

3.2 AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY RESOURCES

This section of the 2024 PEIR describes the existing conditions related to agriculture and forestry resources within the SCAG region, sets forth the regulatory framework that affects agriculture and forestry resources, and analyzes the potential impacts to agriculture and forestry resources that could result from Connect SoCal2024. In addition, this 2024 PEIR provides regional-scale mitigation measures as well as project level mitigation measures that can and should be considered and implemented by lead agencies for subsequent, site-specific environmental review to reduce identified impacts as appropriate and feasible.

3.2.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

DEFINITIONS

Definitions of terms used in the regulatory framework, characterization of baseline conditions, and impact analysis for agriculture and forestry resources follow:

- *Farmland*: Sections 21060.1(a) of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (Public Resources Code Sections 21000–21177) delineates the consideration of agricultural land to include “prime farmland, farmland of statewide importance, or unique farmland, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) land inventory and monitoring criteria, as modified for California,” and is herein collectively referred to as “Farmland,” or “Important Farmland.” The following are categories mapped by the California Department of Conservation (DOC) (DOC 2018):
 - *Prime Farmland*: Farmland that has the best combination of physical and chemical features able to sustain long-term agricultural production. This land has the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields. Land must have been used for irrigated agricultural production at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date.
 - *Farmland of Statewide Importance*: Farmland similar to Prime Farmland but with minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or less ability to store soil moisture. Land must have been used for irrigated agricultural production at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date.
 - *Unique Farmland*: Farmland of lesser quality soils used for the production of the state’s leading agricultural crops. This land is usually irrigated but may include non-irrigated orchards or vineyards as found in some climatic zones in California. Land must have been cropped at some time during the four years prior to the mapping date.
 - *Farmland of Local Importance*: Land of importance to the local agricultural economy as determined by each county’s board of supervisors and a local advisory committee.

It should be noted that irrigated farmland includes most irrigated crops grown in California. When combined with soil data, these farmed areas become the Important Farmland (IFL) categories of Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, and Unique Farmland. Because of the nature of the IFL definitions, some irrigated uses, such as irrigated pastures or nurseries, may not be eligible for all three IFL categories.

- *Grazing Land*: Land on which the existing vegetation is suited to the grazing of livestock. This category was developed in cooperation with the California Cattlemen’s Association, University of California Cooperative Extension, and other groups interested in the extent of grazing activities. The minimum mapping unit for Grazing Land is 40 acres.

- *Urban and Built-Up Land:* Land 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. This land is used for residential, industrial, commercial, institutional, public administrative purposes, railroad and other transportation yards, cemeteries, airports, golf courses, sanitary landfills, sewage treatment, water control structures, and other developed purposes.
- *Other Land:* Land not included in any other mapping category. Common examples include low density rural developments; brush, timber, wetland, and riparian areas not suitable for livestock grazing; confined livestock, poultry or aquaculture facilities; strip mines and borrow pits; and water bodies smaller than 40 acres. Vacant and non-agricultural land surrounded on all sides by urban development and greater than 40 acres is mapped as Other Land.
- *Forest:* Section 12220(g) of CEQA defines forest land as “land that can support 10-percent native tree cover of any species, including hardwoods, under natural conditions, and that allows for management of one or more forest resources, including timber, aesthetics, fish and wildlife, biodiversity, water quality, recreation, and other public benefits.”
- *Timberland:* Public Resources Code Sections 4526 defines Timberland as “land, other than land owned by the federal government and land designated by the board as experimental forest land, which is available for, and capable of, growing a crop of trees of a commercial species used to produce lumber and other forest products, including Christmas trees.”
- *Timberland Production Zone:* California Government Code Section 51104(g) defines a Timberland Production Zone (TPZ) as “an area which has been zoned pursuant to Section 51112 or 51113 and is devoted to and used for growing and harvesting timber, or for growing and harvesting timber and compatible uses, as defined in subdivision (h). With respect to general plans of cities and counties, ‘timberland preserve zone’ means ‘timberland production zone.’”

EXISTING CONDITIONS

This section characterizes the baseline conditions for Important Farmland, agricultural use, Williamson Act contracts, forest land, and timberland, including Timberland Production zones.

AGRICULTURAL LANDS

California ranked first among the 50 states in 2020 in terms of net farm income at \$14.2 billion (California Department of Food and Agriculture 2021). Agricultural and related products are also one of California’s largest exports to the rest of the world. As of 2018, the SCAG region maintains over 2.6 million acres of agricultural land, which includes approximately 1.1 million acres of Farmland and approximately 1.50 million acres of grazing land/rangeland, with over 100,000 parcels of land designated as either Farmland or grazing land/rangeland (DOC 2023a). For purposes of this analysis and in accordance with SB 375, “farmland” means farmland that is outside all existing city spheres of influence or city limits as of January 1, 2008, and is one of the following:

- Classified as Prime or Unique Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance.
- Farmland classified by a local agency in its general plan that meets or exceeds the standards for Prime or Unique Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Senate Bill 375).

Agricultural areas in the region provide benefits like flood control, groundwater recharge, energy production, and employment opportunities. The DOC maps farmland throughout California under the Farmland Mapping and

Monitoring Program (FMMP) (DOC 2023a). The FMMP emphasizes Important Farmland, which is comprised of four subcategories: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Local Importance, as defined above.

Table 3.2-1, SCAG Region by General Land Use Category (2016–2018), breaks down the acres of agricultural lands, urban and built up land, other land, and water area by county within the SCAG region. San Bernardino County contains the most agricultural land by far, with farms and grazing lands making up over 63 percent of total inventoried area. Ventura and Imperial counties also contain substantial amounts of agricultural land, with farm and/or grazing lands comprising approximately half of the total acreage in each county. Orange County and Los Angeles County have the least amount of agricultural lands in the SCAG region, which is unsurprising as they contain the highest percent acreage of Urban and Built-up Land in the region relative to their total size.

TABLE 3.2-1 SCAG Region by General Land Use Category (2016–2018)

COUNTY	LAND USE CATEGORY (CHANGE IN ACRES FROM 2016 TO 2018)						TOTAL AREA INVENTORIED
	FARMLAND	GRAZING LAND	AGRICULTURAL LAND SUBTOTAL	URBAN AND BUILT-UP LAND	OTHER LAND	WATER AREA	
Imperial	-6,097	0	-6,097	4,351	1,596	148	-2
Los Angeles	77	21,661	21,737	605,913	83,105	3,095	713,851
Orange	-675	-811	-1,486	1,176	69	2,051	1,810
Riverside	-5,977	-346	-6,322	8,138	2,422	-4,237	0
San Bernardino	-688	-1,234	-1,922	2,027	-104	-1	0
Ventura	-236	-145	-381	-518	135	847	83
Totals	-13,596	1,482	5,528	621,087	87,224	1,902	715,742

Source: DOC 2016, 2018.

Table Note: 2018 data is the most recently available data for farmland mapping.

Agricultural lands in the SCAG region represent a declining trend, with the exception of Los Angeles County where grazing land increased from 2016 to 2018 due to the substantial increase in the total area inventoried for the survey in that jurisdiction that captured additional grazing land not previously included in the survey area. As noted above, Irrigated Farmland includes most irrigated crops grown in California. When combined with soil data, these farmed areas become the Important Farmland (IFL) categories of Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance & Unique Farmland. Because of the nature of the IFL definitions, some irrigated uses, such as irrigated pastures or nurseries, may not be eligible for all three IFL categories. Non-irrigated land uses include grazing areas, land used for dryland crop farming, and formerly irrigated land that has been left idle for three or more update cycles. The conversion of irrigated farmland to urban land is primarily due to urbanization, which increased between 2016 and 2018 for all counties except Ventura. Urban Land includes residential, industrial, recreational, infrastructure and institutional uses. Non-irrigated and other land that was converted to urban land were primarily due to the construction of new homes, commercial and industrial buildings and groundwater recharge or water control ponds. Los Angeles County saw the greatest increase in urban and built up land, other land, and water area between 2016 and 2018.

Table 3.2-2, SCAG Region Important Farmland (2018), shows the breakdown of Important Farmland in the SCAG region. Nearly 15 percent of the area inventoried by the FMMP classifies as Important Farmland.

