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Project Title:	Soda Mountain Solar
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Document Title:	Section 3-2 Agriculture and Forestry Resources
Description:	This Section evaluates the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts the Project may have on agriculture and forestry resources and identifies any required Applicant-Proposed Measures (APM) and any required Mitigation Measures.
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3.2 AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY RESOURCES

This section evaluates potential impacts to agriculture and forestry resources that may result directly or indirectly from the project. The analysis in this section describes the applicable regulations, presents an overview of existing conditions, and describes the potential agriculture and forestry impacts of the proposed project. The analysis is based on a review of existing resources, technical data, and applicable laws, regulations, plans, and policies.

3.2.1 Regulatory Setting

3.2.1.1 Federal

FEDERAL LAND POLICY AND MANAGEMENT ACT

The Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) establishes public land policy and guidelines for administration and provides for the management, protection, development, and enhancement of public lands such as would be subject to the requested ROW grant. Under FLPMA, the BLM is responsible for the development of energy resources on BLM-administered lands in a manner that balances diverse resource uses and considers the long-term needs of future generations for renewable and non-renewable resources. Among those uses, FLPMA address livestock grazing on public lands.

CALIFORNIA DESERT CONSERVATION AREA PLAN

The California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) encompasses 25 million acres in southern California and was designated by Congress in 1976 through the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA). The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages approximately 10 million of the 25 million acres in the CDCA. Congress directed the BLM to prepare and implement a comprehensive long-range plan for the management, use, development, and protection of public lands within the CDCA. The CDCA Plan (BLM 1999) is based on the concepts of multiple use, sustained yield, and maintenance of environmental quality. The CDCA Plan provides overall regional guidance for BLM-administered lands in the CDCA and establishes long-term goals for the protection and use of the California desert.

The CDCA Plan includes 12 plan elements, including a Motorized-Vehicle Access (MVA) Element that establishes the travel management framework for the CDCA, and also includes some activity-level decisions for popular locations, and a Livestock Grazing Element that established geographic boundaries of livestock allotments, the types of forage use, and the upper limits on the stocking levels in each of the allotments.

DESERT RENEWABLE ENERGY CONSERVATION PLAN

In September 2016, the BLM adopted the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan (DRECP) Land Use Plan Amendment (LUPA) to the CDCA Plan, Bishop Resource Management Plan, and Bakersfield Resource Management Plan. The DRECP LUPA addresses solar, wind, geothermal energy generation, and transmission projects on 10.8 million acres of BLM-administered lands in the desert regions of southern California (BLM 2016).

The DRECP did not make changes to the CDCA Plan Livestock Grazing Element goals but did add additional goals to maintain and enhance various resource values that are relevant to the Livestock Grazing Element. The DRECP also analyzed and made changes to the Livestock Grazing Element objectives that affect allotments within the West Mojave Planning Area.

The majority of the project site is located on DRECP General Public Lands, and the generation-tie (gen-tie) route is within the Soda Mountains Expansion ACEC. General Public Lands are BLM-administered lands that do not have a specific land allocation or designation associated with energy development, conservation, or recreation. These lands are not needed to fulfill the DRECP biological conservation or renewable energy strategy. These areas are available to renewable energy applications but do not benefit from permit review streamlining or other incentives.

3.2.1.2 State

FARMLAND MAPPING AND MONITORING PROGRAM

The Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP) produces maps and statistical data used to analyze impacts to California's agricultural resources. Every 2 years, the maps are updated using data obtained from aerial photographs, a computer mapping system, public review, and field reconnaissance. Agricultural land is rated by the FMMP according to soil quality, irrigation status, and importance. The highest quality land is called Prime Farmland. Other FMMP categories include Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, Farmland of Local Importance, and Grazing Land. The subsections below describe each FMMP farmland category (California Department of Conservation [CDOC] 2024a).

Prime Farmland

Prime Farmland 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. For land to be designated as Prime Farmland, it must have been used for irrigated agriculture production at some time during the 4 years prior to the mapping date.

Farmland of Statewide Importance

Farmland of Statewide Importance is similar to Prime Farmland but with minor shortcomings, such as greater slopes or less ability to store soil moisture. For land to be designated as Farmland of Statewide Importance, it must have been used for irrigated agricultural production at some time during the 4 years prior to the mapping date.

