



DECEMBER 3, 2024

VIA EMAIL: [PAJAROSTATION@PUBLICINPUT.COM](mailto:PAJAROSTATION@PUBLICINPUT.COM)

TAMC

ATTN: PAJARO-WATSONVILLE MULTIMODAL STATION PROJECT

55-B PLAZA CIRCLE

SALINAS, CA 93901

Dear Transportation Agency for Monterey County (TAMC):

NOTICE OF PREPARATION OF AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT FOR THE PAJARO-WATSONVILLE MULTIMODAL STATION PROJECT, SCH# 2003091011

The Department of Conservation's (Department) Division of Land Resource Protection (Division) has reviewed the Notice of Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report for the Pajaro-Watsonville Multimodal Station Project (Project).

The Division monitors and maps farmland conversion on a statewide basis, provides technical assistance regarding the Williamson Act, and administers various agricultural land conservation programs. Public Resources Code, section 614, subdivision (b) authorizes the Department to provide soil conservation advisory services to local governments, including review of CEQA documents.

Protection of the state's agricultural land resources is part of the Department's mission and central to many of its programs. The CEQA process gives the Department an opportunity to acknowledge the value of the resource, identify areas of Department interest, and offer information on how to assess potential impacts or mitigation opportunities.

The Department respects local decision-making by informing the CEQA process, and is not taking a position or providing legal or policy interpretation.

We offer the following comments for consideration with respect to the project's potential impacts on agricultural land and resources within the Department's purview.

#### PROJECT ATTRIBUTES

TAMC has been planning the extension of rail service to Monterey County for over twenty-five years through the Monterey County Rail Extension Project. The Pajaro-Watsonville Multimodal Station project is Phase 2 of that larger program. Initial transit service at the Pajaro-Watsonville Multimodal Station would be provided by Caltrain, Amtrak Coast Starlight, Monterey-Salinas Transit, and Santa Cruz Metro. The goal of the Monterey County Rail Extension Project with the long-range "Vision Service," as

described in the 2023 California State Rail Plan and the TAMC Monterey Bay Network Integration Study, is to build out the regional and intercity rail network to connect Monterey County to Santa Cruz County and other rail services within the statewide rail network.

A future passenger rail service on the Santa Cruz Branch Line provided by the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission would use the Pajaro-Watsonville Multimodal Station. Additionally, the planned "Round the Bay" service would extend service around the Monterey Bay area and through the Monterey Branch Line.

The Pajaro-Watsonville Multimodal Station is designed to be a major transit hub serving Monterey and Santa Cruz County residents, providing access to multiple transportation modes. The station would serve as a key component of TAMC's larger Monterey County Rail Extension project, which aims to extend passenger rail service from Gilroy to Salinas to provide viable alternative transportation options for commuters, visitors, and residents traveling from Monterey, Santa Cruz, and San Benito Counties to the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond. The project site contains Prime Farmland as designated by DOC's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program.

#### PROJECT CONSIDERATIONS

The conversion of agricultural land represents a permanent reduction and impact to California's agricultural land resources. The Department generally advises discussion of the following in any environmental review for the loss or conversion of agricultural land:

- Type, amount, and location of farmland conversion resulting directly and indirectly from implementation of the proposed project.
- Impacts on any current and future agricultural operations in the vicinity; e.g., land-use conflicts, increases in land values and taxes, loss of agricultural support infrastructure such as processing facilities, etc.
- Incremental impacts leading to cumulative impacts on agricultural land. This would include impacts from the proposed project, as well as impacts from past, current, and likely future projects.
- Implementation of any City or County Agricultural Mitigation Plans, Programs, or Policies.
- Proposed mitigation measures for impacted agricultural lands within the proposed project area.

#### MITIGATING AGRICULTURAL LAND LOSS OR CONVERSION

Consistent with CEQA Guidelines, the Department advises that the environmental review address mitigation for the loss or conversion of agricultural land. An agricultural conservation easement is one potential method for mitigating loss or conversion of agricultural land. (See Cal. Code Regs., tit. 14, § 15370 [mitigation includes "compensating for the impact by replacing or providing substitute resources or environments, including through permanent protection of such resources in the form of

conservation easements."]; see also *King and Gardiner Farms, LLC v. County of Kern* (2020) 45 Cal.App.5th 814.)

Mitigation through agricultural conservation easements can take at least two forms: the outright purchase of easements or the donation of mitigation fees to a local, regional, or statewide organization or agency whose purpose includes the acquisition and stewardship of agricultural easements. The conversion of agricultural land may be viewed as an impact of at least regional significance. Hence, the search for replacement lands may not need to be limited strictly to lands within the project's surrounding area. A helpful source for regional and statewide agricultural mitigation banks is the California Council of Land Trusts. They provide helpful insight into farmland mitigation policies and implementation strategies, including a guidebook with model policies and a model local ordinance. The guidebook can be found at:

[California Council of Land Trusts](#)

Of course, the use of conservation easements is only one form of mitigation, and the Department urges consideration of any other feasible measures necessary to mitigate project impacts.

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the Notice of Preparation of an Environmental Impact Report for the Pajaro-Watsonville Multimodal Station Project. Please provide the Department with notices of any future hearing dates as well as any staff reports pertaining to this project. If you have any questions regarding our comments, please contact Farl Grundy, Associate Environmental Planner via email at [Farl.Grundy@conservation.ca.gov](mailto:Farl.Grundy@conservation.ca.gov).

Sincerely,

*Monique Wilber*

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Conservation Program Support Supervisor