TABLE 3.2-2 SCAG Region Important Farmland (2016-2018)

COUNTY	FARMLAND DESIGNATION (CHANGE IN ACRES FROM 2016-2018)						
	PRIME FARMLAND	FARMLAND OF STATEWIDE IMPORTANCE	UNIQUE FARMLAND	FARMLAND OF LOCAL IMPORTANCE	IMPORTANT FARMLAND TOTAL	PERCENT OF TOTAL AREA INVENTORIED (2018)	PERCENT OF TOTAL AREA INVENTORIED (2016-2018)
Imperial	-1,042	-5,676	-165	786	-6,097	50.8	0.6
Los Angeles	-374	-66	824	-306	77	1.5	(0.0)
Orange	-110	-52	-513	0	-675	1.0	0.1
Riverside	-557	-148	-444	-4,828	-5,977	21.3	0.3
San Bernardino	-435	-202	-38	-13	-688	1.4	0.0
Ventura	-212	-66	-186	228	-236	21.3	0.0
Totals	-2,731	-6,210	-523	-4,132	-13,596	15.1	0.2

Source: DOC, 2016, 2018.

Note: Figures are generated from the GIS data. Files dating from 1990 to 2018; 2018 is the most recently available data as of March 2023.

As shown above, in Table 3.2-2, Imperial County contains the most Prime Farmland and Farmland of Statewide Importance, due to a favorable climate, productive soils, and irrigation water from the All-American Canal. The County produced approximately \$2.3 billion in agricultural crops and commodities in 2021, which is a 12 percent increase compared to 2020. Major crops grown in Imperial County include vegetables, melons, and fruit and nut crops. Although Imperial County does not contain state-designated Important Grazing Land, cattle are the County’s number one commodity, and livestock produced approximately \$464 million (20 percent) of the county’s agricultural income in 2021 (Imperial County 2021). **Map 3.2-1, Farmland in the SCAG Region**, displays the regional distribution of Important Farmlands within the SCAG region.

As shown in **Table 3.2-3, SCAG Region Important Farmland Average Annual Acreage Change (1984–2018)**, the SCAG region lost an average of 9,010 acres of Important Farmland from 1984 to 2018 (DOC 2018).

TABLE 3.2-3 SCAG Region Important Farmland Average Annual Acreage Change (1984–2018)

COUNTY	1984 IMPORTANT FARMLAND ACREAGE	2018 IMPORTANT FARMLAND ACREAGE	1984-2018 NET ACREAGE LOST	1984-2018 NET ACREAGE LOST (PERCENT)	AVERAGE ANNUAL ACREAGE LOST
Imperial	562,132	522,374	39,758	7%	1,169
Los Angeles	60,877	27,467	33,410	55%	983
Orange	26,535	5,040	21,495	81%	632
Riverside	561,542	413,858	147,684	26%	4,344
San Bernardino	69,575	19,705	49,870	72%	1,467
Ventura	132,388	118,272	14,116	11%	415
Totals	1,413,049	1,106,716	306,333	22%	9,010

Source: DOC 2018.

Los Angeles County is the most urbanized county in the SCAG region and contains only 1.5 percent of Important Farmland. Despite this, the County reaped over \$177 million from agricultural commodities in 2019 (the most

recent data available). Nursery products are the number one commodity in Los Angeles County, followed by vegetable crops and dairy and livestock (Los Angeles County 2019).

Orange County was once a rural community that relied primarily on its agricultural economy that included oranges, apricots, and walnuts. Similar to Los Angeles County, Orange County has become heavily urbanized and now contains the lowest acreage of Important Farmland of any county in the SCAG region. Despite this, Orange County produced approximately \$95 million from agricultural crops and commodities in 2021, the majority of which was generated by nursery crops, as well as tree fruit and berry crops (Orange County 2021).

Riverside County contains the most Unique Farmland and Farmland of Local Importance within the region, due to its soil quality, moisture, and growing season that sustain high value crops. In 2020, Riverside County grossed approximately \$1.4 billion from agricultural production, up seven percent from 2019. Major crops in Riverside County include grapefruit, carrots, lettuce, and onions (Riverside County 2020).

San Bernardino, despite having the most agricultural land in the SCAG region, has almost the least amount of Important Farmland, second only to Orange County. This is due to the massive amount of Grazing Land that constitutes most of the agricultural land in San Bernardino County. In 2021, the County's gross value of agricultural production totaled approximately \$351million, down 10 percent from 2020. Milk is the number one commodity and the meat from cattle and calves is the number two commodity for the County (San Bernardino County 2022).

Ventura County has some of the most productive Prime and Unique Farmlands in the nation. Over 21 percent of inventoried land in the County is designated as Important Farmland. In 2021, the County generated approximately \$2.1 billion from agricultural commodities, a five percent increase from 2020. Strawberries and lemons are the top crops in the County, followed by nursery stock, raspberries, and avocados (Ventura County 2021).

FORESTRY RESOURCES

Forest lands within the SCAG region include the Angeles National Forest (Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties), San Bernardino National Forest (San Bernardino and Riverside counties), Los Padres National Forest (Los Angeles and Ventura County), and the Cleveland National Forest (Orange County and Riverside County), as well as forest lands within the open space zones of Imperial and Los Angeles counties (**Map 3.2-2, Forest Lands in the SCAG Region**).

Within the SCAG region, forests growing at higher elevations (approximately 3,000 feet and above) are dominated by conifers. Montane conifer forests are often comprised of white fir and sugar pine, while mountain juniper and lodgepole pine thrive on open slopes and flats, respectively. Interior and Canyon live oak is also found in areas of higher elevation, as are big cone-fir trees, and Coulter, ponderosa, and Jeffrey pines. The San Bernardino Mountains maintain the highest elevation forests in the region, which are dominated by limber pine.

Forests and woodlands in lower elevations of the SCAG region are largely oak-dominated, supporting Engelmann and valley oak. Lower woodlands also consist of a mix of Coulter pine, canyon live oak, black oak, ponderosa pine, and Jeffrey pine, as well as understory grasses and herbs, most of which are non-native. Coast live oak woodland forms along coastal slopes and is often found associated with California walnut. In the vicinity of Sierra Peak in Orange County is the Tecate cypress forest, which thrives on low-fertility soils. The fire-adapted conifer species is listed by the California Native Plant Society and the forest is considered a special-status natural community by the California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDB) (CNDDB 2023).

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife recognizes valley oak woodland, Engelmann oak woodland, and California walnut woodland as sensitive woodland communities in the SCAG region. These communities as well as others have declined dramatically due to urban and agricultural development over the past 100 years. Wildfires have also negatively affected forests and woodlands, many of which can be attributed to humans. It is estimated that 3,501 human-caused fires have burned approximately 1,458,881 acres of California in 2020 (CAL FIRE 2020). Refer to Section 3.20, *Wildfire*, of this 2024 PEIR for a discussion of wildfire impacts. Fire management and protection professionals now face longer fire seasons, bigger fires, and more acres burned on average each year, and more extreme fire behavior as climate change intensifies fire conditions.

TIMBERLAND

"Timberland" means privately or publicly owned land which is devoted to and used for growing and harvesting timber, or for growing and harvesting timber and compatible uses, and which can grow an average annual volume of wood fiber of at least 15 cubic feet per acre. "Timber" means trees of any species maintained for eventual harvest for forest products purposes, whether planted or of natural growth, standing or down, on privately or publicly owned land, including Christmas trees, but does not mean nursery stock. Timber is permitted in the A-2 and A-3 agricultural zones in Imperial County, the Open Space zone in Los Angeles County with a Conditional Use Permit (CUP), and the Open Space Overlay in San Bernardino County with a CUP. Riverside County permits timberland production within the R-R (rural residential) zone and W-2 (controlled development areas) zone if a CUP has been obtained. Some counties designate areas of timberland as Timberland Preserves. These areas zoned as Timberland Production Zones (TPZs) are restricted in use to the production of timber for at least 10 years. There is no TPZ land in the SCAG region (California Land Conservation Assistance Network 2013).

3.2.2 REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

FEDERAL

UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE NATIONAL FOREST MANAGEMENT ACT OF 1976

The United States Forest Service manages approximately 2.3 million acres of national forests in the SCAG region, which is subject to the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (Public Law 94-588) (U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry 1976), a federal law that governs the administration of national forests. There are four national forests in the SCAG region, each of which is managed in accordance with a Forest Management Plan: the Angeles National Forest (US Forest Service 2023a), San Bernardino National Forest (US Forest Service 2023b), Los Padres National Forest (US Forest Service 2023c), and Cleveland National Forest (USDA 2023d).

