This section of the Draft Environmental Impact Report (Draft EIR or DEIR) addresses agricultural lands and the potential impacts of the proposed General Plan Update on these lands. Key issues addressed in this section include conflicts/incompatibilities between urban land uses and agricultural operations and loss of agricultural land.

4.2.1 EXISTING SETTING

EXISTING LAND USE AND AGRICULTURAL OPERATIONS

Existing uses on lands outside the boundaries of the Chico Sphere of Influence are primarily agricultural and rural residential. Lands northeast and east of the Sphere of Influence are used primarily for seasonal grazing of livestock. The area north of the Sphere of Influence, east of State Route (SR) 99, and south of Rock Creek is developed with rural residential land uses interspersed with orchards, field crops, and grazing land. The Greenline established by Butte County (see Section 4.1, Land Use, for a further discussion of the Greenline) provides a boundary between urban and agricultural uses to the west.

Within the city's corporate boundary and Sphere of Influence, the primary use of land is developed urban and suburban uses. While limited in size and number relative to the city as a whole, there are agricultural or agricultural-supporting land uses within the city. The largest active agricultural land use within the city's central urban area is the Vanella Orchard located on 8th Avenue, west of the Esplanade. Also located within the central urban area is the Chico Nut Company, adjacent to the Esplanade and immediately south of Lindo Channel. Chico Nut Company is a processing, storage, and shipping facility for tree crops, almonds in the area. Two large agricultural industrial operations, Smucker Quality Beverages and the R.W. Knudsen Company, are located to the south of the southern City limit boundary on Hegan Lane and Speedway Avenue, respectively, yet are within the Sphere of Influence. Within the city limits, various small agriculture operations and remnant orchards exist as isolated uses on undeveloped lands.

EXISTING BUTTE COUNTY AGRICULTURAL OPERATIONS

Agricultural operations are a significant feature in the economy of Butte County. According to the County's 2008 Crop and Livestock Report, the estimated gross value of agricultural production in Butte County for 2008 was approximately $580 million. This is a $73 million increase over the 2007 gross value of approximately $507 million. The total increase in gross value of agriculture during 2008 is 62.0 percent above the Butte County 10-year average of approximately $357 million (Butte County Department of Agriculture, 2008). **Table 4.2-1** lists the ten leading farm commodities in Butte County.

TABLE 4.2-1
BUTTE COUNTY LEADING FARM COMMODITIES, 2008

Commodity	Value
Rice	$248 million
Almonds	$86 million
Walnuts	$76 million
Dried Plums	$31 million
Nursery Stock	$31 million

Commodity	Value
Timber	$16 million
Rice Seed	$12 million
Peaches – Clingstone	$12 million
Cattle/Calves	$10 million

Source: Butte County Department of Agriculture, 2008

For the period between 2004 and 2008, the total plant crop acreage in Butte County increased from 457,435 to 468,094, an increase of almost 11,000 acres in field, seed, vegetable, and fruit and nut crops. The largest percentage gain in acreage was in fruit and nut crops (Butte County Department of Agriculture, 2008).

Planning Area

Within the Chico Planning Area, agricultural land accounts for approximately 74,508 acres, of which 6,520 acres fall within the current city limits. Of the remaining acreage, approximately 961 acres are located within the Sphere of Influence and approximately 67,027 acres are located in the Planning Area but outside of the Sphere of Influence. **Table 4.2-4** lists the Important Farmland in the City of Chico Planning Area. The agricultural land in the Planning Area includes grazing land, row crops, field crops, and orchards.

FARMLAND CLASSIFICATIONS AND RATING SYSTEM

Two classification programs are generally used to determine a soil's potential agricultural productivity.

- The USDA Soil and Conservation Service (USDA-SCS) Land Capability Classification System takes into consideration soil limitations, the risk of damage when the soils are used, and the way in which soils respond to treatment.

- The Storie Index Rating system ranks soils based on their suitability for agriculture.

The Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) administered by the California Department of Conservation maps out agricultural areas based on soil quality and land use, with categories such as "Prime Farmland," "Farmland of Statewide Importance," and "Grazing Lands." More information about each of these classification systems is provided in the following sections of this chapter.

Land Capability Classification System

The Land Capability Classification System designed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture includes eight classes of land designated by Roman numerals I thru VIII. The classes are arable land—suitable for cropland—in which the limitations on their use and necessity of conservation measures and careful management increase from I through IV. The criteria for placing a given area in a particular class involve the landscape location, slope of the field, and depth and texture of the soil. The remaining four classes, V through VIII, are not to be used for cropland but may have uses for pasture, range, woodland, grazing, wildlife, recreation, and aesthetic purposes. Within the broad classes are subclasses which signify special limitations such as (e) erosion, (w) excess wetness, (s) problems in the rooting zone, and (c) climatic limitations. A

general description of soil classification, used by the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), is provided in **Table 4.2-2**.

TABLE 4.2-2
SOIL CAPABILITY CLASSIFICATION

Class	Definition
I	Soils have few limitations that restrict their use.
II	Soils have moderate limitations that reduce the choice of plants or that require special conservation practices.
III	Soils have severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants, require conservation practices, or both.
IV	Soils have very severe limitations that reduce the choice of plants, require very careful management, or both.
V	Soils are not likely to erode but have other limitations, impractical to remove, that limit their use largely to pasture or range, woodland, or wildlife habitat.
VI	Soils have severe limitations that make them generally unsuited to cultivation and limit their use largely to pasture or range, woodland, or wildlife habitat.
VII	Soils have very severe limitations that make them unsuited to cultivation and that restrict their use largely to pasture or range, woodland, or wildlife habitat.
VIII	Soils and landforms have limitations that preclude their use for commercial plant production and restrict their use to recreation, wildlife habitat, or water supply, or to aesthetic purposes.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service, 2010a

Storie Index Rating System

The Storie Index Rating System ranks soil characteristics according to their suitability for agriculture. Ratings range from Grade 1 soils (80 to 100 rating), which have few or no limitations for agricultural production, to Grade 6 soils (less than 10), which are not suitable for agriculture. Under this system, soils deemed less than prime can function as prime soils when limitations such as poor drainage, slopes, or soil nutrient deficiencies are partially or entirely removed. The six grades, ranges in index rating, and definition of grades defined by the NRCS are provided below in **Table 4.2-3**.

