
6. ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

6.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

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BASELINE EXISTING CONDITIONS ASSUMED IN THE ANALYSIS

Section 15125(a) of the CEQA Guidelines requires that an EIR include a description of the physical environmental conditions (environmental setting) as they exist at the time the Notice of Preparation (NOP) is published. The NOP for this project was released on March 22, 2010 for the required 30-day public review period. The environmental setting will normally constitute the baseline physical conditions used by the Lead Agency to assist in determining the significance of an impact. The CEQA Guidelines recognize that the date for establishing an environmental baseline cannot be rigid. Because physical environmental conditions may vary over a range of time periods, the use of environmental baselines that differ from the date of the NOP is reasonable and appropriate when doing so results in a more accurate or conservative environmental analysis.

Each technical section of this EIR (see sections 6.2 through 6.14) describes the environmental setting specific to that topic or issue area. The environmental setting information is based on information that was prepared as part of the 2008 Technical Background Report (TBR) published in February 2008 and updated, where necessary, to reflect any changed circumstances or more current information. A copy of the TBR is included on CD at the back of this document.

Buildout Assumptions

Future growth assumed in the policy area is guided by land uses identified on the county's Preferred Land Use Map (see Figure 3-3 in Chapter 3, Project Description). The level of development evaluated in this Draft EIR is based on reasonable assumptions for development activity anticipated to occur over the next 20 years within the county. This Draft EIR presents a conservative scenario based upon the potential development within the county and adjacent areas from 2010 through 2030. The development assumptions are referred to as the "adjusted buildout" scenario. As a practical matter, as illustrated under the current General Plan, actual development in any city or county is typically less than the theoretical limit or holding capacity of development. This is a result of market forces, as well as building and zoning restrictions when applied to specific sites which often dictate the construction of less than the maximum allowable development. The "full buildout" scenario assumes the maximum development capacity of the land. It is anticipated full buildout would not occur within the twenty year timeframe of this General Plan, but would occur at a later date.

A discussion of the growth assumptions assumed for the analysis is included in Chapter 3, Project Description and Chapter 5, Population, Employment and Housing. Specifically, Table 3-2 provides a breakdown of the net new growth over existing conditions assumed as well as the County's total adjusted buildout (reduction of buildout capacity) assumptions for the current land use combined with the projected new growth. The proposed General Plan assumes an adjusted buildout of approximately 23,000 new residential units as well as 26,000 new jobs and an increase in population of approximately 65,000 new residents. The net new growth is estimated to account for over 6,000 new residential units, close to 10,000 new jobs, and approximately 18,000 new residents. The EIR analysis is based on these buildout projections. If the development assumptions were not adjusted to take into account market forces and a realistic level of development the theoretical holding capacity of the land under the full buildout scenario would include a total population of over 90,000 people, close to 33,000 new residential units (over 17,000 are included within the Sutter Pointe Specific Plan area), over 87,500 new jobs and over 61 million square feet designated for industrial and commercial uses with an additional 13 million square feet designated as future reserve for commercial and industrial development. Table 3-3 in Chapter 3 presents the full buildout development assumptions. The full buildout scenario assumes the Sutter Pointe Specific Plan would be fully developed within the next 20 years. It would not be realistic to assume this level of development would occur within the county given historic growth rates and the current economic situation in California. However, if full buildout of the General Plan were to occur it is anticipated that impacts would be greater than under the adjusted buildout scenario. The analysis in each technical section addresses both the adjusted buildout as well as full buildout of the General Plan.

In addition, the following assumptions or scenarios were made for the traffic modeling. Allocations of future land use for both the No Project (existing) and proposed General Plan (project) by traffic analysis zone (TAZ) are assigned for 2030 conditions. The TAZs are geographic areas used to organize land use input data for the traffic model. The TAZs are defined by natural borders such as roads, waterways, and topography and typically represent areas of common travel behavior. The No Project or existing 1996 General Plan and proposed General Plan have similar employment forecasts. Compared to the No Project Alternative, the proposed General Plan would slightly reduce household growth and increase the number of employees throughout the unincorporated county. Compared to No Project conditions, there is a decrease of over 200 dwelling units (a decrease of 1 percent) and an increase of over 250 jobs (an increase of 1 percent).