Unique Farmland

Unique Farmland consists of lesser quality soils used for the production of the state's leading agricultural crops. This land is usually irrigated, but it may include non-irrigated orchards or vineyards, as found in some climatic zones in California. For land to be designated as Unique Farmland, it must have been cropped at some time during the 4 years prior to the mapping date.

Farmland of Local Importance

Farmland of Local Importance is land of importance to the local economy, as defined by each county's local advisory committee and adopted by its board of supervisors. Farmland of Local Importance is either currently producing or has the capability of production but does not meet the criteria of Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, or Unique Farmland. Authority to adopt or to recommend changes to the category of Farmland of Local Importance rests with the board of supervisors in each county (DOC

2018). The following lands in the study area within San Bernardino County are to be included in the Farmland of Local Importance category:

- Farmlands that include areas of soils that meet all characteristics of Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, or Unique Farmland and that are not irrigated.
- Farmlands not covered by above categories but are of high economic importance to the community. These farmlands include dryland grains of wheat, barley, oats, and dryland pasture.

Grazing Land

Grazing Land consists of land that has existing vegetation, whether grown naturally or through management, that is suited for grazing or browsing of livestock.

WILLIAMSON ACT

The state allows local governments to enter into Williamson Act contracts or Farmland Security Zone contracts to preserve agricultural land and provide tax benefits to the landowner. The Williamson Act, formerly known as the California Land Conservation Act of 1965 (California Government Code 51200–51297.4, as amended), preserves agricultural and open space lands from conversion to urban land uses by establishing a contract between local governments and private landowners to voluntarily restrict their landholdings to agricultural or open space use. In return, these landowners receive property tax assessments that are based on farming or open space use, rather than assessments that are based on the full market property value, which is typically 20% to 75% higher. Williamson Act contracts are valid for a minimum of 10 years, and in the absence of a notice of non-renewal, they are automatically renewed each year for an additional 1-year term.

The Williamson Act also allows local governments to establish agricultural preserves, which are parcels of land set aside for agricultural uses. They typically avoid areas where public utility improvements and associated land acquisitions may be necessary (California Government Code 51230). An agricultural preserve can consist of no less than the following minimum acreages:

- An area of 10 to 40 acres for prime agricultural land if surrounded by or substantially surrounded by or contiguous to other agricultural preserve lands.
- An area of 40 acres or more for prime agricultural land.
- An area of 40 to 160 acres for non-prime agricultural land if surrounded by or substantially surrounded by or contiguous to other agricultural preserve lands.
- An area of 160 acres or more for non-prime agricultural land, with the provision that to meet this requirement, two or more parcels may be combined if they are contiguous and if they are in common ownership or use.

The Williamson Act states that a board or council, by resolution, shall adopt rules governing the administration of agricultural preserves. The rules of each agricultural preserve specify the uses allowed. Any commercial agricultural use would generally be permitted within any agricultural preserve. Local governments may identify compatible uses permitted with a use permit. Notwithstanding any determination of compatible uses by a city or county, unless the city or county, after notice and hearing, makes a finding to the contrary, the erection, construction, alteration, and maintenance of gas facilities are specifically determined under the Williamson Act to be compatible uses within any agricultural preserve (California Government Code 51238).

The Farmland Security Zones are more stringent agricultural preservation contracts than standard Williamson Act contracts and are made between a private landowner and a public agency.

CALIFORNIA GOVERNMENT CODE 51238

California Government Code 51238 includes provisions related to the Williamson Act that state the following:

Notwithstanding any determination of compatible uses by the county or city pursuant to this article, unless the board or council after notice and hearing makes a finding to the contrary, the erection, construction, alteration, or maintenance of gas, electric, water, communication, or agricultural laborer housing facilities are hereby determined to be compatible uses within any agricultural preserve.

CALIFORNIA PUBLIC RESOURCES CODE 12220(G)

California Public Resources Code 12220(g) defines forest land as land that can support 10% “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.”

CALIFORNIA PUBLIC RESOURCES CODE 4526

California Public Resources Code 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. Commercial species shall be determined by the board on a district basis.”