TABLE 4.2-3
STORIE INDEX RATING SYSTEM

Grade	Index Rating	Definition
1 – Excellent	80 – 100	Soils are well suited to intensive use for growing irrigated crops that are climatically suited to the region.
2 – Good	60 – 79	Soils are good agricultural soils, although they may not be so desirable as Grade 1 because of moderately coarse, coarse, or gravelly surface soil texture; somewhat less permeable subsoil; lower plant available water holding capacity, fair fertility; less well drained conditions, or slight to moderate flood hazards, all acting separately or in combination.
3 – Fair	40 – 59	Soils are only fairly well suited to general agricultural use and are limited in their use because of moderate slopes; moderate soil depths; less permeable subsoil; fine, moderately fine or gravelly surface soil textures; poor drainage; moderate flood hazards; or fair to poor fertility levels, all acting alone or in combination.
4 – Poor	20 – 39	Soils are poorly suited. They are severely limited in their agricultural potential

Grade	Index Rating	Definition
		because of shallow soil depths; less permeable subsoil; steeper slope; or more clayey or gravelly surface soil textures than Grade 3 soils, as well as poor drainage; greater flood hazards; hummocky micro-relief; salinity; or fair to poor fertility levels, all acting alone or in combination.
5 – Very Poor	10 – 19	Soils are very poorly suited for agriculture, are seldom cultivated and are more commonly used for range, pasture, or woodland.
6 – Nonagricultural	Less than 10	Soils are not suited for agriculture at all due to very severe to extreme physical limitations, or because of urbanization.

Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service, 2010b

The "prime" soil classifications of both systems indicate the absence of soil limitations which, if present, would require the application of management techniques (e.g., drainage, leveling, special fertilizing practices) in order to enhance production.

Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

The Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program was established in 1982 to continue the important farmland mapping efforts begun in 1975 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resource Conservation Service. The intent of the USDA was to produce agricultural resource maps based on soil quality and land use across the nation. As part of the nationwide agricultural land use mapping effort, the USDA developed a series of definitions known as Land Inventory and Monitoring (LIM) criteria. The LIM criteria classified land's suitability for agricultural production. Suitability included both the physical and chemical characteristics of soils and the actual land use. Important Farmland Maps are derived from the USDA soil survey maps using the LIM criteria.

Since 1980, the State of California has assisted the USDA with completing its mapping in the state. The FMMP was created within the California Department of Conservation (DOC) to carry on the mapping activity on a continuing basis and with a greater level of detail. The DOC applied a greater level of detail by modifying the LIM criteria for use in California. The LIM criteria in California utilize the NRCS Soil Capability and Storie Index rating systems described above but also consider physical conditions such as a dependable water supply for agricultural production, soil temperature range, depth of the groundwater table, flooding potential, rock fragment content, and rooting depth.

Important Farmland Maps for California are compiled using the modified LIM criteria. The minimum mapping unit is 10 acres unless otherwise specified. Units of land smaller than 10 acres are incorporated into the surrounding classification. The Important Farmland Maps identify five agriculture-related categories: Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Local Importance, and Grazing Land. Each is summarized below, based on *A Guide to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program* (1994) prepared by the Department of Conservation. **Figure 4.2-1** shows the mapped categories. The FMMP data is updated and released every two years. The most current information available from the FMMP is from 2008.

Prime Farmland

Prime Farmland is land with the best combination of physical and chemical features able to sustain the long-term production of agricultural crops. These lands have the soil quality, growing season, and moisture supply needed to produce sustained high yields. Lands defined as Prime Farmland must have been used for production of irrigated crops at some time during the four years prior to the Important Farmland Map date.

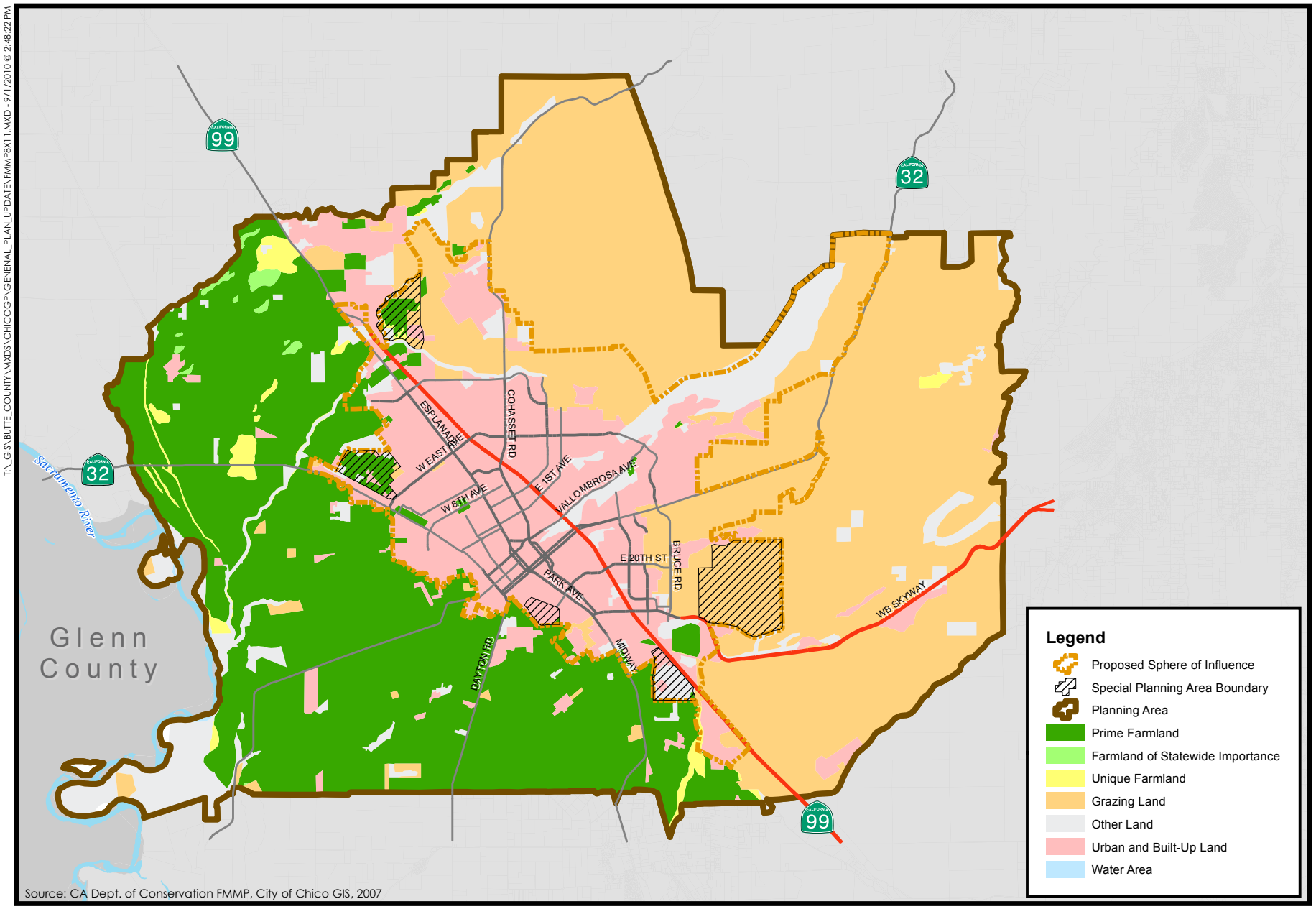

Figure 4.2-1
Important Farmlands

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Farmland of Statewide Importance

Farmland of Statewide Importance is land similar to Prime Farmland but with minor shortcomings such as greater slopes or with less ability to hold and store moisture. The land must have been used for the production of irrigated crops at some time during the four years prior to the Important Farmland Map date.

