under the contract to agricultural or open space uses in exchange for lower than normal property tax assessments. In 2010, 511 parcels in the Planning Area, totaling 25,724 acres (58 percent of the total agricultural acreage in the planning area) were under Williamson Act contracts. Of these, 65 parcels totaling 2,417 acres were in non-renewal, meaning that the contracts will not be renewed when they expire at the end of their 10-year periods.

Parcels under Williamson Act contracts are fairly well distributed throughout the non-urbanized sections of the Planning Area, with the exception of the southeastern portion of the Planning Area, and north of the St. Johns River, where parcels under contract are smaller and more scattered. The majority of parcels under contract contain Prime Farmland, except for those in the northwest corner of the Planning Area where the land is classified as Farmland of Statewide Importance. Most of the parcels whose contracts are not renewing are located just north of the city limits, near the Highway 99/198 interchange, in the West 198 Corridor area, and adjacent to the city boundary on the southeast. The non-renewal status is likely due to landowners' anticipation of forthcoming residential and commercial development in these areas.

Farmland Protection

By 2030, a significant amount of the agricultural land within the Planning Area will likely be converted to urban uses in order to accommodate projected growth. At buildout of the proposed Plan, only 45 percent of the Planning Area will be given to agricultural use, compared to 65 percent in 2010³, with the remaining land classified as either urban, water resources, or other soil types. If the proposed General Plan were developed to its full capacity, about 14,580 acres of agricultural land would be replaced by urban development. Of that land, 89 percent is currently classified as either Prime Farmland (12,490 acres) or Farmland of Statewide Importance (399 acres).

Continued conversion of agricultural lands to urban uses and rural residential uses could have an impact on the County's agricultural economic base. To protect farmland and open space, the Land Use Element in the General Plan establishes a fairly compact urban growth area, encouraging infill development and new growth adjacent to or near existing urban uses in order to minimize sprawl and unnecessary conversion of agricultural lands.

Soils

A full discussion of soil types and characteristics is found in Section 3.7: Geology, Soils, and Seismicity.

³ Tulare County, 2010, as cited in Visalia General Plan Existing Conditions Report, Dyett & Bhatia 2010.

REGULATORY SETTING

Federal Regulations

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) maps soils and farmland uses to provide comprehensive information necessary for understanding, managing, conserving, and sustaining the nation's limited soil resources. In addition to many other natural resource conservation programs, the NRCS manages the Farmland Protection Program, which provides funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farmland in agricultural uses. Working through existing programs, USDA joins with state, tribal, or local governments to acquire conservation easements or other interests from landowners.

The NRCS also classifies soils according to their suitability for agricultural use. The categories of the NRCS Soil Capability Classification System are as follows:

- Class I Soils have few limitations that restrict their use.
- Class II Soils have moderate limitations that reduce the choice of plants or that require moderate conservation practices.
- Class III Soils have severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants or that require special conservation practices, or both.
- Class IV Soils have very severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants or that require very careful management, or both.
- Class V Soils are not likely to erode but have other limitations, impractical to remove, that limit their use.
- Class VI Soils have severe limitations that make them generally unsuitable for cultivation.
- Class VII Soils have very severe limitations that make them unsuitable for cultivation.

Federal Farmland Protection Policy Act

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) oversees the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) (7 U.S. Code [USC] Section 4201 et seq.; see also 7 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 658). The FPPA (a subtitle of the 1981 Farm Bill) is national legislation designed to protect farmland. The FPPA states its purpose is to "minimize the extent to which federal programs contribute to the unnecessary conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses." The FPPA applies to projects and programs that are sponsored or financed in whole or in part by the federal government. The FPPA does not apply to private construction projects subject to federal permitting and licensing, projects planned and completed without assistance from a federal agency, federal projects related to national defense during a national emergency, or projects proposed on land already committed to urban development. The FPPA spells

out requirements to ensure federal programs to the extent practical are compatible with state, local, and private programs and policies to protect farmland and calls for the use of the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) system to aid in analysis. Because the City of Visalia may ultimately seek some federal funding for transportation or other capital improvements, the FPPA is considered in this document.

