

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This section presents potential environmental impacts of the proposed project. The scope of the analysis and key attributes of the analytical approach are presented to assist readers in understanding the manner in which the impact analysis was conducted.

CEQA Guidelines Section 15125(a) states:

An EIR must include a description of the physical environmental conditions in the vicinity of the project, as they exist at the time the notice of preparation is published, or if no notice of preparation is published, at the time environmental analysis is commenced, from both a local and regional perspective. This environmental setting will normally constitute the baseline physical conditions by which a lead agency determines whether an impact is significant. The description of the environmental setting shall be no longer than is necessary to an understanding of the significant effects of the proposed project and its alternatives.

In this case, the County of Sonoma published the Notice of Preparation (NOP) for the project in February 2008 (see **Appendix B**). For this reason, the Draft EIR generally adopts as its baseline the environmental setting as it existed when the NOP was published.

The study area for environmental effects differs among resources depending on where impacts are expected. For example, traffic impacts caused by the proposed project are assessed for the local roadway network, whereas cultural resource impacts are assessed for the areas subject to direct ground-disturbing activities.

In addition to the direct impacts associated with the proposed project, the project may contribute to broader cumulative impacts when considered together with other developments that may cause related impacts. These cumulative impacts are described in each subsection in this section of the Draft EIR, and are summarized throughout Section 3.

Standards of Significance

As required by CEQA, an EIR must identify and evaluate the significance of impacts caused by a proposed project. Evaluation of the significance of an impact involves professional judgment that takes into account a variety of factors such as environmental resources, ability for resource recovery, need for mitigation, consistency with conclusions reached for similar projects, and CEQA case law. The following levels of impact significance were used in this analysis:

- *Significant and unavoidable impacts* are those that have been determined to be significant and cannot be mitigated to less than significant. A statement of overriding considerations must be made by the County if it approves the project with any significant impacts.
- *Potentially significant impacts* are those that may be significant but can either be reduced to less than significant through mitigation measures or remain significant and unavoidable after mitigation.
- *Less-than-significant impacts* are those that are adverse but are not potentially significant and therefore do not require mitigation.
- *No impact* refers to effects of the project on the environment that are not considered adverse.

Cumulative Impacts

According to the CEQA Guidelines, cumulative impacts are changes in the environment that result from adding the effect of the project to those effects of closely related past, present and probable future projects. The cumulative impact from several projects is the change in the environment that results from the incremental impacts of the proposed project when added to the other closely related past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects. As defined in Section 15355 of the CEQA Guidelines, an EIR should not discuss impacts that do not result in part from the project evaluated in the EIR. As such, the discussion in this section focuses specifically on those impacts of the project that would result in cumulative effects, and does not consider cumulative impacts to which the project would not contribute.

The CEQA Guidelines identify two basic methods for establishing the cumulative environment in which the project is to be considered: the use of a list of past, present, and reasonably anticipated future projects; or the use of adopted projections from a general plan or other regional planning document. The plan approach was used for this EIR and was based on the Sonoma County General Plan 2020 adopted in September 2008.

A two-step approach was used to analyze cumulative impacts. The first step was to determine whether the combined effects from the proposed project and other projects would be cumulatively significant. This was done by adding the project's incremental impact to the anticipated impacts of other projects. Where the combined effect of the projects was determined to result in a significant cumulative effect, the second step was to evaluate whether the proposed project's incremental contribution to the combined significant cumulative impact would be cumulatively considerable as required in Section 15064(h)(1) of the CEQA Guidelines. It should be noted that Section 15064(h)(4) of the CEQA Guidelines states that "the mere existence of significant cumulative impacts caused by other projects alone shall not constitute substantial evidence that the proposed project's incremental effects are cumulatively considerable." Therefore, it is not necessarily true that, even where cumulative impacts are significant, any level of incremental contribution must be deemed cumulatively considerable. Conversely, it is not necessarily true that if the project's individual impact is less than significant; its contribution to a significant cumulative impact will not be cumulatively considerable. An impact that is less than significant when considered individually may still be cumulatively considerable in light of the impact caused by all projects considered in the analysis.