Unique Farmland

Unique Farmland is land of lesser quality soils used for the production of the state's leading agricultural crops. This land is usually irrigated but may include nonirrigated orchards or vineyards, as found in some climatic zones in California. The land must have been cultivated at some time during the four years prior to the Important Farmland Map date.

Farmland of Local Importance

Farmland of Local Importance is land of importance to the local agricultural economy, as determined by each county's board of supervisors and a local advisory committee. Farmland of Local Importance has not been determined in Butte County and therefore is not included on the Important Farmland Map.

Grazing Land

Grazing Land is land on which the existing vegetation, whether grown naturally or through management, is suited to the grazing of livestock. The minimum mapping unit for this category is 40 acres.

IMPORTANT FARMLAND MAP

Figure 4.2-1 depicts Important Farmland in the Planning Area, as identified by the FMMP. **Table 4.2-4** provides a breakdown of farmland acreage based on the FMMP categories. The entire Planning Area includes approximately 30,231 acres of Prime Farmland, along with approximately 1,389 acres of Farmland of Statewide Importance and Unique Farmland. These categories account for approximately 31 percent of the total number of acres in the Planning Area. **Table 4.2-4** and **Figure 4.2-1** do not take into account any development in the Planning Area after 2008, when the most recent Important Farmland Map was published.

TABLE 4.2-4
FARMLAND IN PLANNING AREA

Farmland Type	Important Farmland (acres)			Total Acres
	City Limits (2008) Only	General Plan Update Proposed SOI outside City	Planning Area Outside of Proposed SOI	
Prime Farmland	423.8	735.8	29,070.2	30,229.8
Farmland of Statewide Importance	0	0	259.6	259.6
Unique Farmland	1.5	66.0	1,061.6	1,129.0
Grazing Land	5,978.4	2,461.5	33,331.5	41,771.5
Other Land*	2,707.4	647.8	6,130.3	9,485.5
Urban and Built-up Land	12,123.1	2,993.4	2,697.4	17,813.9

Farmland Type	Important Farmland (acres)			Total Acres
	City Limits (2008) Only	General Plan Update Proposed SOI outside City	Planning Area Outside of Proposed SOI	
Water	0	0	66.7	66.7
Total	21,234.3	6,904.5	72,617.2	100,756

Source: DOC, 2010

Note: The total acreage in this table does not match the total acres for the Planning Area. This is due to rounding and to slight differences in the information bases used to calculate the tables.

**Other Land indicates those lands not otherwise placed in a FMMP category. For the Planning Area, this includes natural vegetation, rural residential, wetlands, and vacant lands.*

FARMLAND CONVERSION

The conversion of lands suitable for agricultural to urban development and other uses is an issue of concern in California. **Tables 4.2-5** and **4.2-6** summarize the conversion of agricultural lands that occurred between 1988 and 2006 in Butte County. From 1988 through 2004, the Butte County Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program was in an "interim" stage; "irrigated" and "nonirrigated farmland" was tracked prior to determination of Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, and Unique Farmland. Between 2004 and 2006, Butte County had defined the types of important farmland. Therefore, **Table 4.2-5** provides interim farmland and grazing land information from 1998 through 2004, while **Table 4.2-6** provides important farmland and grazing land information from 2004 through 2008.

Since the farmland acreages were recorded as interim until 2004, it is difficult to compare over the long term what the percentage decreases were in the types of important farmlands. However, it is apparent that the important farmland data is more accurate, equating to 100 percent of the county inventoried, than in the interim farmland data, where 86 percent of county land was inventoried. The change in documentation in 2004 results in far greater acreage of grazing land; however, the important farmland acreages are similar. Farmland conversion of Prime Farmland is of particular concern. For the four-year comparison of Prime Farmlands between 2004 and 2008, there was a decrease equating to an average loss of approximately 688 acres of Prime Farmland annually.

TABLE 4.2-5
ACRES OF INTERIM FARMLANDS AND GRAZING LANDS – BUTTE COUNTY (1988–2004)

Year	Important Farmland Acres		Total Farmlands	Grazing Land	Total Agricultural Lands
	Irrigated Farmland	Nonirrigated Farmland			
1988	256,488	12,694	269,182	270,065	539,247
1990	259,880	11,509	271,389	267,310	538,699
1992	260,342	9,897	270,239	266,361	536,600
1994	260,571	9,823	270,394	265,083	535,477
1996	257,707	9,366	267,073	264,529	531,602
1998	255,245	9,476	264,721	264,778	529,499
2000	249,413	7,903	257,316	264,982	522,298
2002	247,007	6,648	253,655	263,653	517,308
2004*	245,475	5,448	250,923	261,946	512,869
Net Acreage Changes	-11,013	-7,246	-18,259	-8,119	-26,378
Annual Average Difference	-688	-453	-1,141	-507	-1,649

Source: DOC, 2006a

Due to the availability of digital soil data (SSURGO) beginning in 2004, the map was upgraded to Important Farmland status. Please refer to **Table 4.2-6.*

TABLE 4.2-6
ACRES OF IMPORTANT FARMLANDS AND GRAZING LANDS – BUTTE COUNTY (2004–2008)

Year	Important Farmland Acres				Total Important Farmlands	Grazing Land	Total Agricultural Lands
	Prime Farmland	Farmland of Statewide Importance	Unique Farmland	Farmland of Local Importance			
2004	197,557	22,323	24,947	0	244,837	406,401	651,238
2006	196,219	21,604	24,235	0	242,058	407,678	649,736
2008	194,690	22,794	23,077	0	240,561	401,859	642,420
Net Acreage Changes between 2004 & 2008	-2,867	+471	-1,870	0	-4,276	-4,542	-8,818
Annual Average Difference	-717	+118	-468	0	-1,069	-1,136	-2,205

Source: DOC, 2006a; DOC, 2010

Note that **Tables 4.2-5** and **4.2-6** provide data related to farmland conversion countywide and are not limited to property within the Planning Area.

AGRICULTURAL LAND CONSERVATION

Greenline Urban Growth Boundary

In 1979, Butte County outlined an Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) in its General Plan Land Use Element. The Chico Area Greenline, located along the city's western city limit, is an UGB that is coordinated by both the City of Chico and Butte County. The Greenline serves to restrict development on the prime farmlands west of Chico and preserves this area for agricultural production.