The land use forecasts and network assumptions for 2030 were input in the regional travel demand model developed and maintained by the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG), and the model was run to generate regional transportation performance measures (for use in comparing the No Project conditions versus the proposed General Plan) and daily roadway segment volumes.

STRUCTURE OF THE IMPACT ANALYSIS

Each technical section begins with a detailed description of the environmental setting including the applicable regulatory setting followed by the thresholds of significance, methods of analysis and impact analysis.

Thresholds of Significance

The thresholds of significance that will serve as the basis for judging impact significance are identified in each technical section. Thresholds of Significance used for the evaluation of impacts include those thresholds currently used by the County. Sutter County relies on these thresholds as those that are appropriate for evaluating the significance of environmental impacts.

Impacts

The project impacts discussion describes potential consequences to each resource that would result from implementation of the General Plan. The impact analysis analyzes buildout of the proposed General Plan under both the adjusted buildout scenario as well as full buildout.

Following the impact analysis each of the five growth areas is identified followed by a brief discussion of any issues unique to that particular growth area.

Potential environmental impacts have been classified in the following categories:

- **Less than Significant** – Results in no substantial adverse change to existing environmental conditions.
- **Potentially Significant** – Causes a potential substantial adverse change to existing environmental conditions that can be mitigated to less-than-significant levels by implementation of feasible mitigation measures or by the selection of an environmentally superior project alternative.
- **Significant** – Causes a substantial adverse change to existing environmental conditions that can be mitigated to less-than-significant levels by implementation of feasible mitigation measures or by the selection of an environmentally superior project alternative.
- **Significant and Unavoidable** – Causes a substantial adverse change to existing environmental conditions that cannot be fully mitigated by implementation of all feasible mitigation measures, or by the selection of an environmentally superior project alternative.

Mitigation Measures and Residual Impacts

If impacts are considered significant and it is determined that implementation of the draft General Plan policies would not reduce impacts to a less-than-significant level, mitigation measures are proposed to reduce or avoid these impacts. In many instances the mitigation measures are new policies or revised policies that address the impact. This section also describes the level of significance of impacts following implementation of mitigation measures. Upon completion of this process, impacts are defined as either significant but mitigable or significant and unavoidable. Significant but mitigable impacts are those impacts that could be reduced to a less-than-significant level with the implementation of mitigation measures. Significant and unavoidable impacts are those impacts that would remain significant either due to the unavailability of feasible mitigation measures to reduce impacts or inability for mitigation measures to reduce impacts to a less-than-significant level.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

The discussion of cumulative impacts (contained within each technical section of Chapter 6) describes potential impacts from buildout of the proposed General Plan in combination with other development or actions that would add to the effect on a specific resource. A cumulative impact would occur, for example, from the incremental effect or impact of the project when added or combined with other closely related past, present or reasonably foreseeable future projects outside of the boundaries of the policy area. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor, but collectively significant projects taking place over a period of time. In many cases development under the proposed General Plan serves as the context for the cumulative analysis, as it includes all development within the policy area over the next 20 years. For some environmental resource areas, however, the cumulative context extends beyond the borders of the policy area and may include the boundaries of a particular service provider (such as a School District, the larger Sacramento Valley, or the greater Central Valley). If the cumulative impact is determined to be significant, the cumulative analysis evaluates whether the contribution of the proposed General Plan is "cumulatively considerable." If the contribution is not considerable, the cumulative impact is deemed less than significant. If the contribution is considerable, the EIR must identify potentially feasible mitigation measures that could reduce the magnitude of the contribution to a less-than-considerable level. If the mitigation does so, then the impact is deemed less than significant and no further mitigation is necessary. If mitigation is unavailable to reduce the contribution to a less-than-considerable level, the cumulative impact is deemed significant and unavoidable.

ASSUMPTIONS

This EIR makes several assumptions about development within the policy area. The environmental analysis assumes a conservative scenario, and in some cases a worst-case scenario, for all technical issue areas evaluated.