State Regulations

California Farmland Conservancy Program

The California Farmland Conservancy Program (Public Resources Code Section 10200 et seq.) supports the voluntary granting of agricultural conservation easements from landowners to qualified nonprofit organizations, such as land trusts, as well as local governments. Conservation easements are voluntarily established restrictions that are permanently attached to property deeds, with the general purpose of retaining land in its natural, open-space, agricultural, or other condition while preventing uses that are deemed inconsistent with the specific conservation purposes expressed in the easements. Agricultural conservation easements define conservation purposes that are tied to keeping land available for continued use as farmland. Such farmlands remain in private ownership and the landowner retains all farmland use authority, but the farmland is restricted in its ability to be subdivided or used for nonagricultural purposes, such as urban uses. Potential impacts on conservation easements would be addressed in subsequent project-level documents.

Williamson Act and Farmland Security Zone Contracts

The California Land Conservation Act (Government Code Section 51200 et seq.) of 1965, commonly known as the Williamson Act, provides a tax incentive for the voluntary enrollment of agricultural and open space lands in contracts between local government and landowners. The contract restricts the land to agricultural and open space uses and compatible uses defined in State law and local ordinances. An agricultural preserve, which is established by local government, defines the boundary of an area within which a city or county will enter into contracts with landowners. Local governments calculate the property tax assessment for lands under contract based on the actual use of the land rather than the potential land value assuming full development.

Williamson Act contracts are effective for periods of 10 years and longer. The contract is automatically renewed each year, maintaining a constant, 10-year contract, unless the landowner or local government files to initiate non-renewal. Should that occur, the Williamson Act would terminate 10 years after the filing of a notice of non-renewal. Only a landowner can petition for a contract cancellation. Tentative contract cancellations can be approved only after a local government makes specific findings and determines the cancellation fee to be paid by the landowner.

The State of California has the following policies regarding public acquisition of and locating public improvements on lands in agricultural preserves and on lands under Williamson Act contracts (Government Code Section 51290–51295):

- Avoid locating federal, State, or local public improvements and improvements of public utilities, and the acquisition of land, in agricultural preserves.

- Locate public improvements that are in agricultural preserves on land other than land under Williamson Act contract.
- Any agency or entity proposing to locate such an improvement, in considering the relative costs of parcels of land and the development of improvements, give consideration to the value to the public of land, particularly prime agricultural land, in an agricultural preserve.

Since 1998, another option in the Williamson Act Program has been established with the creation of Farmland Security Zone contracts. A Farmland Security Zone is an area created within an agricultural preserve by a board of supervisors upon the request of a landowner or group of landowners. Farmland Security Zone contracts offer landowners greater property tax reduction and have a minimum initial term of 20 years. Like Williamson Act contracts, Farmland Security Zone contracts renew annually unless a notice of non-renewal is filed. Potential cancellation of Williamson Act and Farmland Security Zone contracts would be addressed in subsequent project-level documents.

Under the Open Space Subvention Act of 1971, the State has provided annual subvention payments to counties for foregone property tax revenue due to Williamson Act contracts. The Budget Act of 2009 virtually eliminated these payments for the 2009-10 fiscal year. While partial funding was restored for the 2010-11 fiscal year, long-term State support to counties for agricultural land conservation is uncertain.

Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

The California Department of Conservation administers the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP), under which it maintains an automated map and database system to record changes in the use of agricultural lands. Farmland under the FMMP is listed by category—Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Local Importance. The farmland categories listed under the FMMP are described above in the Physical Setting section.

Regional/ Local Regulations

Tulare County General Plan Environmental Resource Element

The Tulare County General Plan Environmental Resource Element includes measures to preserve agriculture, as well as an agricultural resources section. The purpose of the agricultural resources section is to evaluate the County's farmland preservation programs and Williamson Act policies in order to preserve agricultural resources, as they are a vital component of the County's economy. The policies included in the agriculture section of the general plan aim to:

- Promote the long-term preservation of productive and potentially-productive agricultural lands and to accommodate agricultural-support services and agriculturally-related activities that support the viability of agriculture and further the County's economic development goals;
- Support increased viability of agriculture production and promote high-value, employment-intensive, and diverse agricultural production and processing in Tulare County; and

Chapter Three: Settings, Impacts, and Mitigation Measures
3.5 Agriculture and Soils

- Support the reasonable development and economic viability of animal confinement facilities.⁴