Williamson Act Contract Lands

Butte County participates in the Williamson Act program (described further below). As of 2007, there were 215,882 acres of land in Butte County under Williamson Act contracts (DOC, 2009). An extension of the Williamson Act, called the Farmland Security Zone (FSZ) Program, permits farmers and ranchers to garner an additional 35 percent property tax reduction by keeping their land in agriculture for a minimal initial term of 20 years; however, the FSZ program has not been adopted by Butte County. There are no Williamson Act contracts within the existing city limits of Chico. **Figure 4.2-2** shows lands in the Planning Area under Williamson Act contracts. Approximately 25,651 acres of land in the Planning Area are under agricultural preservation contracts. Most of this land is located around the western edge of the Planning Area.

The amount of land currently under Williamson Act contract in Butte County has decreased since 1991, the earliest year for which statistics are available. A total of 226,065 acres were under Williamson Act contract in 1991. This means 10,183 fewer net acres are under Williamson Act contracts than in 1991, a 4.5 percent decrease. Most of this decrease has occurred through the nonrenewal of Williamson Act contracts. The number of acres in nonrenewal increased between 2004 and 2005. In 2004, a total of 367 acres were put into nonrenewal status. This number increased to 928 acres the following year (DOC, 2009).

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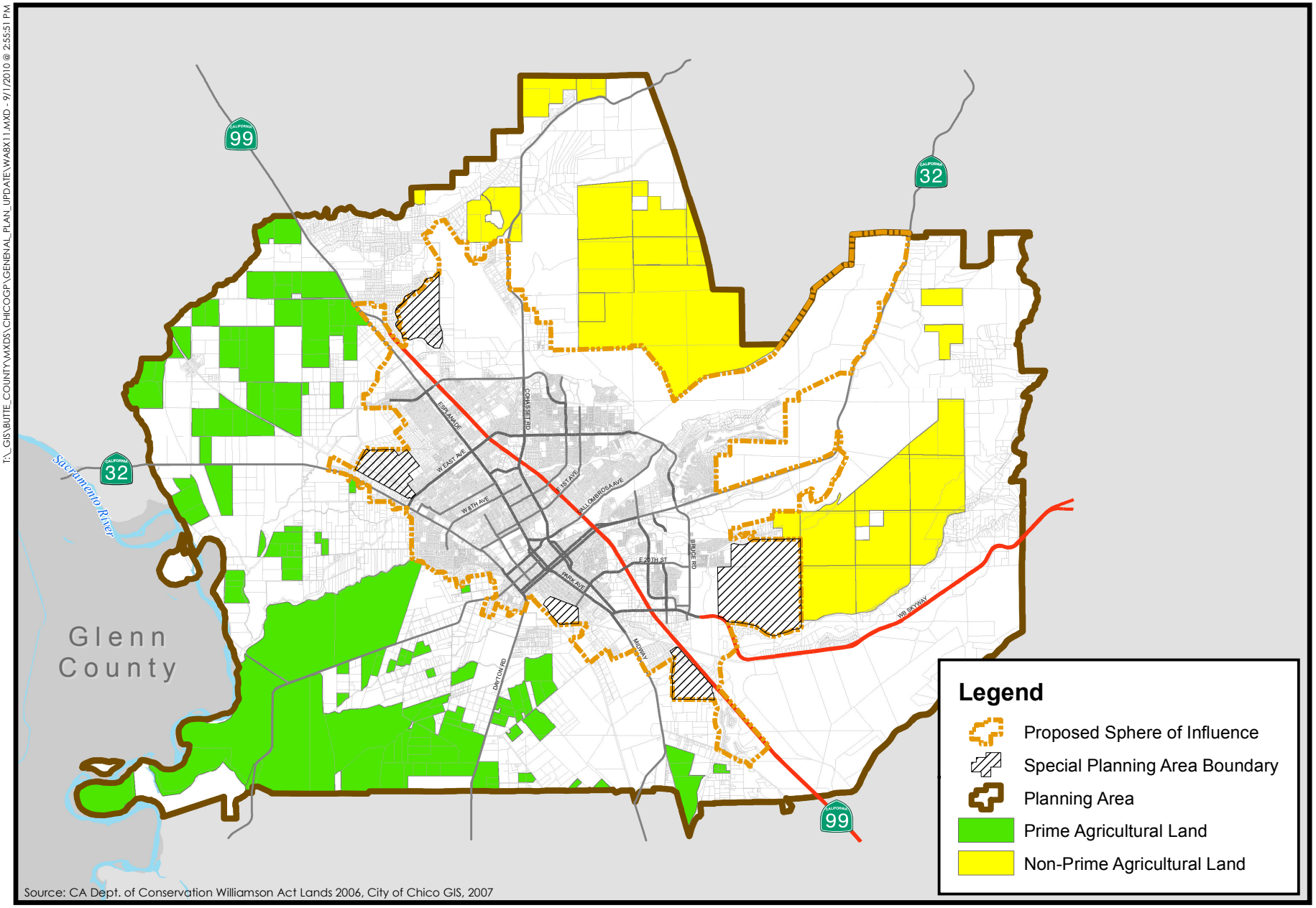

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Figure 4.2-2
Williamson Act/Preserved Agricultural Lands

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4.2.2 REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

FEDERAL

Farmland Protection Policy Act

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), a federal agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is the agency primarily responsible for implementation of the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA). The purpose of the FPPA is to minimize federal programs' contribution to the conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses by ensuring that federal programs are administered in a manner that is compatible with state, local, and private programs designed to protect farmland. NRCS provides technical assistance to federal agencies, state and local governments, tribes, or nonprofit organizations that desire to develop farmland protection programs and policies.

NRCS summarizes FPPA implementation in an annual report to Congress. The FPPA also established the Farmland Protection Program and the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA), which are discussed below.

Farmland Protection Program

The NRCS administers the Farmland Protection Program, a voluntary program aimed at keeping productive farmland in agricultural uses. Under the Farmland Protection Program, NRCS provides matching funds to state, local, or tribal government entities and nonprofit organizations with existing farmland protection programs to purchase conservation easements. The goal of the program is to protect between 170,000 and 340,000 acres of farmland per year (USDA-NRCS, 2010c). Participating landowners agree not to convert the land to nonagricultural use and retain all rights to use the property for agriculture. A minimum of 30 years is required for conservation easements and priority is given to applications with perpetual easements. NRCS provides up to 50 percent of the fair market value of the easement being conserved (USDA-NRCS, 2010c).

To qualify for a conservation easement, farmland must meet several criteria. The land must be:

- Prime, Unique, or other productive soil, as defined by NRCS based on factors such as water moisture regimes, available water capacity, developed irrigation water supply, soil temperature range, acid-alkali balance, water table, soil sodium content, potential for flooding, erodibility, permeability rate, rock fragment content, and soil rooting depth;
- Included in a pending offer to be managed by a nonprofit organization, state, tribal, or local farmland protection program;
- Privately owned;
- Placed under a conservation plan;
- Large enough to sustain agricultural production;
- Accessible to markets for the crop that the land produces; and
- Surrounded by parcels of land that can support long-term agricultural production.