CALIFORNIA GOVERNMENT CODE 51100 TO 51155

California Government Code Chapter 6.7 (51100–51155) regulates timberlands in the state of California. A timberland production zone (TPZ) is defined as 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. With respect to the general plans of cities and counties, "timberland preserve zone" means "timberland production zone" (California Government Code 51104). A TPZ is a 10-year restriction on the use of land and will replace the use of agricultural preserves (Williamson Act contracts) on timberland. Land use under a TPZ will be restricted to growing and harvesting timber, and to compatible uses approved by the county (or city). According to the code, examples of compatible uses are watershed management; grazing; and the erection, construction, alteration, or maintenance of electric and gas transmission facilities.

FOREST TAXATION REFORM ACT

Commercial timberlands are afforded protection through the state’s Forest Taxation Reform Act of 1976, which mandates the creation of TPZs to restrict and protect commercial timber resources.

3.2.1.3 Local

SAN BERNARDINO COUNTYWIDE PLAN

The San Bernardino Countywide Plan (San Bernardino County 2024a), adopted by the Board of Supervisors in 2020, updates and expands the County's General Plan by addressing the physical, social, and economic issues facing the unincorporated portions of the county. The Countywide Plan consists of the Policy Plan, the Business Plan, and a communities plan. The Policy Plan, based on the former General Plan, consists of 11 elements: Land Use, Housing, Infrastructure and Utilities, Transportation and Mobility, Natural Resources, Renewable Energy and Conservation, Cultural Resources, Hazards, Personal and Property Protection, Economic Development, and Health and Wellness. The Business Plan consists of a policy-based governance element along with an implementation plan. The communities plan consists of 35 Community Action Guides that provide a framework for communities to create future character and independent identity through community actions.

The following policies in the Natural Resources and Infrastructure and Utilities elements of the Countywide Plan are relevant to this analysis (San Bernardino County 2024b).

Goal N-7 Agriculture and Soils. The ability of property owners, farmers, and ranchers to conduct sustainable and economically viable agricultural operations.

- **Policy NR-7.1 Protection of agricultural land.** We protect economically viable and productive agricultural lands from the adverse effects of urban encroachment, particularly increased erosion and sedimentation, trespass, and non-agricultural land development.
- **Policy NR-7.2 Preservation of important farmlands.** We require project applicants seeking to develop 20 or more acres of farmland (classified as prime, of statewide importance, or unique farmland) to non-agricultural uses to prepare an agricultural resource evaluation prior to project approval. The evaluation shall use generally accepted methodologies to identify the potentially significant impact of the loss of agricultural land as well as the economic viability and sustainability of future agricultural use of the property, including long-term sustainability and economic viability of water resources. If the conversion is deemed significant, the County shall require mitigation at a 1:1 ratio of converted to preserved acreage through conservation easements, payment of its valuation equivalent if a fee mitigation program is established, or inclusion in a regional agricultural preservation program.
- **Policy NR-7.3 Conservation and preservation incentives.** We support programs and policies that provide tax and economic incentives to conserve existing productive agricultural lands or preserve farmland classified as prime, of statewide importance, unique, or of local importance. We support land owners in establishing new and maintaining existing California Land Conservation (Williamson Act) contracts.
- **Policy NR-7.4 Economic diversity of farm operations.** We encourage farm operations to strengthen their economic viability through diversifying potential sources of farm income and activity, including value added products, agricultural tourism, roadside stands, organic farming, and farmers markets.
- **Policy NR-7.5 Agriculture on Rural Living and Open Space properties.** We permit small-scale, non- water-intensive, and incidental agricultural on properties designated for Rural Living. In the Oak Glen and Mentone community planning areas, we also permit commercial-scale agriculture on properties designated for Rural Living. In the Oak Glen and Mentone community planning areas and in the Crafton Hills, we also permit commercial-scale agriculture on privately-owned properties designated for Open Space.

- **Policy NR-7.6 Sustainable grazing practices.** We require all grazing on open rangelands to be compatible with the conservation of threatened and endangered species.
- **Policy IU-1.5 Agricultural water use.** We encourage water-efficient irrigation and the use of non-potable and recycled water for agricultural uses.