Tulare County Code Agricultural Land Policies

Chapter 29 of the Tulare County Code contains the County’s Agricultural Land Policies. As the value of agricultural land and production is an important asset to Tulare County, it is the County’s responsibility to prevent the loss of agricultural resources. Article 3 of this code clearly defines the “Right to Farm” and its purposes:

Where non-agricultural land uses, especially residential development, extend into agricultural areas, or locate in the vicinity of agricultural land, agricultural operations may be the subject of nuisance complaints. Such complaints may cause the curtailment of agricultural operations, and discourage investments for the improvement of agricultural land. This is detrimental to the economic viability of the agricultural industry of the County. It is the purpose and intent of this Chapter to prevent the loss to the County of its agricultural resources. (Ord. CS § 7-29-1050 (a), 2012).⁵

Tulare County Rural Valley Lands Plan

The Rural Valley Lands Plan (RVLP) is an area plan of the Tulare County General Plan that provides additional land use designations and policies for areas zoned for agriculture. The RVLP applies to approximately 773,500 acres of the western portion of the county and applies to areas outside Tulare County’s planned Urban Development Boundaries for cities and unincorporated communities. The RVLP was initiated to protect and maintain agricultural viability. The RVLP both establishes minimum parcel sizes for areas zoned for agriculture and implements a policy that supports reasonable accommodation for parcels that are not deemed suitable for agricultural activities. The RVLP designates five Exclusive Agricultural (AE) zones: AE, AE-10, AE-20, AE-40, and AE-80. Each requires a different minimum parcel size (ranging from five to 80 acres). The RVLP also contains non-agricultural land-use designations.

City of Visalia General Plan

The Land Use Element of the current Visalia General Plan includes the following policies related to agricultural land:

- 6.3.1 Continue to maintain a 20-acre minimum for parcel map proposals in areas designated for Agriculture to encourage viable agricultural operations in the planning area.

⁴ Tulare County General Plan Update, Agricultural Chapter, 2008.
<http://generalplan.co.tulare.ca.us/documents/GeneralPlan2008/Goals%20and%20Policies%20Report%20%28Component%20B%29.pdf>

⁵ Tulare County Code, Chapter 29: Right to Farm, passed February 28, 2012, accessed September 11, 2012
<http://www.codepublishing.com/CA/tularecounty/>.

- 6.3.2 Work with Tulare County to discourage parcelization of agricultural land outside of the current Urban Development Boundary and to encourage the use of agricultural preserves, where they will promote orderly development.
- 6.3.3 Maintain and update the City's agricultural preserve program.
- 6.3.4 Increase residential densities to reduce the need for conversion of prime agricultural land. Techniques to be utilized include usage of mixed use planned unit developments, integration of duplexes in single family subdivisions and development of properties to, at least, the minimum densities specified in the Land Use Element and map.
- 6.3.5 A Right-To-Farm Ordinance should be pursued.

The Conservation, Open Space, Recreation and Parks Element of the current Visalia General Plan includes the following policies related to agricultural land:

- 2.1.1 Conduct an annual review of cancelled Williamson Act contracts and development proposals on agricultural land within the Urban Area Boundary to foresee opportunities for acquisition, dedication, easements or other techniques to preserve agricultural open space.
- 2.1.2 On a City-wide basis, maintain a compact urban form and encourage growth in infill areas to minimize loss of agricultural resources and extension of public services.
- 2.1.3 Direct residential and commercial development to areas of non-prime agricultural soils to protect agricultural and open space values.
- 2.1.4 As the circulation system expands in the City and its planning area, design it to discourage land speculation in agricultural areas.
- 2.1.9 To allow efficient cultivation, pest control and harvesting methods, require buffers and transition areas between urban development and adjoining or nearby agricultural land.

Impact Analysis

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

Implementation of the proposed Plan would have a potentially significant adverse impact if it would:

- Criterion 1:** Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Important Farmland), as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use.

Criterion 2: Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract.

Criterion 3: Involve other changes in the existing environment that, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use.

METHODOLOGY AND ASSUMPTIONS

Farmland resource acreages were assessed based on the California Department of Conservation’s FMMP, a biennial report and mapping resource on the conversion of farmland and grazing land. Williamson Act contract lands were identified by the Department of Conservation and by the City of Visalia. Using these sources, the proposed General Plan was analyzed for potential conversion of important farmland, conflicts with zoning designations, conversion of Williamson Act contract lands, and other changes resulting from the proposed General Plan that would remove farmland from agricultural production.

