SECTION 4
ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

4.1 AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

The purpose of this section of the EIR is to determine the impact of the proposed project on agricultural resources. This section provides an analysis of the project's effect on the site's agricultural potential based on information from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the California State Department of Conservation Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program (FMMP), and applicable regulations concerning agriculture.

4.1.1 Existing Conditions

Background

The soils found at the project site and through much of the Imperial Valley were created as a result of historic flooding of the Colorado River and contain deep, rich silts, deposited over thousands of years. These soils provide a basis for the agricultural operations located throughout the area. Highly productive soils, climate, and a reliable water source have combined to make agriculture the most important economic activity of Imperial County. Agriculture's importance within the County was assured once a reliable irrigation and transportation network was established. According to the County Agricultural Commissioner, agricultural production currently contributes more than one billion dollars annually to the region's economy. More than 120 types of crops are grown in Imperial County, including field crops (such as alfalfa and Sudan grass) and row crops (such as lettuce, carrots, and melons). Operations related to agriculture ensure employment for a large segment of the population.

El Centro is the largest urban area in the County. Urban growth in the region has traditionally been concentrated around the County's regional agricultural centers and shipping stations. This pattern has facilitated the continued economic viability of the region and is expected to play a major economic role in the future.

Climate

The climate for the project vicinity is typical of the climate found throughout much of Imperial County. The County is arid with hot, dry summers and mild winters. The daily temperatures and seasonal variations can be extreme. The clear skies and rapid heating and cooling of the desert soils create high temperatures by day and quick cooling by night. The average annual rainfall is about three inches and the average annual air temperature is about 72 degrees Fahrenheit. The average frost-free season is about 300 days per year.

Productive Soils and Soil Classifications

A critical factor in determining whether a particular property is suitable for agriculture is its soil composition. Information on the adequacy and importance of soils in Imperial County is available from two main sources: the USDA, NRCS (formerly Soil Conservation Service or SCS), and the FMMP. Imperial County has its own Soil Rating Policy as well.

United States Department of Agriculture - Natural Resources Conservation Service

The NRCS encourages the preservation of prime farmland for agriculture. The service utilizes two systems to rate soils. Soil rating systems include: Soil Capability Grouping and Storie Index.

Soil Capability Grouping. The NRCS has mapped and rated County soils to provide a rating system used by farmers, agricultural districts, and public agencies to determine a soil's productive capacity and to provide a tool in making future land use decisions. The NRCS rates soils for their suitability for most field crop production. This Grouping uses Roman numerals I through VIII to indicate progressively greater limitations and narrower choices for practical use. The higher the capability number rating of the soil, the lower the productive capability, which could result from either lesser quality or otherwise restricted physical or chemical conditions.

1. **Storie Index.** The second rating system utilized by the NRCS provides an additional index showing the relative degree of suitability, or value, of a soil for general intensive agriculture. The rating is based on soil **characteristics** only. It does not take into account other factors, such as the availability of water for irrigation, the climate, and the distance from markets, which might determine the desirability of growing specific crops in a given locality.

California State Department of Conservation Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

The FMMP was implemented in 1982 to monitor conversion of the State's agricultural lands. The program provides information using the Soil Capability Grouping rating system and presents it in the form of Important Farmland Series Maps. The Important Farmland Series Maps use eight classification categories, of which the top four (Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, Unique Farmland, and Farmland of Local Importance) are all regarded, for mapping purposes, as “Important Farmland.” “Prime Farmland” contains soils with the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics of all types. Farmland with a good combination of physical and chemical characteristics for the production of crops is identified as “Farmland of Statewide Importance.”

Imperial County - Soil Rating Policy

Although only Class I and II soils are normally considered "prime agricultural land" by the State of California (Government Code Section 51201(c)), climate, soil, and other conditions specific to the irrigated portion of the County of Imperial, have resulted in the classification of all soils with a Capability Grouping of I, II, or III as prime agricultural soils. The Class III soils are considered to be important within the County of Imperial where sites containing these soils have historically been used for agriculture.

Rosswood (El Centro) Site Soils

The proposed site is identified by the USDA Soil Conservation Service Soil Survey Map of Imperial County as being composed of two soil types:

1. 110 Holtville silty clay, wet with a Storie Index of 30 and Soil Capability Grouping of IIw-5; irrigated, and capability subclass VIIIw, dryland;
2. 115 Imperial-Glenbar silty clay loams, wet with a Storie Index of 34 and Soil Capability grouping IIIw-6, irrigated, capability subclass VIIIw, dryland.

