

3.0 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

This section describes the current environmental conditions in the Chandler Ranch Specific Plan Area. More detailed setting information is included within the impact analysis for each issue area.

3.1 REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The Chandler Ranch Specific Plan Area is located in the eastern portion of the City of Paso Robles, in San Luis Obispo County, about 25 miles north of the City of San Luis Obispo. San Luis Obispo County covers approximately 3,300 square miles, and contains approximately 260,000 residents. The current population of the City of Paso Robles is 28,000 (Department of Finance, January 2005). The County is topographically diverse, with mountains, rich agricultural valleys, and distinct urban areas, all within close proximity of the Pacific Ocean. The Mediterranean climate of the region and coastal influence produce moderate temperatures year round, with rainfall concentrated in the winter months. The region is subject to various natural hazards, including earthquakes, landslides, and wildfires.

3.2 PHYSICAL SETTING

3.2.1 General Physical Character

The City of Paso Robles is located in the upper Salinas River valley. The Salinas River itself flows through the center of the City from south to north. The community is bounded by steep hills and canyons on the west, and open rolling hills to the east. Paso Robles is located in a rich agricultural area, where ranchlands are transitioning to vineyards to support a growing wine industry. Suburban residential development approved by San Luis Obispo County frames the City on the southern and eastern edges, with lower density residential to the north and west of the City. Agricultural uses both north and south of the City eventually give way to the unincorporated communities of San Miguel and Templeton.

The Paso Robles area is bordered on the south and west by the rugged mountainous ridges of the Santa Lucia Coastal Range, to the east by the low hills of the La Panza and Temblor Ranges, and to the north by the low hills and flat-topped mesas of the Diablo Range. The highest elevations in the vicinity are located in the Santa Lucia Coastal Range where many peaks are 2,000 to 3,400 feet above mean sea level (msl). Substantial ridgelines are distributed throughout the western, southern, and eastern portions of the City.

The development pattern of Paso Robles is more suburban on the east side of the Salinas River than on the west side, although both sides of the river maintain the City's overall small town character. The older part of the community lies west of the Salinas River and Highway 101. This area includes many prominent buildings of architectural interest, which are developed along a traditional grid network of streets. The area is centered on an identifiable downtown, and tightly knit surrounding residential neighborhoods.

The eastern portion of the City includes many newer developments, and is primarily residential in character. This area, however, also includes both neighborhood and regional substantial commercial development, and a major industrial area.



3.2.2 Topography

The topography within the City ranges from nearly level to rolling hills and a few steeper escarpments. Several areas in the City, including the developed areas west of U.S. Highway 101, the Salinas River basin, and areas north of Highway 46 east, are characterized by relatively flat topography. The elevation of the Salinas River bed drops at a gentle gradient about nine feet per mile within the Paso Robles city limits. Most of the downtown area and other areas west of the Salinas River have an average elevation of approximately 700 feet. In the hills to the west of the City, lands rise to an elevation of 1,300 feet. Land to the east of the Salinas River is characterized by low, undulating hills including relatively flat grassy plateaus, ridges, and steep oak tree-covered canyons and creek basins, and varies between 800 and 950 feet msl. The Chandler Ranch area is situated in such a location.

3.2.3 Agricultural Lands

The majority of the agricultural soils in the City are used for cultivated crops and rangeland. Cultivated crops in the City and immediate area include dry farmed grain hay, barley, oats, safflower and wheat. With irrigation, suitable crops in the City and vicinity would include almonds (although most of the almond acreage is not irrigated), apples, walnuts, and wine grapes. New large vineyards have been planted on the hilly soils off of Highway 46 West and East, including the property immediately east of the Specific Plan site. Over the past 20 years, croplands in Paso Robles have been increasingly converted from dry grain crops and pasture lands to winegrape vineyards.