In Butte County, the Farmland Protection Program is supplemented by the California Department of Conservation's Important Farmland Inventory System and Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, which are discussed in further detail under state regulatory programs below.

Land Evaluation and Site Assessment

Under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), lead agencies may refer to the LESA model in their environmental analysis but are not required to do so. The LESA system ranks lands for suitability and inclusion in the Farmland Protection Program. LESA evaluates several factors, including soil potential for agricultural use, location, market access, and adjacent land use. These factors are used to numerically rank the suitability of parcels based on local resource evaluation and site considerations. The LESA system has spawned many variations, including the California LESA model described below.

STATE

California Department of Conservation

The Department of Conservation administers and supports a number of programs, including the Williamson Act, the California Farmland Conservancy Program, the Williamson Act Easement Exchange Program, and the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program. These programs are designed to preserve agricultural land and provide data on conversion of agricultural land to urban use. The Department of Conservation is responsible for approving Williamson Act Easement Exchange Program agreements.

Important Farmland Inventory System and Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

As discussed above, the Important Farmland Inventory System initiated in 1975 by the U.S. Soil Conservation Service (now NRCS) classifies land based on ten soil and climatic characteristics. The Department of Conservation started a similar system of mapping and monitoring for California in 1980, known as the FMMP.

Under CEQA, the lead agency is required to evaluate agricultural resources in environmental assessments at least in part based on the FMMP. The state's system was designed to document how much agricultural land in California was being converted to nonagricultural land or transferred into Williamson Act contracts. The definitions of Important Farmland types are provided in the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program discussion in the Existing Setting section above.

California Land Evaluation and Site Assessment Model

The California LESA model was developed in 1997 based on the federal LESA system. It can be used to rank the relative importance of farmland and the potential significance of its conversion on a site-by-site basis. The California LESA model considers the following factors: land capability, Storie Index, water availability (drought and non-drought conditions), land uses within one-quarter mile, and "protected resource lands" (e.g., Williamson Act lands) surrounding the property. A score can be derived and used to determine if the conversion of a property would be significant under CEQA.

Williamson Act

The California Land Conservation Act of 1965, commonly referred to as the Williamson Act, is a nonmandated state program, administered by counties and cities to preserve agricultural land and discourage the premature conversion of agricultural land to urban uses. The act authorizes local governments and property owners to (voluntarily) enter into contracts to commit agricultural land to specified uses for ten or more years. Once restricted, the land is valued for taxation based on its agricultural income rather than unrestricted market value, resulting in a lower tax rate for owners. In return, the owners guarantee that these properties remain under agricultural production for an initial ten-year period. The contract is renewed automatically unless the owner files a notice of nonrenewal, thereby maintaining a constant ten-year contract. Currently, approximately 70 percent of the state's prime agricultural land is protected under this act. Prime Farmland under the Williamson Act includes land that qualifies as Class I and II in the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) classification of land or that qualifies for rating 80 to 100 in the Storie Index rating. Participation is on a voluntary basis by both landowners and local governments and is implemented through the establishment of agricultural preserves and the execution of Williamson Act contracts.

Termination of a Williamson Act contract through the nonrenewal process is the preferred method to remove the enforceable restriction of the contract. Cancellation is not appropriate when objectives served by cancellation could be served by nonrenewal. Cancellation is reserved for unusual, "emergency" situations. In order to approve tentative cancellation, a board or council must make specific findings based on substantial evidence that a cancellation is consistent with the purposes of the act or in the public interest. Contracts can specify that both findings must be made in order to approve tentative cancellation.

Farmland Security Zones

Farmland Security Zones (FSZs) were established by the legislature in 1998. FSZs are meant to protect participating Important Farmland from development pressure. An FSZ must be located within an agricultural preserve (area designated as eligible for a Williamson Act contract) and designated as Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Local Importance. The agricultural and open space lands enrolled in the program are protected for a minimum of a 20-year term under an FSZ and are offered an even greater property tax reduction than land under a Williamson Act contract. This program has not been adopted by Butte County.

LOCAL

City of Chico Agricultural Preservation Standards

The City of Chico has Agricultural Preservation Standards as part of Section 19.64 of the Chico Municipal Code, which contains agricultural preservation provisions that require subdividers to disclose a property's proximity to farmland to prospective buyers and that limit the definition of a "nuisance" to exclude established farms operated according to commonly accepted farming practices (City of Chico, 1999).

Butte County's Right-to-Farm Ordinance

Butte County adopted a right-to-farm ordinance in 1981 (Chapter 35 of the Butte County Code). This ordinance seeks to conserve, protect, enhance, and encourage properly conducted agricultural operation on agricultural land in Butte County. The policy states that residents of

property in or near agricultural districts should be prepared to accept the inconveniences and discomfort associated with normal agricultural activities. The policy establishes that no properly conducted agricultural operations shall be or become a nuisance if the subject property is located near an agricultural operation on agricultural land, residents or users of the subject property may at times be subject to inconvenience or discomfort arising from that operation.

4.2.3 IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

STANDARDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

Based on Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, agricultural resource impacts are considered to be significant if the following could result from the implementation of the proposed General Plan Update:

1) Conversion of Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance, as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to nonagricultural use.

2) Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract.

3) Changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of farmland to nonagricultural use.

METHODOLOGY

Evaluation of potential agricultural impacts of the proposed City of Chico General Plan Update was based on review of the current and proposed Butte County General Plan and Zoning Code and a field review of the Planning Area to better understand the current agricultural/land use interface. The agricultural analysis is based on information gathered from the Butte County General Plan Update and the Chico 2030 General Plan Update, the California Department of Conservation Farmland Conversion Reports, and the California Department of Conservation Important Farmlands Map. This analysis addresses direct impacts and losses of farmland as well as indirect impacts on agricultural uses (e.g., growth pressure to convert farmlands, conflicts between agricultural operations and urban land uses) as a result of the development of land use designations proposed under the General Plan Update as well as any roadway improvements and implementation of policy provisions.