To analyze the significance of each impact, the proposed General Plan goals and policies were considered to determine if significant physical impacts will still remain with development of the General Plan and full implementation of all policies.

SUMMARY OF IMPACTS

<i>Proposed Project Impact</i>	<i>Mitigation Measure</i>	<i>Significance after Mitigation</i>
Buildout of the proposed General Plan would convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance, as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use.	None Available	Significant
Buildout of the proposed General Plan would conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract.	None Available	Significant
Buildout of the proposed General Plan would result in changes in the existing environment that, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use.	None Available	Significant

IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Impact

3.5-1 Buildout of the proposed General Plan would convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance, as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use. (Significant and Unavoidable)

Agricultural lands produce commodities that generate local jobs and income; contribute to the aesthetic value of the area; and create foraging habitats for wildlife. In addition to the loss of these

key benefits, the conversion of agricultural land has hydrological implications, as loss of open space may increase peak stormwater flows and introduce water quality impacts through contaminated urban runoff. According to data from the FMMP, Tulare County has been experiencing conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses in recent years, as described in the Physical Setting section of this chapter.

Much of the development expected to take place over the next 20 years, including both current projects and those following the proposed Plan, would be infill projects taking place within or adjacent to the city limits. While much of this development would occur on vacant or underutilized urban land, there are currently agricultural sites within city limits that will experience an increase in development pressures. At full buildout of the proposed Plan, these sites would be converted to urban uses. Moreover, the proposed Plan’s urban footprint at full buildout would extend beyond the existing city limits. Although nearly all of the additional land is already within Visalia’s Urban Development Boundary and designated as urban reserve or another urban use under the currently adopted General Plan, most of it is currently occupied by agricultural uses that would be lost at buildout.

Table 3.5-2 shows the Planning Area’s existing inventory of Important Farmland by category, the projected losses resulting from General Plan buildout, and the percentage change by type of Important Farmland. Overall, adoption of the proposed Plan would result in the conversion of 14,265 acres (or 33 percent) of the existing Important Farmland within the Planning Area to urban uses, which may include park and open space designations. Of this land, 12,490 acres is classified as Prime Farmland, representing 37 percent of the existing Prime Farmland within the Planning Area. Another 399 acres are classified as Farmland of Statewide Importance, which represent only 5 percent of the total existing land within that category in the Planning Area. Still another 1,333 acres are considered Unique Farmland, or 82 percent of the Planning Area’s existing Unique Farmland. Prime Farmland currently accounts for 51 percent of the Planning Area, but will account for 86 percent of the total converted farmland, while all other categories would account for less than 10 percent each, meaning a disproportionately higher loss of Prime Farmland compared to any other type.

Table 3.5-2: Important Farmland Change in the Study Area

Type	Existing Acres	Change	Acres at General Plan Buildout	Percent Change By Type
Prime Farmland	33,991	-12,490	21,501	-37%
Farmland of Statewide Importance	7,353	-399	6,954	-5%
Unique Farmland	181	-44	137	-24%
Farmland of Local Importance	1,630	-1,333	298	-82%
<i>Total Important Farmland</i>	<i>43,155</i>	<i>-14,265</i>	<i>28,890</i>	<i>-33%</i>

Sources: Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resource Protection, 2012; Dyett & Bhatia, 2012.

The loss of over 14,000 acres of farmland is significant. Multiple policies are identified in the proposed General Plan to prevent excessive agricultural land conversion, including prioritizing infill

Chapter Three: Settings, Impacts, and Mitigation Measures
3.5 Agriculture and Soils

development within the existing city limits, clear phasing of growth, compact development in new growth areas, and the continuation of most agricultural activities in the Planning Area.

Proposed General Plan Policies that Reduce the Impact

Land Use Element Policies

LU-P-14 *Recognize the importance of agriculture-related business to the City and region, and support the continuation and development of agriculture and agriculture-related enterprises in and around Visalia by:

- Implementing growth boundaries and cooperating with the County on agricultural preservation efforts;
- Accommodating agriculture-related industries in industrial districts;
- Facilitating successful farmers' markets;
- Helping to promote locally-grown and produced agricultural goods, and the image of Visalia and Tulare County as an agricultural region.