3.2.2 Environmental Setting

The project site is located entirely on federally owned land managed by the BLM in unincorporated San Bernardino County, California. The project site is bounded directly to the east by the Mojave National Preserve (administered by the National Park Service) and BLM lands, including the Razor Off-Highway Vehicle recreation area at the southeast corner. Interstate 15 (I-15), the former Arrowhead Trail Highway, runs along the western boundary of the project site.

The project site is composed of rural desert land within the BLM's California Desert District, within the jurisdiction of the Barstow Field Office, and the planning boundary of the CDCA Plan and DRECP. The portion of the project site east of I-15 is located on DRECP General Public Lands, and the portion of the project site west of I-15, the gen-tie line route, is within an ACEC. Vegetation within the project site consists of intermittent low-lying desert shrubs, and soils are mostly composed of sand interspersed with gravel and cobble.

There are no federal grazing allotments within 50 miles of the project site (BLM 2019). No agricultural uses or operations occur on-site or within the vicinity of the project site. There is no Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance on the project site, nor is there any land under a Williamson Act contract (CDOC 2022). The closest designated farmland is approximately 30 miles southeast. Additionally, there is no forest or timberland on the project site, as defined by California Public Resources Code 4526 and California Government Code 51104(g).

3.2.3 Impact Analysis

3.2.3.1 Thresholds of Significance

The determinations of significance of project impacts are based on applicable policies, regulations, goals, and guidelines defined by the State California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, Appendix G. Specifically, the project would be considered to have a significant effect on agriculture and forestry resources if the effects exceed the significance criteria described below:

1. 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 non-agricultural use.
2. Conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract.
3. Conflict with existing zoning for, or cause rezoning of, forest land (as defined in California Public Resources Code 12220(g)), timberland (as defined by California Public Resources Code 4526), or timberland-zoned timberland production (as defined by California Government Code 51104(g)).
4. Result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use.
5. Involve other changes in the existing environment that, 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.

Project analysis under each of these thresholds is discussed below.

3.2.3.2 Impact Assessment

Impact AG-1: *Would the project convert a 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 non-agricultural use? (No Impact)*

The project site is composed of rural desert land and is almost entirely undeveloped. Vegetation within the project site consists of intermittent low-lying desert shrubs, and soils are mostly composed of sand interspersed with gravel and cobble.

No portion of the project site is designated as Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance (CDOC 2022). Therefore, the project would not convert Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance, and **no impact** would occur.

Impact AG-2: *Would the project conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use, or a Williamson Act contract? (No Impact)*

Although San Bernardino County is enrolled in the California Williamson Act program, the majority of the project site is located on DRECP General Public Lands and the gen-tie line route is within an ACEC. General Public Lands are BLM-administered lands that do not have a specific land allocation or designation associated with energy development, conservation, or recreation. There is no land under a Williamson Act contract on the project site (CDOC 2024b). The closest areas enrolled in a Williamson Act contract are approximately 35 miles southwest. For these reasons, the project would not conflict with existing zoning for agricultural use or a Williamson Act contract, and **no impact** would occur.

Impact AG-3: *Would the project conflict with existing zoning for, or cause rezoning of, forest land, timberland), or timberland zoned Timberland Production? (No Impact)*

There is no forest or timberland on the project site. Therefore, the project would not conflict with existing zoning for, or cause rezoning of, forest land, and **no impact** would occur.

Impact AG-4: *Would the project result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use? (No Impact)*

There is no forest or timberland on the project site. Therefore, the project would not result in the loss of forest land or conversion of forest land to non-forest use, and **no impact** would occur.

Impact AG-5: *Would the project 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? (No Impact)*

There is no Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide Importance on the project site (CDOC 2022). There is also no forest or timberland on the project site. Therefore, the project would not involve other changes in the existing environment which could result in conversion of farmland to non-agricultural use or conversion of forest land to non-forest use. **No impact** would occur.

3.2.4 Cumulative Impacts

Impact C-AG-1: Would the impacts of the proposed project, in combination with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future projects, contribute to a cumulative impact related to agriculture and forestry resources? (No Impact)

As the project would not result in impacts related to agricultural and forestry resources, it would not combine with other cumulative projects to produce cumulatively considerable impacts related to these resources. **No cumulative impacts** related to agricultural and forestry resources would occur.

3.2.5 References Cited

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