FARMLAND PROTECTION POLICY ACT OF 1981

Congress passed the Agriculture and Food Act of 1981 (Public Law 97-98) (United States Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry 1981) containing the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) subtitle I of Title XV, Sections 1539–1549. Pursuant to the FPPA of 1981 Sections 1539–1549, the Secretary of Agriculture is directed to establish and carry out a program to "minimize the extent to which federal programs contribute to the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses, and to the extent practicable, will be compatible with state, unit of local government, and private programs and policies to protect farmland" (7 USC 4201–4209 & 7 USC 658) (NRCS 2023). Projects are subject to FPPA requirements if they may irreversibly convert farmland (directly or indirectly) to nonagricultural use and are completed by a federal agency or with assistance from a federal agency. The purpose of the FPPA to minimize the impacts federal programs have on the unnecessary

and irreversible conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses. It ensures that to the extent possible, federal programs are administered to be compatible with state, local units of government, and private programs and policies to protect farmland. Federal agencies are required to develop and review their policies and procedures to implement the FPPA every two years. The FPPA does not authorize the federal government to regulate the use of private or nonfederal land or, in any way, affect the property rights of owners. For the purpose of FPPA, farmland includes Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, and Land of Statewide or Local Importance. Farmland subject to FPPA requirements does not have to be currently used for cropland. It can be forest land, pastureland, cropland, or other land, but not water or urban built-up land.

FEDERAL FARM AND RANGLAND PROTECTION PROGRAM

The Federal Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) is a voluntary easement purchase program that helps farmers and ranchers keep their land in agriculture (7 CFR 1491). Pursuant to Sections 1539–1549 of the FPPA of 1981 Sections, the Secretary of Agriculture is directed to establish and carry out a program to “minimize the extent to which federal programs contribute to the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses, and to the extent practicable, will be compatible with state, unit of local government, and private programs and policies to protect farmland.” (7 USC 4201-4209 & 7 USC 658). The program provides matching funds to state, tribal, or local governments and nongovernmental organizations with existing farmland protection programs to purchase conservation easements or other interests in land.

The FRPP is re-authorized in the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Farm Bill) (U.S. Congress 2002). The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) manages the program. Technical Committee, awards funds to qualified entities to conduct their farmland protection programs. Although a minimum of 30 years is required for conservation easements, priority is given to applications with perpetual easements.

FEDERAL FOREST LEGACY PROGRAM

The Forest Legacy Program (FLP) (16 USC Sections 2103c) (USDA 2017) was part of the 1990 Federal Farm Bill (U.S. Congress 1990). The purpose of the FLP is to protect environmentally important forestland under private ownership from conversion to non-forest uses, such as residential or commercial development. The FLP promotes the use of voluntary conservation easements on these properties. Landowners who wish to participate may sell or transfer particular rights, such as the right to develop the property or to allow public access, while retaining ownership of the property and the right to use it in any way consistent with the terms of the easement. The agency or organization holding the easement is responsible for managing the rights it acquires and for monitoring compliance by the landowner. Forest management activities, including timber harvesting, hunting, fishing, and hiking are encouraged, provided they are consistent with the program’s purpose.

AGRICULTURAL IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2018

The Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018, or 2018 Farm Bill, which was signed on December 20, 2018 (and will remain in effect through 2023, although some provisions extend beyond 2023), builds upon and continues to implement many of the crucial programs that serve agricultural producers. The USDA is charged with implementing the bill, which reauthorized previous programs in the 2014 Farm Bill to serve producers now while they seek public input for future programs (USDA 2018). The 2018 Farm Bill continued funding for major programs but did include some changes to Natural Resources Conservation Programs such as expanding support to producers who address significant natural resources concerns through adoption of conservation practices and activities (USDA 2019). All major conservation programs are continued, although some have been modified.

FEDERAL ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) is a voluntary program that provides financial and technical assistance through contracts up to 10 years in length to farmers and ranchers who face threats to soil, water, air, and related natural resources on their land. These contracts provide financial assistance to help plan and implement conservation practices that address natural resource concerns and for opportunities to improve soil, water, plant, animal, air and related resources on agricultural land and non-industrial private forestland. In addition, another purpose of EQIP is to help producers meet federal, state, tribal and local environmental regulations.

STATE

THE CALIFORNIA LAND CONSERVATION ACT

The California Land Conservation Act (Williamson Act) of 1965 was enacted by the California State Legislature in 1965 to encourage the preservation of agricultural lands (DOC 2019a). The DOC administers the Williamson Act, for the conservation of farmland and other resource-oriented laws. The Williamson Act program permits property tax adjustments for landowners who contract with a city or county to keep their land in agricultural production or approved open space uses for at least 10 years. Lands covered by Williamson Act contracts are assessed based on their agricultural value instead of their potential market value under nonagricultural uses. In return for the preferential tax rate, the landowner is required to contractually agree to not develop the land for a period of at least 10 years (DOC 2019b).

Williamson Act contracts are renewed annually for 10 years unless a party to the contract files for non-renewal (DOC 2019b). The filing of a non-renewal application by a landowner ends the automatic annual extension of a contract and starts a nine-year phase-out of the contract. During the phase-out period, the land remains restricted to agricultural and open space uses, but property taxes gradually return to levels associated with the market value of the land (DOC 2019c). At the end of the nine-year non-renewal process, the contract expires, and the owner's uses of the land are restricted only by applicable local zoning.

The Williamson Act defines compatible use of contracted lands as any use determined by the county or city administering the preserve to be compatible with the agricultural, recreational, or open-space use of land within the preserve and subject to contract. However, uses deemed compatible by a county or city government must be consistent with the principles of compatibility set forth in Government Code Section 51231, 51238, or 51238.1.

Within the SCAG region, Imperial, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties have land under a Williamson Act contract, although Santa Catalina Island is the only contracted area in Los Angeles County. Orange County no longer has any land under a Williamson Act contract (DOC 2017).

OPEN SPACE SUBVENTION ACT

The Open Space Subvention Act of 1972 (Government Code (Gov. Code), Sections 16140 et seq.) was enacted on January 1, 1972, to provide for the partial replacement of local property tax revenue foregone as a result of participation in the Williamson Act and other enforceable open space restriction programs. Participating local governments receive annual payment based on the quantity (number of acres), quality (soil type and agricultural productivity), and, for Farmland Security Zone contracts, location (proximity to a city) of land enrolled under eligible, enforceable open space restrictions (DOC 2023c).

THE RIGHT TO FARM ACT OF 1981

The Right to Farm Act of 1981 (California Civil Code Sections 3482.5) is designed to protect commercial agricultural operations from nuisance complaints that may arise when an agricultural operation is conducting business in a “manner consistent with proper and accepted customs.” The code specifies that established operations that have been in business for three or more years that were not nuisances at the time they began shall not be considered a nuisance as a result of new land use.

FARMLAND SECURITY ZONE ACT

The Farmland Security Zone Act (California Government Code Sections 51296–51297.4) is similar to the Williamson Act and was passed by the California State Legislature in 1999 to ensure that long-term farmland preservation is part of public policy (DOC 2023d). Farmland Security Zone Act contracts are sometimes referred to as “Super Williamson Act Contracts.” Under the provisions of this act, a landowner already under a Williamson Act contract can apply for Farmland Security Zone status by entering into a contract with the county. Farmland Security Zone classification automatically renews each year for an additional 20 years. In return for a further 35 percent reduction in the taxable value of land and growing improvements (in addition to Williamson Act tax benefits), the owner of the property promises not to develop the property into non-agricultural uses. Currently, Ventura County is the only county in the SCAG region with lands designated as Farmland Security Zones.

THE CORTESE-KNOX-HERTZBERG LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANIZATION ACT OF 2000

The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act (Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act) of 2000 (Gov. Code, Sections 56000 et seq.) established procedures for local government changes of organization, including city incorporations, annexations to a city or special district, and city and special district consolidations. This act requires that development or use of land for other than open space shall be guided away from existing prime agricultural lands in open space use toward areas containing nonprime agricultural lands, unless that action would not promote that planned, orderly, efficient development of an area (California State Assembly 2018).