LU-P-19 Ensure that growth occurs in a compact and concentric fashion by implementing the General Plan's phased growth strategy.

The General Plan Land Use Diagram establishes three growth rings to accommodate estimated City population for the years 2020 and 2030. The Urban Development Boundary I (UDB I) shares its boundaries with the 2012 city limits. The Urban Development Boundary II (UDB II) defines the urbanizable area within which a full range of urban services will need to be extended in the first phase of anticipated growth with a target buildout population of 178,000. The Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) defines full buildout of the General Plan with a target buildout population of 210,000. Each growth ring enables the City to expand in all four quadrants, reinforcing a concentric growth pattern...

LU-P-21 Allow annexation and development of residential, commercial, and industrial land to occur within the Tier II UDB and the Tier III Urban Growth Boundary consistent with the City's Land Use Diagram, according to the following phasing thresholds:

Tier II: The expansion criteria for land in Tier II to become available for annexation and development is that such annexation and development shall only occur if it does not result in excess of a 10-year supply of undeveloped residential land within the new Tier I. This is intended to be consistent with LAFCO policies discouraging residential annexations exceeding a 10-year housing inventory. Thus, the "inner" tier is distinguished from the GPURC-recommended Tier I in that it is not based on projected capacity and need, but rather on a requirement to be able to demonstrate that less than a ten year inventory of residential land exists.

Tier III: Tier III comprises full buildout of the General Plan. The expansion criteria for land in Tier III is that land would only become available for development when building permits have been issued in Tier I and Tier II at the following levels:

Visalia General Plan Draft Environmental Impact Report

- Residential: after permits for 12,800 housing units have been issued, resulting in a target City population in Tier I of 178,000;
- Commercial: after permits for 960,000 square feet of commercial space have been issued; and
- Industrial: after permits for 2,800,000 square feet of industrial space have been issued

To complement residential neighborhood development, the City also may allow small annexations for sites less than 30 acres in size that are contiguous to the City limits to allow for efficient development of a neighborhood, commercial area or employment center, provided no General Plan amendment is required and infrastructure is available or can be extended at no cost to the City.

LU-P-24 Periodically adjust, no less frequently than once every five years, the land use and economic demand projections used to determine population estimates, needed land supply and amendments to Urban Development Boundaries.

This will be done as part of the General Plan Report.

LU-P-25 Provide planning and technical support for the relocation of agricultural operations currently located in the City to compatible locations in the Planning Area or the County.

LU-P-26 Continue to follow the Referral Agreement with Tulare County, and work with the County to strengthen the implementation of the Visalia General Plan within the Visalia Urban Area Boundary.

LU-P-27 *Initiate planning for post-2030 urban land needs in the area north of St. Johns River that is within the City's Sphere of Influence, and other areas as may be identified by the City Council, when residential development with the Urban Development Boundary reaches 80 percent of capacity, or earlier, at the initiative of the City Council.

This long-term Planning Area is outside of the Urban Growth Boundary established for this General Plan, and a General Plan amendment adding it to the UGB will require detailed studies of infrastructure needs, financing options for extension public facilities and services, and environmental resources and a determination by the City Council that the City's long term interests are best served by sensitively planned, appropriately timed development north of the St. Johns River, that development will provide a net fiscal benefit to the City, and that infill development opportunities within the City have been fully realized.

LU-P-30 Maintain greenbelts, or agricultural/open space buffer areas, between Visalia and other communities by implementing growth boundaries and working with Tulare County and land developers to prevent premature urban growth north of the St. Johns River and in other sensitive locations within the timeframe of this General Plan.

Chapter Three: Settings, Impacts, and Mitigation Measures
3.5 Agriculture and Soils

Techniques to be applied selectively at appropriate locations in consultation with landowners with the objective of preserving agricultural lands and open space around the City could include voluntary programs for establishing open space and conservation easements, purchasing development rights, support for agricultural land trusts and “land banking” and, if feasible, establishing a program for transfer of development rights. This program will need to be coordinated with post-2030 planning to avoid creating the potential for “leapfrog” development. See policy LU-P-27.

- LU-P-31 Promote the preservation of permanent agricultural open space around the City by protecting viable agricultural operations and land within the City limits in the airport and wastewater treatment plant environs.