The following proposed General Plan Update policies and actions address agricultural resources:

Policy LU-1.2 *(Growth Boundaries/Limits) – Maintain long-term boundaries between urban and agricultural uses in the west and between urban uses and the foothills in the east, and limit expansion north and south to produce a compact urban form.*

Action LU-1.2.1 *(Greenline) – Retain the Greenline.*

Policy LU-2.6 *(Agricultural Buffers) – Require buffering for new urban uses along the City's Sphere of Influence adjacent to commercial crop production. Landscaping, trails, gardens, solar arrays, and open space uses are permitted within the buffer. Design criteria for buffers are as follows:*

- *Minimum 100-foot-wide physical separation, which may include roadways and creeks, between the agricultural use and any habitable structure.*

- *Incorporate vegetation, as may be needed to provide a visual, noise and air quality buffer.*

Action LU-6.2.2 *(Bell Muir SPA Planning) – Plan the Bell Muir SPA with primarily low density housing compatible with existing residential development and ongoing agricultural uses in the area. Subsequent planning will:*

- *Identify locations for community gardens or small-scale farms, and develop design guidelines and buffering requirements to address potential incompatibilities.*

- *Address infrastructure needs with particular attention to storm drainage and circulation, including north-south connections to East Avenue and improved access to State Route 32.*

- *Develop special lighting and street standards appropriate for the rural character of the area.*

Policy OS-5.1 *(Urban/Rural Boundary) – Protect agriculture by maintaining the Greenline between urban and rural uses.*

Policy OS-5.2 *(Agricultural Resources) – Minimize conflicts between urban and agricultural uses by requiring buffers or use restrictions.*

Action OS-5.2.1 *(Agricultural Buffers) – Require buffers for development adjacent to active agricultural operations along the Greenline to reduce incompatibilities.*

Policy OS-5.3 *(Protection of Agriculture) – Support continued agricultural use of farmlands outside of the City's Sphere of Influence.*

Policy OS-5.4 *(Preserve Agricultural Lands) – Permit the continued use of land within the City Limits for agricultural purposes while working with property owners to minimize impacts to and from productive agricultural operations.*

The impact analysis provided below utilizes these proposed policies and actions to determine whether implementation of the proposed General Plan Update would result in significant agricultural resource impacts. The analyses identify and describe how specific policies and actions as well as other City regulations and standards provide enforceable requirements and/or performance standards that protect agricultural resources and avoid or minimize significant impacts.

PROJECT IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Loss of and Conversion of Agricultural Land (Standards of Significance 1)

Impact 4.2.1 Implementation of the proposed General Plan Update would result in the conversion of important farmlands (Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance) as designated by the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to nonagricultural use. This is considered a **significant and unavoidable** impact.

According to the California Department of Conservation Important Farmland Map (2010) as indicated in **Table 4.2-4** and depicted in **Figure 4.2-1**, the Planning Area contains approximately 30,230 acres of Prime Farmland and 260 acres of Farmland of Statewide Importance (defined hereafter as "important farmlands"). The Planning Area also contains approximately 1,129 acres of Unique Farmland. Within the General Plan Planning Area, but outside of existing city boundaries, are approximately 66,986 acres of agricultural land, consisting of approximately 29,806 acres of Prime Farmland, 260 acres of Farmland of Statewide Importance, and 1,128 acres of Unique Farmland. As further indicated in **Table 4.2-4**, contained within the city boundaries are approximately 424 acres of Prime Farmland and approximately one acre of Unique Farmland.

The majority of important farmlands in the Planning Area outside of the General Plan Update proposed SOI are located west of the City. **Figure 4.2-3** illustrates the significant acreage of important farmland areas within the Planning Area. The majority of important farmlands in the Planning Area outside of the General Plan Update proposed SOI are designated for resource conservation or for agricultural use by the County, and would therefore not be affected by urban development. The proposed General Plan Update supports the existing Greenline by not proposing any urban development beyond it. General Plan Update Action LU-1.2.1 proposes to retain the Greenline.

The proposed Circulation Element identifies two roadway connections that are outside of the City's SOI: 1) Southgate Avenue Extension; and 2) Eaton Road Extension. The extension of Southgate Avenue west to Midway and the extension of Eaton Road west to the SR 32 would both cross the Greenline and result in the loss of a portion of important farmlands. These extensions are not expected to induce growth or additional conversion of agricultural lands outside of the Greenline given the proposed General Plan policy provisions that prohibit urban development on the agricultural side of the Greenline (Policy LU-1.2 and Action LU-1.2.1), and as neither the City nor County's General Plan updates identify new growth potential in these areas.

As demonstrated by **Figure 4.2-3**, development within the General Plan Update proposed SOI would largely avoid substantial loss of important farmlands west of SR 99. However, the proposed General Plan Land Use Diagram (see **Figure 3.0-3** in Section 3.0, Project Description), does designate residential and mixed-use land uses in areas within important farmland areas (see **Figure 4.2-3**). These areas include the North Chico Special Planning Area (SPA-1), the Bell Muir Special Planning Area (SPA-2), and the Pomona Avenue Opportunity Site (14) for a total conversion of 1,041.73 acres of Prime Farmland and 25.9 acres of Unique Farmland to urban uses. It is important to note that these areas are already identified for some level of urban development, in particular the North Chico SPA, which has been identified a mixed-use urban core by both the City and County for over a decade. General Plan Update Policy LU-2.6 requires buffering for new urban uses along the City's SOI adjacent to commercial crop production demonstrating a commitment to continued agricultural activities adjacent to these locations.

The intent of the proposed General Plan Update is to accommodate anticipated growth through compact, walkable, infill, and mixed-use development, as well as focusing redevelopment along transit corridors and at other key locations. For instance, Policy LU-1.2 seeks to maintain long-term boundaries between urban and agricultural uses in the west and between urban uses and the foothills in the east, and limit expansion north and south to produce a compact urban form. The proposed General Plan Update and its Land Use Diagram would provide for this growth and would minimize outward expansion of the City's boundaries and would retain the current Greenline along the western boundary of the City. The General Plan identifies new growth areas (SPAs) with a mix of uses and higher density residential development. Thus, growth accommodated under the proposed General Plan Update would be confined to the immediate Chico area and would avoid growth effects of sprawl development patterns on agricultural areas.

The City recognizes the importance of agricultural lands and is committed to protecting this resource as supported by its continued commitment to the Greenline (Action LU-1.2.1). The Greenline has been in place for over 30 years and restricts development on the prime farmlands west of Chico and preserves this area for agricultural production. The use of the Greenline would continue to ensure the long-term ability of agricultural uses and serves as an urban growth boundary to restrict the conversion of farmland. The Greenline is coordinated by both the City of Chico and Butte County, in order to provide a boundary between agricultural land uses and urban land uses.

Implementation of the proposed General Plan Land Use Diagram, however, would result in the potential conversion of important farmland acreage. It should be noted that several of these areas already have been approved for development and their project-specific impacts to the loss of important farmlands have been considered. The Final EIR for the Northwest Chico Specific Plan (State Clearinghouse No. 2004082087) concluded that development under the specific plan would result in a significant and unavoidable loss of important farmlands, but that the loss was appropriate given the need to accommodate future housing and jobs for a growing City population. This loss of important farmland is considered a **significant** impact**.**

Key themes of the proposed General Plan include the protection of agricultural resources and keeping urban growth limits. These themes reflect the City's desire to retain a compact urban form, and to emphasize infill and redevelopment, as well as new complete neighborhoods contiguous to existing urban areas. Much of the agricultural land currently within the SOI is surrounded by urban uses, and as a result it has been compromised and may not be considered "viable" agricultural land. The City recognizes the importance of agricultural lands and is committed to protecting this resource as supported by its continued commitment to the Greenline. The Greenline restricts development on the prime farmlands west of Chico and preserves this area for agricultural production. The use of the Greenline would continue to ensure the long-term ability of agricultural uses and serves as an urban growth boundary to restrict the conversion of farmland. However, the proposed General Plan Update would still displace areas currently in agricultural production and result in the conversion of important farmland. The proposed General Plan policies and actions described above do not completely offset the loss of important farmland and no feasible mitigation measures are available to avoid this impact. Therefore this impact is considered **significant and unavoidable**.