CALIFORNIA FARMLAND CONSERVANCY PROGRAM ACT

The California Farmland Conservancy Program Act of 2010 (Pub. Resources Code, Sections 10200 et seq.), also known as Sen. Bill No. 1142 (Statutes 2010, Chapter 323) (SB 1142), established the California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP), which provides grants for agricultural conservation easements. An agricultural conservation easement aims to maintain agricultural land in active production by removing the development pressures from the land. Such an easement prohibits practices that would damage or interfere with the agricultural use of the land. Because the easement is a restriction on the deed of the property, the easement remains in effect even when the land changes ownership. Agricultural conservation easements are created specifically to support agriculture and prevent development on the subject parcels. While other benefits may accrue because the land is not developed (scenic and habitat values, for example), the primary use of the land is agricultural. Easements funded by the CFCP must be of a size and nature suitable for viable commercial agriculture.

THE FOREST PRACTICE ACT

CAL FIRE enforces the laws that regulate logging on privately owned lands in California. The Forest Practice Act was enacted in 1973 to ensure that logging is done in a manner that will preserve and protect fish, wildlife, forests and streams. CAL FIRE reviews and approves plans for timber harvesting on private lands. In addition, through its

responsibility for fighting wildland fires, CAL FIRE plays a role in planning development in forested areas (CAL FIRE 2023).

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION FARMLAND MAPPING AND MONITORING PROGRAM

The FMMP was established in 1982 to assess the location, quality, and quantity of agricultural lands in the State of California and conversion of these lands over time (DOC 2023b). The goal of the FMMP is to provide consistent and impartial data to decision makers for use in planning for the future of California's agricultural land resources (DOC 2023b). The DOC applies NRCS soil classifications to identify agricultural lands, and these agricultural designations are used in planning for the present and future of California's agricultural land resources. The DOC has a minimum mapping unit of 10 acres, with parcels that are smaller than 10 acres being absorbed into the surrounding classifications. The following are categories mapped by the DOC: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Local Importance, Grazing Land, Urban and Built Up Land, and Other Land (DOC 2004).

CALIFORNIA FARMLAND CONSERVANCY PROGRAM

The CFCP seeks to encourage the long-term, private stewardship of agricultural lands through the voluntary use of agricultural conservation easements. The CFCP provides grant funding for projects which use and support agricultural conservation easements for protection of agricultural lands. The CFCP has funded more than 58,000 acres of easement projects in California, in more than a dozen counties between 1996 and 2016 (DOC 2016, 2023e). CFCP has also funded several planning grants, including some with regional or statewide value. CFCP did not award any new grants for planning and policy projects in the SCAG region between 1996 and 2016 (DOC 2023e).

CALIFORNIA FOREST LEGACY

Similar to the Federal Forest Legacy Program, the California Forest Legacy Act of 2007 (Pub. Resources Code, Sections 12220(G)) is a CAL FIRE program to promote conservation easements in environmentally sensitive forest areas. Money to fund the program is obtained from gifts, donations, federal grants and loans, other appropriate funding sources, and from the sale of bonds pursuant to Proposition 12, the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act (The Villaraigosa-Kelley Act) of 2000 (Public Resources Code Division 5, Chapter 1.692). This act defines "forest land" as "land that can support 10-percent native tree cover of any species, including hardwoods, under natural conditions and that allows for management of one or more forest resources, including timber, aesthetics, fish and wildlife, biodiversity, water quality, recreation, and other public benefits".

LOCAL

GENERAL PLANS

The SCAG region spans six counties, each of which has a general plan containing policies related to protection of agriculture and typically forestry resources:

- Imperial County: Agricultural Element (Imperial County Planning and Development Services 2015) - no policies for forestry resources
- Los Angeles County: Chapter 9: Conservation and Natural Resources Element (Los Angeles County Department of Regional Planning, 2022)

- Orange County: Chapter VI. Resources Element (Orange County Public Works Development Services 2015)
- Riverside County: Chapter 5: Multipurpose Open Space Element (Riverside County Planning Department 2015)
- San Bernardino County: Natural Resources Element (County of San Bernardino Land Use Service Division, 2020)
- Ventura County: Resources Appendix (County of Ventura Resource Management Agency, Planning Division 2011)

Additional plans and ordinances at the master plan level, city-level, and specific plan level may also apply within the SCAG region.

ZONING

City and county zoning codes provide the set of detailed requirements that implement general plan policies at the level of the individual parcel. Zoning codes present standards for different uses and identifies which uses are allowed in the various zoning districts of the jurisdiction, including zones for agricultural use and timberland production. Since 1971, state law has required the city or county zoning code to be consistent with the jurisdiction's general plan. The purpose of agricultural zoning is to protect farmland and farming activities from incompatible non-farm uses.

LAND CONSERVATION TRUST

A land trust is a nonprofit organization that, as all or part of its mission, actively works to conserve land by undertaking or assisting in land or conservation easement acquisition, or by its stewardship of such land or easements. A land conservation trust is another type of organization devoted to protecting open space, agricultural lands, wildlife habitats, and natural resource lands. There are approximately 80 established trusts in California, 14 of which are located at least partially within the SCAG region (California Council of Land Trusts 2019). Local and regional land trusts, organized as charitable organizations under federal tax laws, are directly involved in conserving land for its natural, recreational, scenic, historical, and productive values. Local governments and special districts, either on their own or working with land trusts and conservancies, can acquire fee title to agricultural and open space lands or purchase development rights to preserve rural and agricultural areas, watersheds, or critical habitat, or to create public parks and recreational areas.

REGIONAL CONSERVATION PLANS

Local agencies throughout the region have worked together to form Regional Conservation Plans (RCPs). These plans recognize that important habitats do not routinely line up with jurisdictional borders, so designation of conservation lands can span multiple jurisdictions. Additionally, RCPs efficiently address mitigation mandates from CEQA by anticipating transportation projects and "banking" potentially threatened endangered-species habitats. The following are adopted major conservation plans made up of multiple jurisdictions within SCAG's boundaries; The Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP), the Western Riverside MSHCP, the Orange County Transportation Authority Measure M2 Natural Communities Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP), and the Orange County Central Coastal NCCP/HCP. Refer to Section 3.4, *Biological Resources*, of this 2024 PEIR for further information.

The following RCPs are in the planning phase, although conservation and restoration efforts for most of them are well underway; City of Rancho Palos Verdes NCCP/HCP, Imperial Irrigation District NCCP/HCP, Town of Apple Valley MSHCP/NCCP, and the San Bernardino County Regional Conservation Investment Strategy.

LOCAL AGENCY FORMATION COMMISSIONS

The Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) is the independent regulatory agency that has the responsibility to create orderly local governments and special districts boundaries, with the goal of encouraging “planned, well-ordered, efficient urban development patterns,” the preservation of open-space lands, and the discouragement of urban sprawl. While LAFCO has no direct land use authority, its actions determine which local government will be responsible for planning new areas. LAFCO addresses a wide range of boundary actions, including creation of spheres of influence for cities, adjustments to boundaries of special districts, annexations, incorporations, detachments of areas from cities, and dissolution of cities.

MITIGATION BANK OR CONSERVATION BANK

A conservation or mitigation bank is privately or publicly owned land managed for its natural resource values. In exchange for permanently protecting, managing, and monitoring the land, the bank sponsor is allowed to sell or transfer habitat credits to permittees who need to satisfy legal requirements and compensate for the environmental impacts of developmental projects.

A privately owned conservation or mitigation bank is a free-market enterprise that:

- Offers landowners economic incentives to protect natural resources;
- Saves permittees time and money by providing them with the certainty of pre-approved compensation lands;
- Consolidates small, fragmented wetland mitigation projects into large contiguous sites that have much higher wildlife habitat values;
- Provides for long-term protection and management of habitat.

A publicly owned conservation or mitigation bank offers the sponsoring public agency advance mitigation for large projects or multiple years of operations and maintenance (Bunn et al. 2013).

3.2.3 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

In determining whether impacts to agriculture are significant environmental effects, lead agencies may refer to the California Agricultural Land Evaluation and Site Assessment Model (1997) prepared by the DOC as an optional model to use in assessing impacts on agriculture and farmland (DOC 2019d). In determining whether impacts to forestry resources, including timberland, are significant environmental effects, lead agencies may refer to information compiled by the CAL FIRE regarding the state’s inventory of forest land, including the Forest and Range Assessment Project and the Forest Legacy Assessment project; and forest carbon measurement methodology provided in Forest Protocols adopted by the California Air Resources Board.

