



NOVEMBER 16, 2022

VIA EMAIL: [CMERCIER@ONTARIOCA.GOV](mailto:CMERCIER@ONTARIOCA.GOV)

Charles Mercier, Principal Planner  
City of Ontario Planning Department  
303 East B Street  
Ontario, CA 91764



Dear Mr. Mercier:

INITIAL STUDY AND NOTICE OF PREPERATION OF A DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT FOR THE 2022 RICH-HAVEN SPECIFIC PLAN AMENDMENT PROJECT, SCH# 2022100425

The Department of Conservation's (Department) Division of Land Resource Protection (Division) has reviewed the Initial Study and Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the 2022 Rich-Haven Specific Plan Amendment Project (Project). The Division monitors farmland conversion on a statewide basis, provides technical assistance regarding the Williamson Act, and administers various agricultural land conservation programs. We offer the following comments and recommendations with respect to the project's potential impacts on agricultural land and resources.

#### Project Description

The Rich-Haven Specific Plan (RHSP) was approved by the City of Ontario in 2015, with subsequent Specific Plan Amendments approved in 2016, 2018, and 2021. The current (2021) Rich-Haven Specific Plan comprises approximately 584 acres located west of Interstate I-15, and south of State Route SR-60. The 2021 Specific Plan Area lies within the 8,200-acre Ontario Ranch area, bounded generally by Riverside Drive to the north, "Old" East Edison Avenue to the south, Mill Creek Avenue and Hamner Avenue to the east, and Haven Avenue to the west. The location and boundaries of the 2022 RHSP Specific Plan Amendment evaluated in the Initial Study coincide with the location and boundaries in the 2021 Specific Plan.

In summary, the proposed 2022 Specific Plan Amendment would result in the following primary revisions to the 2021 Specific Plan:

1. Total residential development within the Specific Plan Area would be maintained at 7,194 dwelling units. Residential units and residential densities would however be reassigned within the Specific Plan Area.

2. Total commercial development would be reduced by approximately 65,900 square feet, an approximate 6.7 percent reduction in the 2021 Specific Plan commercial entitlements.

3. Total light industrial development would be increased by approximately 1,583,623 square feet, an approximate 134 percent increase from the 2021 Specific Plan Amendment.

### Department Comments

The conversion of agricultural land represents a permanent reduction and significant impact to California's agricultural land resources. CEQA requires that all feasible and reasonable mitigation be reviewed and applied to projects. Under CEQA, a lead agency should not approve a project if there are feasible alternatives or feasible mitigation measures available that would lessen the significant effects of the project.

All mitigation measures that are potentially feasible should be included in the project's environmental review. A measure brought to the attention of the lead agency should not be left out unless it is infeasible based on its elements.

Consistent with CEQA Guidelines, the Department recommends the County consider agricultural conservation easements, among other measures, as potential mitigation. (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."])

Mitigation through agricultural 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 should be deemed an impact of at least regional significance. Hence, the search for replacement lands should not 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 that should be considered. Any other feasible mitigation measures should also be considered. Indeed, the recent judicial opinion in *King and Gardiner Farms, LLC v. County of Kern* (2020) 45 Cal.App.5th 814 ("KG Farms") holds that agricultural conservation easements on a 1 to 1 ratio are not alone sufficient to adequately mitigate a project's conversion of agricultural land. KG Farms does not stand for the proposition that agricultural

conservation easements are irrelevant as mitigation. Rather, the holding suggests that to the extent they are considered, they may need to be applied at a greater than 1 to 1 ratio, or combined with other forms of mitigation (such as restoration of some land not currently used as farmland).

### Conclusion

The Department recommends further discussion of the following issues:

- 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.
- Proposed mitigation measures for all impacted agricultural lands within the proposed project area.
- Projects compatibility with lands within an agricultural preserve and/or enrolled in a Williamson Act contract.
- If applicable, notification of Williamson Act contract non-renewal and/or cancellation.

### Conclusion

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to comment on the Initial Study and Notice of Preparation of a Draft Environmental Impact Report for the 2022 Rich-Haven Specific Plan Amendment Project. Please provide this 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*

Monique Wilber  
Conservation Program Support Supervisor