In Paso Robles and the County as a whole, the wine industry has experienced rapid growth over the past 20 years. In 1977, the total planted winegrape acreage in the County was approximately 4,000 acres. Currently, in the Paso Robles area alone, approximately 25,000 acres are planted with winegrapes (Paso Robles Vintners and Growers Association, 2005). By 1997, San Luis Obispo County became the fourth largest premium coastal vineyard area in California, after Sonoma, Napa, and Monterey Counties.

3.2.4 Climate

The area is characterized by a Mediterranean climate with a wet season from October to early April and a dry summer season. In general, the most rainfall is in the range of hills and mountains nearest the coast with a decreasing amount farther inland. In Paso Robles, the total annual precipitation is approximately 15 inches. In winter, the average high temperatures range from the 50s to the 60s, with lows in the 30s. There are typically a number of winter nights when temperatures fall 10-15 degrees below freezing. In summer, the average daily highs are in the 90s, with some days exceeding 100. Summertime lows are typically in the 60s and 70s.

3.2.5 City Limits and Sphere of Influence

Paso Robles is one of seven incorporated cities within San Luis Obispo County. The existing City limit of Paso Robles includes 12,739 acres (20 square miles). The City's present Sphere of Influence outside the City limits encompasses only relatively small noncontiguous areas on the western periphery of the City, as well as two areas adjacent to the Salinas River.



3.2.6 Specific Plan Area Setting

The Chandler Ranch Area can be characterized by rolling terrain with a major south-north trending drainage area in the central portion of the site. Steeper slopes are located along the flanks of the drainage, with the highest portions of the site in the center, within an area characterized by oak woodland. Elevations across the site range from a high of approximately 1,000 feet along the main ridgeline to 732 feet at the northeast corner of the subject property, closest to Huerhuero Creek. On-site drainages are intermittent streams which flow north and northeast draining into Huerhuero Creek, which is located in the northeast corner of the Specific Plan area.

The subject property is currently used for livestock grazing and has historically been used for both dryland farming and grazing. Model homes (some occupied) from a 1960s-era development project are located in the southeast corner of the specific plan, in an ~~County unincorporated~~ area called "Our Town." The historic Chandler Ranch headquarters (house and barn) is located in the southwest corner of the specific plan area, on the Wilcox parcel. The Chandler Ranch site is controlled by seven property owners. Figure 3-1 shows the site in the context of surrounding development, with onsite property ownership indicated.

3.2.7 Surrounding Land Uses

The Specific Plan area is surrounded by existing developments. The areas north, west and south of the site are within the City of Paso Robles. Specifically, Barney Schwartz Park, and Huerhuero Creek are north of the site, beyond which lies Highway 46 East and areas designated for agriculture, parks/open space, commercial and industrial uses. Various residential and commercial uses are west of the site, particularly west of Golden Hill Road. The southern portion of the site is flanked by additional residential, commercial and industrial land uses.

The area to the east is within an unincorporated portion of San Luis Obispo County. The County recently approved an agricultural cluster subdivision on 851 acres, in which 43 homes would be built. The remaining portion of that area is to be preserved in agricultural use, which at this time is wine grape cultivation.

3.3 CUMULATIVE PROJECTS SETTING

The State *CEQA Guidelines* require the analysis of the cumulative effects of a project in combination with other foreseeable development in the area. CEQA defines "cumulative impacts" as two or more individual events that, when considered together, are considerable or will compound other environmental impacts. Cumulative impacts are the changes in the environment that result from the incremental impact of development of the proposed project and other nearby projects. For example, traffic impacts of two nearby projects may be insignificant when analyzed separately, but could have a significant impact when analyzed together. Section 15130 of the State *CEQA Guidelines* prescribes two methods for analyzing cumulative impacts: (1) use of a list of past, present, and reasonably anticipated future projects producing related or cumulative impacts; or (2) use of a summary of projections contained in an adopted general plan or related planning document.



For the purpose of this study, buildout under the 2003 General Plan is considered to be the basis of cumulative impacts. The General Plan would accommodate a population of up to 44,000, and anticipates development within the Chandler Ranch Area Specific Plan consistent with what is being considered in this EIR.





Property Ownership and Environmental Setting Figure 3-1