Agriculturally Zoned Lands and Williamson Act Contracts (Standard of Significance 2)

Impact 4.2.2 Implementation of the proposed General Plan Update would not involve any land use changes for parcels currently under a Williamson Act Contract. However, proposed land uses would result in the re-designation of some land

areas in the proposed Sphere of Influence, yet currently zoned for agriculture in the Butte County General Plan. Although these lands are under Butte County jurisdiction, City re-designation to non-agricultural uses would result upon annexation into the City. This is considered a **less than significant** impact.

As previously discussed and indicated in **Figure 4.2-2**, the Planning Area contains approximately 25,651 acres of land subject to Williamson Act contracts. While implementation of the proposed Land Use Diagram would eventually result in the re-designation of some land areas currently zoned for agriculture by Butte County to urban/rural uses (e.g., SPA-1 and Opportunity Site 14) (see Impact 4.2.1), the proposed Land Use Diagram does not propose conversion of land subject to Williamson Act contracts to urban uses. As shown in **Figure 4.2-2**, all lands subject to Williamson Act contracts in the Planning Area are outside of the General Plan Update proposed SOI. These lands are designated for resource conservation or for agricultural use by the County and would therefore not be affected by urban development. Development within the SOI proposed by the General Plan Update would avoid the loss of farmlands subject to Williamson Act contracts.

Future annexation of current zoned agricultural lands to the City would involve the re-zoning of these lands to a non-agricultural use in order to be consistent with the General Plan. This action would not constitute a conflict with agriculturally zoned lands. As discussed under Impact 4.2.1 (Loss of and Conversion of Agricultural Land), the City recognizes the importance of all agricultural lands and is committed to protecting this resource as supported by its continued commitment to the Greenline. Policy LU-1.2 seeks to maintain long-term boundaries between urban and agricultural uses in the west and between urban uses and the foothills in the east, and limit expansion north and south to produce a compact urban form while General Plan Update Action LU-1.2.1 proposes to retain the Greenline. The Greenline has been in place for over 30 years and restricts development on the prime farmlands west of Chico, where many acres of Williamson Act contract lands exist, and preserves this area for agricultural production. The use of the Greenline would continue to ensure the long-term ability of agricultural uses and serves as an urban growth boundary to restrict the conversion of farmland. The Greenline is coordinated by both the City of Chico and Butte County, in order to provide a boundary between agricultural land uses and urban land uses.

Implementation of the proposed General Plan Update Land Use Diagram does not include the conversion of land subject to Williamson Act contracts to urban uses and would not result in conflicts with agriculturally zoned lands. Therefore, this impact is considered **less than significant.**

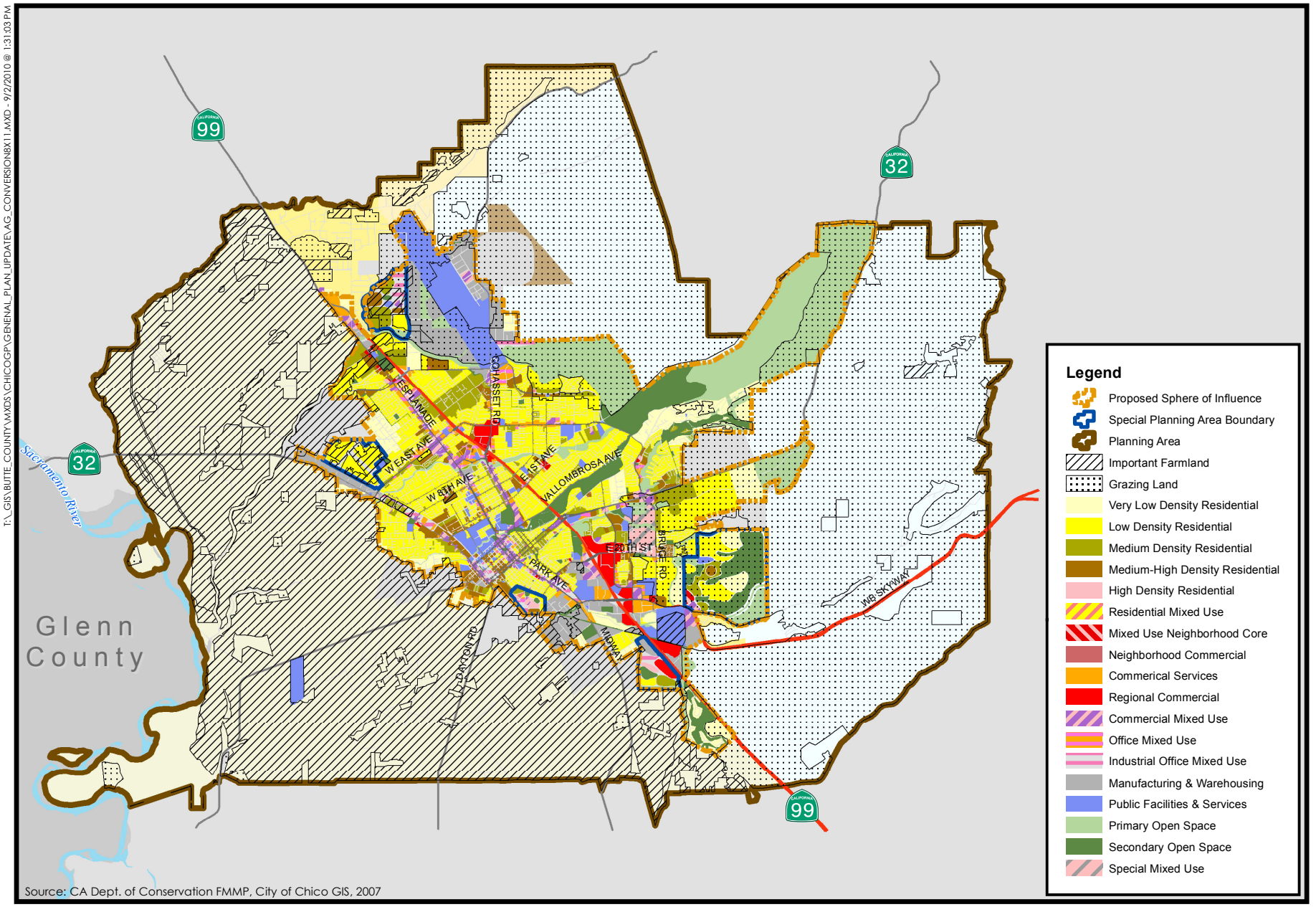

Figure 4.2-3
Farmland Impacts

PMC®

Agricultural/Urban Interface Conflicts (Standard of Significance 3)

Impact 4.2.3 Implementation of the proposed General Plan Update could result in changes in the existing environment which, due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of farmland to nonagricultural use. However, policy provisions in the proposed General Plan Update and continued implementation of the City of Chico Agricultural Preservation Standards under the Municipal Code would ensure that agricultural operations are not adversely impacted. This is considered a **less than significant** impact

Implementation of the proposed City of Chico General Plan Update Land Use Diagram would place urbanized land uses adjacent to agricultural uses and would replace existing agricultural uses. It is anticipated that as the city builds out, new agriculture/urban interface conflicts could occur. **Figure 4.2-1** illustrates that there are important farmland areas adjacent to or near proposed urban land uses to the west and east of the city, including some agricultural lands within the city limits adjacent to residential, mixed-use, industrial, and commercial land uses.