Land around the Airport may be developed with site-appropriate industrial uses during the planning period, providing it conforms to the land use compatibility requirements for the Visalia Municipal Airport environs established by the City.

- LU-P-32 Continue to maintain a 20-acre minimum for parcel map proposals in areas designated for Agriculture to encourage viable agricultural operations in the Planning Area.

- LU-P-33 Work with Tulare County to prevent urban development of agricultural land outside of the current Urban Development Boundary and to promote the of use agricultural preserves, where they will promote orderly development.

- LU-P-44 *Promote development of vacant, underdeveloped, and/or redevelopable land within the City limits where urban services are available and adopt a bonus/incentive program to promote and facilitate infill development in order to reduce the need for annexation and conversion of prime agricultural land and achieve the objectives of compact development established in this General Plan.

Techniques to be used include designation of infill opportunity zones as part of the implementation process and provision of incentives, such as reduced parking and streamlined review, and residential density bonuses, and floor area bonuses for mixed use and/or higher-density development, subject to design criteria and findings of community benefit.

Mitigation Measures

This General Plan reflects a policy determination to allow a certain amount of growth to occur in the Planning Area, which necessitates conversion of farmland to urban uses. Development of the Visalia General Plan will result in the loss of 14,265 acres (or 33 percent) of the existing Important Farmland within the Planning Area to urban uses. Conversion of Important Farmland to urban use is not directly mitigable. CEQA defines mitigation as:

- (a) avoiding the impact altogether by not taking a certain action or parts of an action;
- (b) Minimizing impacts by limiting the degree or magnitude of the action and its implementation;
- (c) Reducing or eliminating the impact over time by preservation and maintenance operations during the life of the actions;

- (d) Compensating for the impact by replacing or providing substitute resources or environments.

Aside from preventing development altogether, conversion of farmland cannot be directly mitigated. Satisfying one of the first criterion by avoiding, minimizing, or reducing the impacts would result in only partial implementation of the General Plan as proposed. Policies in the General Plan listed above that specify phasing and timing of development control the pace at which farmland is converted over time, partially satisfying the second and third criteria above, but ultimately the proposed Plan acknowledges and plans for the eventual conversion of the farmland in question. The City has identified alternatives to the project to satisfy these criteria (see Chapter 4).

As agricultural preservation is an issue of regional concern in the Central Valley, a mitigation measure commonly proposed by agricultural preservation groups is the purchase of agricultural easement on existing farmland, which would seem to satisfy the fourth criterion. However, Important Farmland is a finite, limited resource. The purchase of agricultural easements on farmland outside or adjacent to the Planning Area does not actually create any new farmland to replace lost farmland and thus is not “feasible mitigation” under CEQA.

In addition, a program consisting of the required purchase of agricultural easements on other land would be of limited utility or benefit. It is inherently dependent upon voluntary agreements by farm owners to sell such easements on their property for an agreed price. If the land in question is remote and not in an area planned for development in the near term, then the owner may be more willing to sell such an easement at a reasonable price. If the land in question is in an area already subject to development pressures, then most landowners likely will be resistant and will oppose efforts to “target” their area for the purchase of easements, or only sell them at a very high cost. The most likely result will be a “patchwork” of easements, with some owners more willing than others to sell them, potentially creating a more dispersed development pattern and loss of viability of farmland over time.

Overall, the proposed General Plan policies provide a framework for limiting conversion of Important Farmland areas to the minimum extent needed to accommodate long-term growth, and phasing development in such a way that prevents “leap-frogging” or otherwise reducing the viability of remaining farmland. The Plan also proposes to promote preservation of permanent agricultural open space around the City and maintain compact development through a three-tier growth boundary system.

Impact

3.5-2 Buildout of the proposed General Plan would conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract. (*Significant and unavoidable*)

Currently, 1,3560 acres within the City are zoned as agricultures. Most of the area would changes to non-agricultural land use, as described above in in Impact 3.5-1. Under the proposed General Plan’s policies, 511 acres of land currently under active Williamson Act contracts would be converted to non-agricultural use. This represents just 2.3 percent of the total acreage under Williamson Act contract within the Planning Area. The new growth areas in the proposed General Plan aim to minimize impacts on Williamson Act contracts, and 57 percent of Williamson Act lands to

Chapter Three: Settings, Impacts, and Mitigation Measures
3.5 Agriculture and Soils

be converted are already in non-renewal, so this project has no impact on these lands relative to agricultural use over the long term. It is assumed that procedures contained within the Williamson Act itself (such as minimizing the early termination of active contracts) will be followed properly as development occurs under the proposed Plan. At the same time, the General Plan provides long-term predictability to owners of agricultural land in the Planning Area. Owners of land that is not designated for growth during the 20-year planning period may be more likely to enter or extend Williamson Act contracts.