For the purposes of this 2024 PEIR, SCAG has determined that implementation of Connect SoCal 2024 could result in significant impacts related to agriculture and forestry resources if the Plan would exceed the following significance criteria, in accordance with California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Appendix G:

- Convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland), as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the FMMP of the California Resources Agency, to nonagricultural use;

- Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract;
- Conflict with existing zoning for, or cause rezoning of, forest land (as defined in Public Resources Code Section 12220(g)), timberland (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 4526) (California Legislative Information 1973), or timberland zoned Timberland Production (as defined by Government Code Section 51104(g));
- Result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use;
- Involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland, to non-agricultural use or conversion of forest land to non-forest use.

METHODOLOGY

Chapter 2, *Project Description*, describes the Plan's vision, goals, policies, forecasted regional development pattern, policies and strategies, and individual transportation projects and investments. The Plan aims to increase mobility, promote sustainability, and improve the regional economy. Although land use development is anticipated to occur within the region even without the Plan, the Plan could influence growth, including distribution patterns. To address this, the 2024 PEIR includes an analysis on the implementation of policies and strategies as well as potential projects and evaluates how conditions in 2050 under the Plan would differ from existing conditions. The analysis of agriculture and forestry resources considered public comments received on the NOP and feedback and discussions at the various public and stakeholder outreach meetings.

The methodology for determining the significance of agriculture, timberland, and forestry impacts compares the existing conditions (2018) to conditions in 2050 with Connect SoCal 2024, as required by CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.2(a). The known agriculture, timberland, and forestry resources located within the region were evaluated using the criteria set forth by the DOC and the State CEQA Guidelines. The analysis was limited to state-recognized agriculture, timberland, and forestry resources. In general, the potential to impact agriculture, timber, and forest resources varies by the development area type (or location of transportation improvement).

Impacts are assessed in terms of changes to both land use pattern and transportation strategies using data from the six counties within the SCAG region and SCAG forecasts related to projected population, housing, and employment growth. The methodology for determining the significance of these impacts applies the significance criteria above to the future (2050) land use pattern and transportation strategies. The development of new transportation facilities may affect agriculture, timber and forestry resources, through both direct and indirect effects, including traversing agricultural, timberland, and forest lands.

As discussed in Chapter 2, *Project Description*, and Section 3.0, *Introduction to the Analysis*, Connect SoCal 2024 includes Regional Planning Policies and Implementation Strategies some of which will effectively reduce impacts in the various resource areas. Furthermore, compliance with all applicable laws and regulations (as set forth in the Regulatory Framework) would be reasonably expected to reduce impacts of the Plan. See CEQA Guidelines Section 15126.4(a)(1)(B). As discussed in Section 3.0, *Introduction to the Analysis*, where remaining potentially significant impacts are identified, SCAG mitigation measures are incorporated to reduce these impacts. If SCAG cannot mitigate impacts of the Plan to less than significant, project-level mitigation measures are identified which can and should be considered and implemented by lead agencies as applicable and feasible.

IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

IMPACT AG-1 Potential for the Plan to convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (Farmland), as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to nonagricultural use.

Significant and Unavoidable Impact – Mitigation Required

Implementation of Connect SoCal 2024 would have the potential to convert the following to non-agricultural use: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland and Farmland of Local Importance. Implementation of the Plan’s policies, strategies as well as potential projects would result in the conversion of agricultural lands and constitute a significant impact (**Table 3.2-4, SCAG Region Estimated Maximum Direct Potential Loss of Important Agricultural Land, 2019 to 2050**). According to SPM data, more than 5,000 acres of combined existing Important Farmland in the SCAG region could be converted to non-agricultural use in 2050, consistent with jurisdictional feedback on locally anticipated growth and planned transportation projects (see the Connect SoCal 2024 Land Use and Communities Technical Report).

TABLE 3.2-4 SCAG Region Estimated Maximum Direct Potential Loss of Important Agricultural Land, 2019–2050

IMPORTANT FARMLAND (ACRES)				TOTAL OF IMPORTANT FARMLAND (ACRES)	PERCENT POTENTIALLY LOST IN SCAG REGION
PRIME FARMLAND	FARMLAND OF STATEWIDE IMPORTANCE	UNIQUE FARMLAND	FARMLAND OF LOCAL IMPORTANCE		
-1,309	-410	-667	-3,321	-5,707	0.64%

Source: SCAG 2023

Transportation projects and land use development could result in long-term impacts to farmland by adding transportation projects to parts of the region in use as agricultural lands or through development on agricultural lands. Agricultural lands most susceptible to impacts are interspersed throughout urban areas and adjacent to existing urban areas.

Where there would be new transportation facilities constructed outside of the region’s urbanized areas, undisturbed/vacant land could be utilized for transportation purposes. Transportation projects that are most likely to result in significant impacts to agricultural lands include highway expansion, highway widening projects, and potential connectors. Other transportation projects such as roadway improvements, toll road improvements and connections, grade-separated facilities for busways, goods movement roadway facilities, high speed rail and commuter rail projects, and regional express lane network improvements in areas that currently serve as agricultural could also result in significant impacts, requiring mitigation measures.

Connect SoCal 2024 includes regional policies, implementation strategies and investments to help protect natural and farmlands and reduce overall land consumption. Such regional policies include encouraging regional conservation planning, improving natural corridor connectivity, and expanding data sharing among agencies. Connect SoCal 2024 also promotes a safe multi-modal network and a variety of travel modes (e.g., walking, biking,

rolling, driving, taking transit), growth prioritization in Priority Development Areas (PDAs) and minimizing growth in Green Region Resource Areas (GRRAs), to encourage preservation of agricultural lands. While Connect SoCal 2024 includes the land use strategies that would focus new growth in the region's urbanized areas (primarily PDAs), it does not preclude development in GRRAs. As such, the Plan would result in the consumption of agricultural lands, constituting a significant impact requiring mitigation measures.

MITIGATION MEASURES

SCAG MITIGATION MEASURES

- SMM-AG-1** SCAG shall provide support for local jurisdictions looking to pursue farmland conservation planning, including through information sharing and advice on grant opportunities pertinent to supporting local agency's workplans and/or actions in natural and agricultural land conservation, such as the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation program.
- SMM-AG-2** SCAG shall continue to facilitate regional collaboration forums, such as the Natural & Farm Lands Conservation Working Group, for stakeholders to share best practices and develop recommendations for natural and agricultural land conservation throughout the region. The collaboration forums with help identify opportunities to leverage resources that protect and restore natural habitat corridors, especially, where corridors cross county boundaries.
- SMM-AG-3** SCAG shall develop and support a Regional Greenprint, which is a web-based tool that provides the best available scientific data and scenario visualizations to support local jurisdictions and transportation agencies make better land use and transportation infrastructure decisions and conserve natural and farm lands. SCAG shall provide the Greenprint as a publicly available tool to assist local jurisdictions and transportation agencies identify priority conservation areas and work with CTCs to develop advanced mitigation programs for their future plans and projects. SCAG shall support by (1) leveraging funding to encourage advance mitigation, (2) participating in state-level efforts that would support regional advanced mitigation planning in the SCAG region, and (3) supporting the inclusion of advance mitigation programs at county level transportation measures.

PROJECT-LEVEL MITIGATION MEASURES

- PMM-AG-1** In accordance with provisions of Sections 15091(a)(2) and 15126.4(a)(1)(B) of the State CEQA Guidelines, a lead agency for a project can and should consider mitigation measures to address potential adverse effects on agricultural resources, as applicable and feasible. Such measures may include the following or other comparable measures identified by the lead agency:
- a) Provide permanent protection of in-kind farmland in the form of easements, fees, or elimination of development rights/potential to mitigate for loss of farmland.
 - b) Project relocation or corridor realignment to avoid Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Local or Statewide Importance.
 - c) Maintain and expand agricultural land protections such as urban growth boundaries.
 - d) Provide for mitigation fees to support a mitigation bank that invests in farmer education, agricultural infrastructure, water supply, marketing, etc. that enhance the commercial viability of retained agricultural lands.

- e) Minimize severance and fragmentation of agricultural land by constructing underpasses and overpasses at reasonable intervals to provide property access.
- f) Use berms, buffer zones, setbacks, and fencing to reduce conflicts between new development and farming uses and protect the functions of farmland.

LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION MEASURES

As previously discussed, the Plan's Regional Planning Policies and Implementation Strategies (see Chapter 2, *Project Description*, and Section 3.0, *Introduction to the Analysis*) and compliance with existing laws and regulations would reduce impacts; however, given the regional scale of the analysis in this 2024 PEIR, it is not possible or feasible to determine if all impacts would be fully mitigated. Therefore, this 2024 PEIR identifies SCAG and project-level mitigation measures. At the project level, lead agencies can and should consider the identified project-level mitigation measures during subsequent review of transportation and land use projects as appropriate and feasible. While the mitigation measures will reduce the impacts related to conversion of farmland, due to the regional nature of the analysis, unknown site conditions and project-specific details, and SCAG's lack of land use authority over individual projects, SCAG finds that the impact could be **significant and unavoidable** even with mitigation.

IMPACT AG-2 **Potential for the Plan to conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract.**

Significant and Unavoidable Impact – Mitigation Required

As noted above, implementation of the Plan would have the potential to convert Prime or Unique Farmland or Farmland of Statewide Importance to non-agricultural use, which could include land zoned for agricultural use and/or managed pursuant to Williamson Act contracts. While the land use strategies in the Plan are intended to encourage implementation of land use development projects in urbanized areas, some growth is expected to occur in areas that could potentially convert Prime or Farmland of Statewide Importance or Unique Farmland and conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use or Williamson Act contracts. This is particularly likely in areas where urban uses are encroaching on agricultural land, including within sphere of influence areas in more rural jurisdictions. Likewise, transportation projects implemented under the Plan, including highway extensions/widenings, and other linear projects in rural areas with a higher proportion of agricultural land, could traverse land zoned for agricultural use or enrolled in a Williamson Act contract, which could result in agricultural land conversion and associated conflicts.

Similar to IMPACT AG-1, above, while Plan policies and strategies encourage growth in urbanized areas such as PDAs and minimize growth in GRRAs, some growth could occur in areas that would potentially conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use or Williamson Act contracts which constitutes a potentially significant impact requiring mitigation measures.

MITIGATION MEASURES

SCAG MITIGATION MEASURES

See SMM-AG-1 through SMM-AG-3.

PROJECT-LEVEL MITIGATION MEASURES

See PMM-AG-1.

PMM-AG-2 Project level mitigation measures can and should be considered by lead agencies as applicable and feasible. Measures to reduce substantial adverse effects on Williamson Act contracts to the maximum extent practicable, as determined appropriate by each lead agency, may include the following, or other comparable measures:

- a) Project relocation or corridor realignment to avoid lands in Williamson Act contracts.
- b) Establish conservation easements consistent with the recommendations of the Department of Conservation, or 20-year Farmland Security Zone contracts (Government Code Section 51296 et seq.), 10-year Williamson Act contracts (Government Code Section 51200 et seq.), or use of other conservation tools available from the California Department of Conservation Division of Land Resource Protection.

LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION

As previously discussed, the Plan's Regional Planning Policies and Implementation Strategies (see Chapter 2, *Project Description*, and Section 3.0, *Introduction to the Analysis*) and compliance with existing laws and regulations would reduce impacts; however, given the regional scale of the analysis in this 2024 PEIR, it is not possible or feasible to determine if all impacts would be fully mitigated. Therefore, this 2024 PEIR identifies SCAG and project-level mitigation measures. At the project level, lead agencies can and should consider the identified project-level mitigation measures during subsequent review of transportation and land use projects as appropriate and feasible. While the mitigation measures will reduce the impacts related to conflicts with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract, due to the regional nature of the analysis, unknown site conditions and project-specific details, and SCAG's lack of land use authority over individual projects, SCAG finds that the impact could be **significant and unavoidable** even with mitigation.

IMPACT AG-3 **Potential for the Plan to conflict with existing zoning for, or cause rezoning of, forest land (as defined in Public Resources Code Section 12220(g)), timberland (as defined by Public Resources Code Section 4526), or timberland zoned Timberland Production (as defined by Government Code Section 51104(g)).**

Significant and Unavoidable Impact – Mitigation Required

Implementation of Connect SoCal 2024 has the potential to conflict with existing zoning for forest land, timberland, or timberland zoned Timberland Production. Within the SCAG region, forest industries are permitted in open space zones in Imperial County and Ventura County, while national forest lands are protected from future development. There is a potential for transportation projects included in Connect SoCal 2024 Project List to be located entirely or partly within national forests, resulting in the potential for significant impacts. In addition, potential change in land use could occur in forestlands. Therefore, impacts related to forest land are considered significant requiring mitigation measures.

The harvesting of timberland is only permitted in two agricultural zones in Imperial County, in the open space zone in Los Angeles County only if a Conditional Use Permit (CUP) has been obtained, in the rural residential zone

and controlled development areas in Riverside County only if a CUP has been obtained, in the open space zone in San Bernardino County, and only Christmas tree farms are permitted in the Timberland Preserve zone in Ventura County. Although implementation of the transportation and potential development projects could result in long-term impacts to land zoned for timberland use, timberland harvesting does not currently occur in the SCAG region. Therefore, the Plan would result in no impact to timberland. Furthermore, there would also be no impact to Timberland Production Zones, as none have been established in the six-county SCAG region. As described above, impacts to forest land would be considered significant, and mitigation measures are required.

MITIGATION MEASURES

SCAG MITIGATION MEASURES

See SMM-AG-1 through SMM-AG-2.

PROJECT-LEVEL MITIGATION MEASURES

PMM-AG-3 Project level mitigation measures can and should be considered by lead agencies as applicable and feasible. Measures to reduce substantial adverse effects, through the conversion of Farmland to maximum extent practicable, as determined appropriate by each lead agency, may include the following, or other comparable measures:

- a) Minimize construction related impacts to agricultural and forestry resources by locating materials and stationary equipment in such a way as to prevent conflict with forestry resources.
- b) Acquire conservation easements for the loss of forestland or timberland.

LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION

As previously discussed, the Plan's Regional Planning Policies and Implementation Strategies (see Chapter 2, *Project Description*, and Section 3.0, *Introduction to the Analysis*) and compliance with existing laws and regulations would reduce impacts; however, given the regional scale of the analysis in this 2024 PEIR, it is not possible or feasible to determine if all impacts would be fully mitigated. Therefore, this 2024 PEIR identifies SCAG and project-level mitigation measures. At the project level, lead agencies can and should consider the identified project-level mitigation measures during subsequent review of transportation and land use projects as appropriate and feasible. While the mitigation measures will reduce the impacts related to the rezoning for forestland, due to the regional nature of the analysis, unknown site conditions and project-specific details, and SCAG's lack of land use authority over individual projects, SCAG finds that the impact could be **significant and unavoidable** even with mitigation.

IMPACT AG-4 **Potential for the Plan to result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use.**

Significant and Unavoidable Impact – Mitigation Required

Implementation of Connect SoCal 2024 would result in significant impacts with regards to the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use. Forestry resources within the SCAG region are primarily concentrated in the four national forests in the SCAG region, which are protected from future development. However, small patches of forest land and sensitive woodland communities near the wildland-urban interface are

not protected. Despite policies and strategies included in the Plan aim to encourage future development in PDAs, some of the new transportation facilities would be constructed outside of such areas. Additionally, development associated with new urban uses could also be located on forest land, resulting in the conversion of small patches of forest land to non-forest use.

Transportation projects that are most likely to result in impacts to forest lands include highway expansion, highway widening projects, and potential connectors. Other transportation projects such as roadway improvements, toll road improvements and connections, grade separated facilities for busways, goods movement roadway facilities, high speed rail and commuter rail projects, and HOV/ high-occupancy toll (HOT) connectors in areas that are currently forest land could also result in impacts. As mentioned in IMPACT AG-3 above, transportation projects in the Connect SoCal 2024 Project List have the potential to result in impacts to forestry resources remain applicable under this 2024 PEIR. As such, impacts related to forestry would be significant and mitigation measures are required.

MITIGATION MEASURES

SCAG MITIGATION MEASURES

See SMM-AG-1 and SMM-AG-2.

PROJECT-LEVEL MITIGATION MEASURES

See PMM-AG-3.

LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION

As previously discussed, the Plan's Regional Planning Policies and Implementation Strategies (see Chapter 2, *Project Description*, and Section 3.0, *Introduction to the Analysis*) and compliance with existing laws and regulations would reduce impacts; however, given the regional scale of the analysis in this 2024 PEIR, it is not possible or feasible to determine if all impacts would be fully mitigated. Therefore, this 2024 PEIR identifies SCAG and project-level mitigation measures. At the project level, lead agencies can and should consider the identified project-level mitigation measures during subsequent review of transportation and land use projects as appropriate and feasible. While the mitigation measures will reduce the impacts related to loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest land, due to the regional nature of the analysis, unknown site conditions and project-specific details, and SCAG's lack of land use authority over individual projects, SCAG finds that the impact could be **significant and unavoidable** even with mitigation.

IMPACT AG-5 **Potential for the Plan to involve other changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland, to non-agricultural use or conversion of forest land to non-forest use.**

Significant and Unavoidable Impact – Mitigation Required

Implementation of Connect SoCal 2024 would result in significant impacts with regards to the conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use or conversion of forest land to non-forest use.

Although the Plan would include policies and strategies that encourage new anticipated development in the region's PDAs, some new development is anticipated to occur in agricultural areas on forest land outside the national forests (where forest land is protected from future development), and/or near the wildland-urban interface. As described under Impact AG-1, implementation of the Plan would convert existing Important Farmland in the SCAG region to urban uses to accommodate future growth. Furthermore, Farmland that remain agricultural but located adjacent to urban uses, may feel pressure to develop, as nearby land values increase or as nuisances from urban development spread to agricultural lands. In addition, urban uses, especially newly urbanized areas, can lead to pressure on adjacent farms to change their farming practices (to reduce noise, decrease spraying of fertilizers and pesticides, etc.). Implementation of the Plan could also indirectly result in the conversion of additional farmland or forest land as a result of increased development due to transit and/or passenger rail projects included in the Plan.

Another factor contributing to loss of agricultural productivity and conversion of farmlands is loss of topsoil. Loss of topsoil associated with erosion from wind and stormwater, though not necessarily directly caused by urbanization (and the related soil disturbance and changes in drainage patterns), can be exacerbated and accelerated by construction and operation of urban uses. As such, erosion of topsoil from transportation and potential develop projects would occur throughout the region, particularly in areas with high-quality topsoil and/or designated farmland areas, could result in increased loss of topsoil and an incremental decrease in agricultural productivity. As discussed in greater detail in Section 3.7, *Geology and Soils*, and Section 3.10, *Hydrology and Water Quality*, of this 2024 PEIR, construction and operation of transportation and potential land use projects would, for the most part, not result in significant impacts related to water quality, including impacts related to erosion and sedimentation, given compliance with existing regulations. However, given the number of uncertainties regarding enforcement of these regulations due to large geographic and geologically diverse nature of the SCAG region, it is conservatively assumed that substantial erosion and sedimentation, including loss of topsoil, could occur in areas containing farmlands or soils suitable for agricultural production. As such, anticipated growth in the region under the Plan would incrementally increase the potential for loss of topsoil associated with construction and operational activities, and impacts would be considered significant as implementation of the Plan could result in substantial losses of topsoil and adverse effects on farmlands. Also refer to Section 3.3, *Air Quality*, of this 2024 PEIR for a discussion of air quality impacts associated with dust generation resulting from Plan implementation.

Forestry resources are concentrated in the four national forests in the SCAG region, which are protected from future development. However, as discussed in Connect SoCal 2024, climate change associated with greenhouse gas emissions would be expected to contribute to the loss of agricultural and forest land caused by increased drought conditions and wildfires (SCAG 2019) Refer to Section 3.20, *Wildfire*, of this 2024 PEIR for further information. As climate change studies suggest that Southern California will continue to experience more extreme weather scenarios, including longer and hotter heat waves that would increase the threat of wildfire in parts of the SCAG region already prone to wildfires, forested areas in the region are expected to experience greater threats from wildfires as conditions grow drier and hotter (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018). Agricultural areas in Southern California are "moderately" vulnerable to climate change (i.e., loss of winter chill hours, increased heat waves and drought periods, changes in precipitation patterns, and increased fire hazards have the potential to result in the loss of agricultural land) (USDA 2023). As described in Section 3.8, *Greenhouse Gas Emissions*, Connect SoCal 2024 could result in a potentially significant impact with respect to greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) and GHGs are considered a primary cause of global climate change. As discussed in Section 3.8, while implementation of the Plan would facilitate the region meeting the SB 375 GHG reduction targets, reduction of GHGs would be insufficient for the transportation sector to meet the state's overall GHG reduction goals. As such,

overall, the 2024 PEIR concludes that impacts related to GHG emissions and conflicts with GHG reduction plans, policies, and regulations would be potentially significant. Nonetheless, the relationship between development in any given region or country and measurable changes in forest land is not possible to determine and is therefore considered too speculative to be analyzed any further in this environmental document.

As previously mentioned, implementation of the Plan would convert agricultural land to urban uses as the region grows to accommodate 1.6 million additional households. A range of local conservation plans, habitat conservation agencies and state/federal park designated areas provide protection for a significant amount of natural and farmland in the SCAG region. However, a substantial amount of land on the urban and suburban fringe is vulnerable to development if not within the boundaries of protected lands and face additional development pressure as adjacent lands are converted. Therefore, Connect SoCal 2024 could have the potential to cause other changes in the existing environment that could result in conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural use or conversion of forest land to non-forest use, constituting a potentially significant impact requiring the consideration of mitigation measures.

MITIGATION MEASURES

SCAG MITIGATION MEASURES

See SMM-AG-1, SMM-AG-2, SMM-GHG-1, and SMM-GHG-2.

PROJECT-LEVEL MITIGATION MEASURES

See PMM-AG-2 and PMM-GHG-2.

PMM-AG-4 Project level mitigation measures can and should be considered by lead agencies as applicable and feasible. Measures to reduce substantial adverse effects, through the conversion of Farmland, to the maximum extent practicable, as determined appropriate by each lead agency, may include the following, or other comparable measures:

- a) Design proposed projects to minimize, to the greatest extent feasible, the loss of the highest valued agricultural land.
- b) Redesign project features to minimize fragmenting or isolating Farmland. Where a project involves acquiring land or easements, ensure that the remaining non-project area is of a size sufficient to allow economically viable farming operations. The project proponents shall be responsible for acquiring easements, making lot line adjustments, and merging affected land parcels into units suitable for continued commercial agricultural management.
- c) Reconnect utilities or infrastructure that serve agricultural uses if these are disturbed by project construction. If a project temporarily or permanently cuts off roadway access or removes utility lines, irrigation features, or other infrastructure, the project proponents shall be responsible for restoring access as necessary to ensure that economically viable farming operations are not interrupted.

PMM-AG-5 Project level mitigation measures can and should be considered by lead agencies as applicable and feasible. Measures to reduce substantial adverse effects, through the conversion of Farmland,

to the maximum extent practicable, as determined appropriate by each lead agency, may include the following, or other comparable measures:

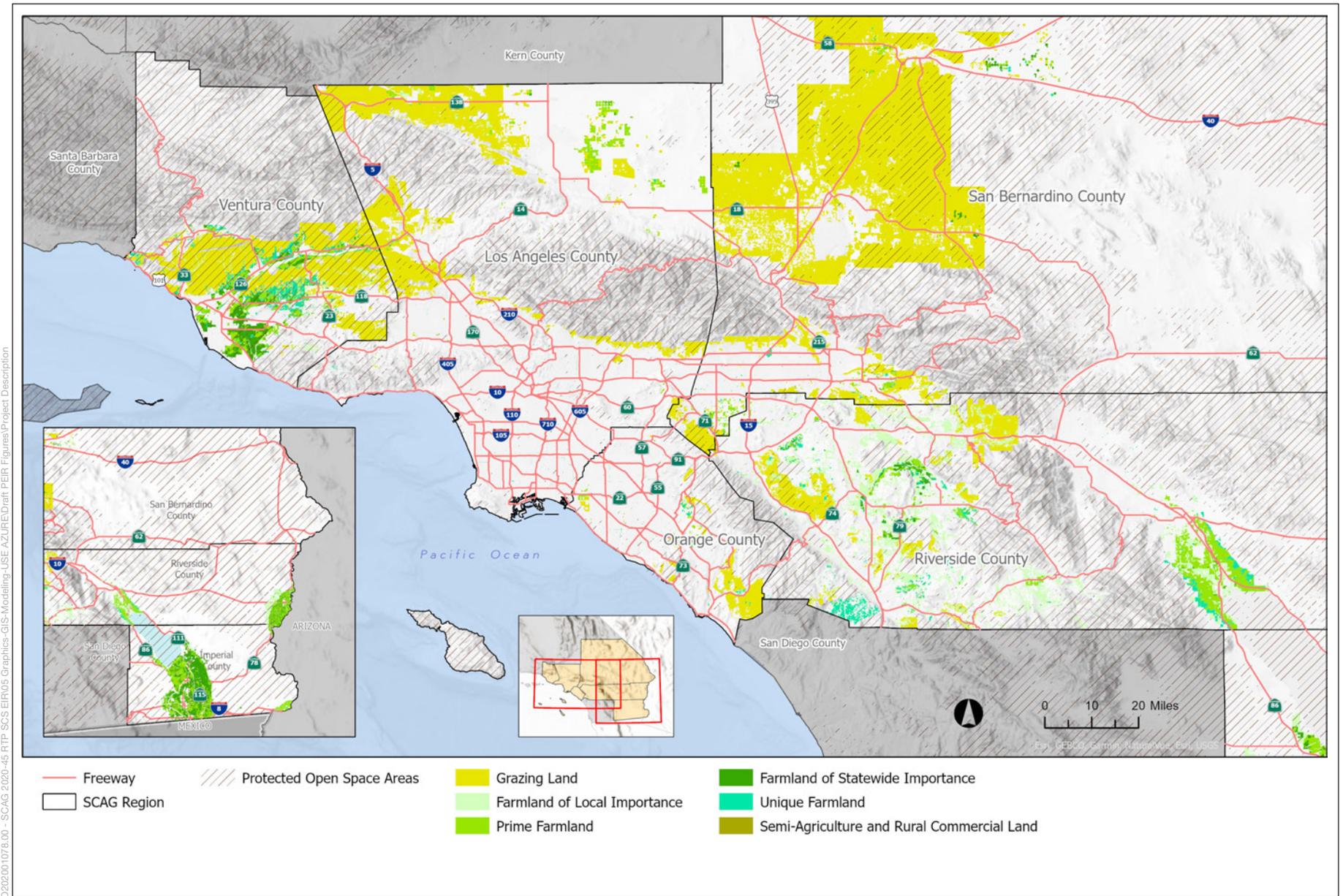
- a) Manage project operations to minimize the introduction of invasive species or weeds that may affect agricultural production on adjacent agricultural land. Where a project has the potential to introduce sensitive species or habitats or have other spill-over effects on nearby agricultural lands, the project proponents shall be responsible for acquiring easements on nearby agricultural land and/or financially compensating for indirect effects on nearby agricultural land. Easements (e.g., flowage easements) shall be required for temporary or intermittent interruption in farming activities (e.g., because of seasonal flooding or groundwater seepage). Acquisition or compensation would be required for permanent or significant loss of economically viable operations.

LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION

As previously discussed, the Plan's Regional Planning Policies and Implementation Strategies (see Chapter 2, *Project Description*, and Section 3.0, *Introduction to the Analysis*) and compliance with existing laws and regulations would reduce impacts; however, given the regional scale of the analysis in this 2024 PEIR, it is not possible or feasible to determine if all impacts would be fully mitigated. Therefore, this 2024 PEIR identifies SCAG and project-level mitigation measures. At the project level, lead agencies can and should consider the identified project-level mitigation measures during subsequent review of transportation and land use projects as appropriate and feasible. While the mitigation measures will reduce the impacts related to conversion of farmland or forestland, due to the regional nature of the analysis, unknown site conditions and project-specific details, and SCAG's lack of land use authority over individual projects, SCAG finds that the impact could be **significant and unavoidable** even with mitigation.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Connect SoCal 2024 is a regional-scale Plan comprised of policies and strategies, a regional growth forecast and land use pattern, and individual projects and investments. At this regional-scale, a cumulative or related project to the Plan is another regional-scale plan (such as Air Quality Management Plans within the region) and similar regional plans for adjacent regions. Because the Plan, in and of itself, would result in significant adverse environmental impacts with respect to agricultural and forestry resources, these impacts would add to the environmental impacts of other cumulative or related projects. Mitigation measures that reduce the Plan's impacts would similarly reduce the Plan's contribution to cumulative impacts.



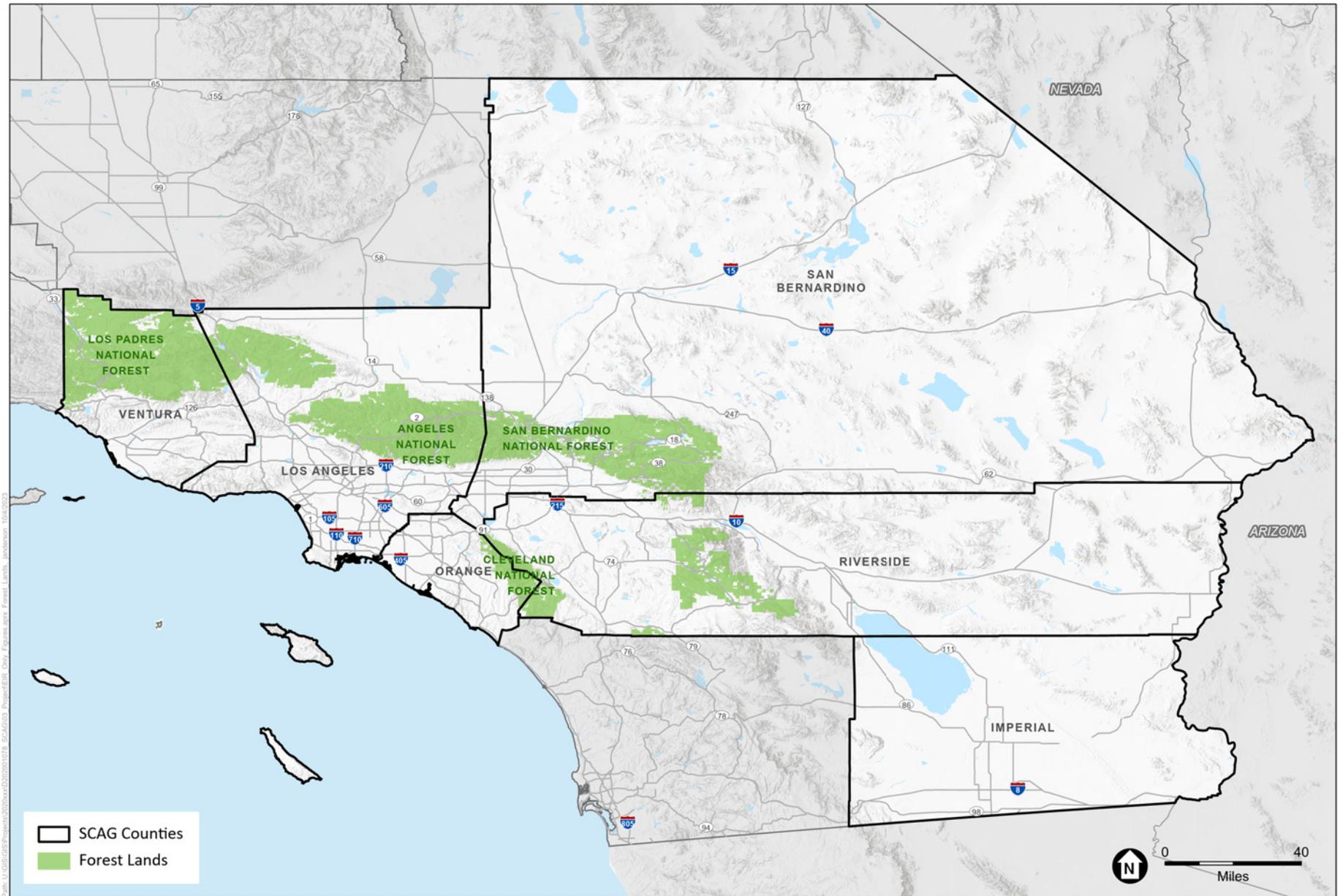
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SOURCE: SCAG, 2022

Connect SoCal 2024 PEIR

Map 3.2-1
Farmland in SCAG Region





SOURCE: ESRI, 2022

Connect SoCal 2024 PEIR

Map 3.2-2
Forest Lands in the SCAG Region



3.2.4 SOURCES

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