The following types of agricultural and urban land use conflicts, inconveniences, or discomforts associated with normal agricultural operations related primarily to the growing of crops are expected to occur:

- Inconveniences or discomforts associated with dust, noise, and odor from agricultural operations;
- Restrictions on agricultural operations (such as pesticide application) along interfaces with urban uses;
- Conflicts with farm equipment and vehicles using roadways;
- Trespassing and vandalism on active farmlands; and
- The proximity of farmland to urban areas can create growth pressure to convert land to urban uses as a result of the above-mentioned conflicts and increases in property value.

As previously described above, the City of Chico has Agricultural Preservation Standards as part of Section 19.64 of the Chico Municipal Code, which contains agricultural preservation provisions that require subdividers to disclose a property's proximity to farmland to prospective buyers and that limit the definition of a "nuisance" to exclude established farms operated according to commonly accepted farming practices. Butte County also has a right-to-farm ordinance that protects agricultural operations. In addition to these requirements, development projects in the city have included in their design and/or been required to address buffers from agricultural uses. The proposed General Plan continues a policy of requiring 100-foot buffers between agricultural and urban uses (Policy LU-2.6). In addition, Policy LU-2.6 contains a provision to incorporate vegetation within these buffer areas in order to provide a visual, noise, and air quality buffer. Examples include the buffers provided in the Northwest Chico Specific Plan (Northwest Chico Specific Plan Draft EIR, pages 4.2-13 through -19).

In addition to Policy LU-2.6, the proposed General Plan Update Land Use Diagram will continue to uphold the Greenline along the perimeter of the Planning Area to buffer agricultural uses from urban land uses (see **Figure 3.0-3**).

General Plan policies call for the establishment of agricultural buffers and discourages urban encroachment onto agricultural lands. Since the Greenline has been in place for nearly 30 years, there are few vacant City properties adjacent to the Greenline. Add to this the fact that the 2030 General Plan does not propose new growth into new agricultural areas (barring the Bell-Muir SPA), and there simply are not many instances where future agricultural/urban interface conflicts exist. In order to address the potential urban encroachment resultant from implementation of the Bell-Muir SPA, proposed General Plan Update Action LU-6.2.2 states that the Bell-Muir SPA will be planned with primarily low density development housing compatible with existing residential development and ongoing agricultural uses in the area. Lighting and street standards will be developed for the rural character of the area and locations for community gardens or small-scale farms will be identified in the effort to adequately blend new development with the existing disposition.

Finally, larger undeveloped areas adjacent to the Greenline either are, or will be, subject to master planning provisions (e.g., Bell-Muir SPA, South Entler SPA, Diamond Match SPA, etc.), which provide a venue to address potential interface conflicts. Implementation of proposed General Plan Update policy and action described above and continued implementation of the City's agricultural preservation standards, as well as the preservation of the Greenline, would minimize agriculture/urban interface conflicts within and adjacent to the city's planned urban areas associated with nuisance effects. Specifically, it is expected that future development would design buffers that would consist of setbacks, and if necessary, landscaping to address site-specific conflicts. Therefore, this impact is considered **less than significant.**

4.2.4 CUMULATIVE SETTING, IMPACTS, AND MITIGATION MEASURES

CUMULATIVE SETTING

The City of Chico and the Planning Area are located in the northwestern portion of Butte County. As previously described, urban development within Butte County (including the unincorporated areas and the cities of Chico, Oroville, Gridley, and Biggs) has resulted in the loss of important farmland (see **Tables 4.2-5** and **4.2-6**) between 1988 and 2006. The existing and projected future urban development throughout the state is expected to further contribute to the loss of important farmlands.

The cumulative setting for agricultural resources impacts takes into account existing land use conditions, as well as planned and proposed development anticipated in the Planning Area under build-out conditions, including consideration of land uses under the proposed Butte County General Plan Update (see Section 4.0 for a further description of cumulative growth conditions). The geographic context for the analysis of cumulative agriculture resources impacts varies by threshold. The cumulative context for the analysis of the conversion of agricultural uses to other uses is Butte County. Any net loss of agricultural resources in Butte County is considered to be a cumulatively considerable impact. While the focus of the cumulative impact analysis is Butte County, it is acknowledged that cumulative important farmland conversion contributions by the proposed General Plan Update are of a statewide concern.

Because potential conflicts with Williamson Act contracts and agriculturally zoned land are site-specific and not cumulative in nature for the proposed General Plan Update, they are not addressed as cumulative impacts.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Cumulative Impacts to Agricultural Resources (Standard of Significance 1)

Impact 4.2.4 Implementation of the proposed General Plan Update, along with regional and statewide growth, would result in a contribution to the conversion of important farmland. This is a **cumulatively considerable** and **significant and unavoidable** impact.

The proposed General Plan Update supports the Butte County Greenline by not proposing any development beyond it. As demonstrated by **Figure 4.2-3**, the proposed General Plan Update would avoid substantial loss of important farmlands west of SR 99. However, implementation of the proposed General Plan Update Land Use Diagram would result in the conversion of important farmland areas that are within planned development areas within the SOI (e.g., SPA-1 and Opportunity Site 14). While this loss of important farmland would be limited, it would still contribute to the loss of important farmland in the County as well as in the State. Since no cumulative threshold of acceptable important farmland loss has been established by the State or Butte County, any contribution is determined cumulatively considerable in this Draft EIR. As described under Impact 4.2.1, the proposed General Plan Update contains several policies and actions that would minimize agricultural land conversion. However, the cumulative impacts to agricultural resources from implementation of the plan would still be considerable.

As noted above, the Greenline is intended to restrict development on the prime farmlands west of Chico and preserves this area for agricultural production. The use of the Greenline would continue to ensure the long-term ability of agricultural uses to serve as an Urban Growth Boundary. However, the proposed General Plan Update would still result in the conversion of important farmland. The proposed General Plan policies and actions described above do not offset the loss of important farmland at the State-wide level. Thus, the contribution to cumulative impacts on agricultural resources is considered to be a **cumulatively considerable** and **significant and unavoidable** impact.

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