Proposed General Plan Policies that Reduce the Impact

In addition to the policies listed under Impact 3.5-1, the following policy helps reduce the impact.

OSC-P-1 Conduct an annual review of cancelled Williamson Act contracts and development proposals on agricultural land within the Urban Area Boundary to foresee opportunities for acquisition, dedication, easements or other techniques to preserve agricultural open space or for groundwater recharge.

Mitigation Measures

This General Plan reflects a policy determination to allow a certain amount of growth to occur in the Planning Area, which necessitates conversion of farmland to urban uses. To the greatest extent feasible, future urban growth has been allocated to areas either without Williamson Act contracts, or to areas with contracts in non-renewal. Avoidance of Williamson Act parcels altogether would create a non-contiguous, “patchwork” development pattern that does not meet the Plan’s objectives of concentric, compact, and logical growth. In addition, the City has no authority to force termination of Williamson Act contracts on a given property. Proposed General Plan policies provide a framework for limiting conversion of farmland to the minimum extent needed to accommodate long-term growth, and phasing development in such a way that prevents “leap-frogging” or otherwise reducing the viability of remaining farmland. No further mitigation, besides preventing development, would reduce the impact to active Williamson Act parcels. Alternative urban growth patterns that may lessen the impact on Williamson Act parcels are explored in Chapter 4, Alternatives.

Impact

3.5-3 Buildout of the proposed General Plan would result in changes in the existing environment that, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use. (Significant and Unavoidable)

Agricultural resources are directly threatened by urban development, but growth can have indirect, negative impacts on agricultural practices as well. Urban development has the potential to result in conflicts with adjacent agricultural practices, and lead to restrictions on the use of agricultural chemicals, complaints regarding noise, dust and odors, trespassing, and vandalism. These conflicts may increase costs of agricultural operations, and together with other factors encourage the conversion of additional farmland to urban uses. In addition, urban growth may increasingly compete with agriculture for the use of water resources.

The proposed General Plan’s Land Use Diagram and related policies seek to minimize these impacts. The areas identified for growth are contiguous to existing development and to each other,

and policies clearly require sequencing of growth so that minimal fragmentation of agricultural land will occur. The three-tier growth management system under the proposed General Plan will reinforce Visalia's compact form, minimizing the interface between farming and urban uses. The Plan establishes greenbelt buffers along the urban edge in some places, while providing requirements for buffering and screening of private development elsewhere. The General Plan supports Tulare County's Right-to-Farm ordinance and directs the City to adopt it within its jurisdiction, providing reasonable protection for farmers from nuisance claims. Although policies in the proposed General Plan would reduce agricultural impacts, over 14,000 acres of the existing Important Farmland would be lost. Therefore, this impact is significant and unavoidable.

Proposed General Plan Policies that Reduce the Impact

In addition to Policies LU-P-14, LU-P-25, LU-P-30, LU-P-31, LU-P-32, LU-P-33, and LU-P-44 listed under Impact 3.1-1, the following policies will help to reduce this impact to a less than significant level.

Land Use Element Policies

LU-P-34 *Adopt the County's Right-to-Farm ordinance to support continued agricultural operations at appropriate locations within the City limits, with no new provisions.

This ordinance should not limit urban development contemplated by the General Plan.

LU-P-35 *Adopt an Urban Agriculture Ordinance, reflecting "best practices," to support community gardens and other activities.

This ordinance will be prepared in consultation with the Farm Bureau and other interested organizations and individuals.

Open Space and Conservation Element Policies

OSC-P-27 To allow efficient cultivation, pest control and harvesting methods, require buffer and transition areas between urban development and adjoining or nearby agricultural land.

OSC-P-28 Require new development to implement measures, as appropriate, to minimize soil erosion related to grading, site preparation, landscaping, and construction.

Mitigation Measures

See Impact 3.5-1 Mitigation Measures discussion.