Regulations Governing the Conversion of Farmland to Urban Uses

The relaxation of trade barriers following approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has brought increasing numbers of new residents, businesses, and leisure travelers to the County. It is also expected to greatly increase agricultural import and export opportunities. The region already accommodates large numbers of seasonal agricultural workers who will continue to travel to the Imperial Valley and often choose to remain as permanent residents. To accommodate population growth and take advantage of NAFTA-related economic opportunities, both the City and the County have determined that it may be necessary to convert existing "Important Farmland" to more urban uses. To offset the expected net loss of "Prime Farmland" or "Farmland of Statewide Importance" and provide necessary housing and support facilities, both the County and City General Plans have designated areas where growth should be directed.

City of El Centro General Plan Goals and Policies

The City of El Centro General Plan Conservation Element addresses issues regarding conversion of agricultural land (including unwarranted urbanization of outlying areas) impacts from geothermal development on local agriculture, and other development pressures, such as public utilities, on surrounding agricultural lands. The City of El Centro identifies goals and policies that are intended to conserve designated agricultural lands so that agriculture remains a viable and dominant part of the community's character and the local economy. Policies listed in the General Plan for carrying out this objective are as follows.

Policy 1.1: Direct future development away from prime soil areas to allow their continued use for agricultural uses.

Policy 1.2: Continue to implement the City's Urban Development Program to encourage compact and contiguous development within El Centro, minimizing the amount of agricultural land converted to urban uses.

Policy 1.3: Promote infill and compact development to minimize the amount of agricultural land necessary for future growth.

Policy 1.4: Maintain agricultural facilities and services including irrigation channels, commercial fertilization and pest control, transportation supplies, equipment, and harvested crops.

Policy 1.5: Continue to work with County and State agencies to ensure the effective conservation of agricultural lands within the region and to minimize the impacts of geothermal development on agricultural activities.

4.1.2 Impact Significance Criteria

The project would result in significant impacts to agricultural resources if it:

- conflicts with adopted environmental plans and goals of the community regarding the conversion of agricultural lands to urban uses as provided by the General Plan for the City of El Centro.

- converts 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 Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency, to non-agricultural use.

- conflicts with existing zoning for agricultural uses, or a Williamson Act contract.

- involves other changes in the existing environment, which due to their location or nature, could result in conversion of Farmland to non-agricultural uses.

4.1.3 Impact Analysis

The proposed project is consistent with the City's General Plan regarding conversion of agricultural land. The project site is currently designated as A2U by the County of Imperial and will require annexation to the City of El Centro and a change of zone to R1, single family residential. The project site has been designated as land to be converted to non-agricultural uses by the City of El Centro General Plan. The adoption of the General Plan EIR (2003) also consisted of a Statement of Overriding Considerations for project-level and cumulative impacts associated with loss/conversion of agricultural land.

The proposed project site is classified as approximately 80 percent Farmland of Statewide Importance and approximately 20 percent Prime Farmland as shown on the maps prepared pursuant to the FMMP for the Mapping and Monitoring Program of the California Resources Agency.

The proposed project is adjacent to the eastern City boundary and surrounded by Farmland of Statewide Importance to the west, north, and south. To the east is a combination of Farmland of Statewide Importance and Prime Farmland, which now consists of single-family residents.

Although all agricultural land in Imperial County is considered Important Farmland, it is not anticipated that development should be precluded within all areas of the County. The City of El Centro and County of Imperial have taken inventory of the agricultural uses in the County and have identified a process for converting specific areas of farmland into more urban uses. The proposed project falls within an area that has been anticipated by both the City and the County as a future urban growth area.

The Imperial County General Plan EIR (dated 2004) previously identified impacts and mitigation for losses of important farmland within the County. The proposed project would contribute to a loss of farmland, but that acreage has been analyzed in a previous environmental document. The minimal loss in the context of the agricultural land within the County is considered a less than significant impact.

The site is not party to any Williamson Act contract.

4.1.4 Significant Impacts

No significant direct impacts are expected to occur to agricultural lands as a result of the proposed project.

4.1.5 Mitigation Measures

No mitigation measures would be required.

4.1.6 Impacts After Mitigation

No significant agricultural resources impacts have been identified; therefore, no mitigation measures are required.