

3.2 **Effects Found Not Significant as Part of the Initial Study**

Pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15365, the County of San Diego (County) prepared an Initial Study and Notice of Preparation (NOP) for this Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for the Starlight Solar Project (project). The NOP was publicly circulated for 30 days beginning March 23, 2023. The County held a public scoping meeting on April 12, 2023, at the Backcountry Resource Center to provide responsible agencies and members of the public with information about the CEQA process and to provide further opportunities to identify environmental issues and alternatives for consideration in the EIR. Public comments received during the NOP scoping process are provided in Appendix A, NOP, Initial Study, and Public Comments, of this EIR.

This section discusses the environmental topics for which the effects were identified as having no impact or being less than significant during the scoping process and preparation of the NOP and Initial Study and therefore did not require further analysis. According to the CEQA Guidelines, an EIR should focus on the significant effects on the environment (14 California Code of Regulations [CCR] 15143). To this end, an EIR can “scope out” environmental topics from detailed discussion by including the reasons for which various possible significant effects were not found significant and are not discussed in detail (14 CCR 15128). Consistent with this guidance, the entire or portions of the following environmental topics were found to be not significant during preparation of the Initial Study and scoping process for the project.

- Agriculture and Forestry Resources (Section II)
- Population and Housing (Section XIV)
- Parks and Recreation (Section XVI)

In addition to having been screened out during the NOP and scoping process through the Initial Study, these environmental topics did not receive any public comments during the scoping process. This indicates that none of these environmental areas should be addressed further. The analysis is based on the review of existing resources, technical data, and applicable laws, regulations, and guidelines, as well as the following technical studies prepared for the project:

- *Phase I Environmental Site Assessment, Boulevard Starlight Solar* (Michael Baker International 2023) (Appendix I of this EIR)
- *Agricultural Resources Review Memorandum* (County of San Diego 2023) (Appendix M of this EIR)

The sections that follow summarize the findings from the Initial Study for the topics of Agriculture and Forestry Resources, Population and Housing, and Parks and Recreation.

3.2.1 **Agriculture and Forestry Resources**

For the purpose of this EIR, the *County of San Diego Guidelines for Determining Significance and Report Format and Content Requirements – Agricultural Resources* (County of San Diego 2015) was used to evaluate direct and indirect impacts of the project.

The 588-acre project site is a portion of the 3,874-acre property known as Empire Ranch, which has historically supported ranching, grazing, and recreational uses. Empire Ranch includes a ranch compound, located directly south of Jewel Valley Road, with several single-family homes, bunkhouses, structures for livestock, and a private airstrip. Portions of the project site were historically used for agricultural purposes. Based on historical documentation, land south of the airstrip on the project site may have been used as

ranching/grazing land beginning in 1989 (see Appendix I). The former ranching/grazing land appeared to be ancillary uses supporting historic and current ranching operations at the western-adjointing Empire Ranch property. A portion of a detention basin was present on-site from at least 1989 until sometime before 2002. Further, according to interviews, one dry well is located on the subject property and was previously used for watering cows. The project site does not currently contain agricultural or ranching uses (see Appendix M). The project site is surrounded by unpaved roads, other rural residential development, an electrical substation, and undeveloped land.

Under the County's Zoning Ordinance (County of San Diego 2025), the entire project site is zoned as General Rural (S92). No portion of the project site is subject to any Special Area Regulations. The S92 Use Regulations provide controls for land that (1) consists of rugged terrain, (2) is a watershed, (3) is dependent on groundwater for the water supply, (4) is a desert, (5) is susceptible to fires and erosion, or (6) is subject to other environmental constraints. Agricultural uses, including horticulture, tree crops, and row and field crops, are permitted by the S92 use regulations.

The County's Local Agricultural Resources Assessment (LARA) model evaluates the importance of agricultural resources through the required factors of water, climate, and soil quality (County of San Diego 2015). Pursuant to County guidelines, if any of the required factors of water, climate, or soil receive a rating of "low," the site would not be considered a significant agricultural resource.

Using the LARA model, the factor of water was evaluated at the project site (see Appendix M). Water received a rating of low due to the type of underlying groundwater aquifer. The site is underlain by fractured crystalline rock, and groundwater yield in fractured crystalline rock is generally limited, compared with other aquifer types. The project site does contain a well but does not contain imported water infrastructure connections throughout the site. Therefore, the site would be reliant on a limited groundwater resource for the foreseeable future.

Further, the project site is not designated by the California Department of Conservation (DOC) Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program as Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide or Local Importance (DOC 2020). The project site is designated as Other Land, which is defined as "land not included in any other mapping category." Examples include low-density rural developments, brush, timber, wetland, and riparian areas not suitable for livestock grazing, confined livestock, poultry, or aquaculture facilities. The project site does not contain grazing or agricultural uses.

While the project site is compatible with agricultural use types due to its rural nature, the project has been determined to not meet the definition of an agricultural resource pursuant to the County guidelines for agricultural resources (County of San Diego 2015). Approximately 25 acres of the Empire Ranch property, west of the project site, is designated as Farmland of Local Importance (DOC 2020). Farmland of Local Importance is of importance to the local agricultural economy, as determined by the County's Board of Supervisors and a local advisory committee. Directly east and adjacent to the Farmland of Local Importance is approximately 6.3 acres of land designated as Grazing Land (DOC 2020). The area near the homestead is occasionally used for grazing by horses that are raised on-site. Empire Ranch would continue to operate as a private residence primarily surrounded by open space, along with the proposed project.

Consistent with the County guidelines for agricultural resources, because the required factor of water receives a rating of "low," the project site is not considered a significant agricultural resource (see Appendix M). Additionally, the project site is not designated Prime Farmland, Unique Farmland, or Farmland of Statewide or Local Importance; therefore, impacts would be **less than significant**.

The project would involve other changes to the existing environment, which due to their location or nature, could result in the conversion of off-site agricultural resources to a non-agricultural use or could adversely impact the viability of agriculture on land under a Williamson Act Contract (Contract). No other active

agricultural use occurs in the vicinity of the project. In addition, the project is not under a Contract or Agricultural Preserve, nor is the project site located within the vicinity of a Contract or an Agricultural Preserve. The closest Contract or Preserve is approximately 1.1 miles southwest of the project site. According to the County guidelines for agricultural resources, interface conflicts usually only occur within 300 feet. Therefore, the project would not result in the conversion of off-site agricultural resources to a non-agricultural use or adversely impact the viability of agriculture on land under a Contract. There would be **no impact**.

The project proposes to construct and operate a utility-scale solar facility. The project does not propose a school, church, daycare, or other use that involves a heavy concentration of people at certain times of the day within 1 mile of an agricultural operation or land under a Contract. Therefore, there would be **no impact**.

The existing zoning for the project site is General Rural (S92). The S92 Use Regulations are intended to provide appropriate controls for land that is rugged terrain, watershed, dependent on groundwater for a water supply, desert, susceptible to fires and erosion, or subject to other environmental constraints. Agricultural use types are permitted by right in the S92 zone; however, it is not considered an agricultural zoning. The project site is not within Contract lands or parcels. Therefore, the project would not conflict with zoning for agricultural use or a Contract, and **no impact** would occur.

3.2.2 Population and Housing

The project site encompasses approximately 588 acres in unincorporated San Diego County, south of the community of Boulevard and approximately 0.93 mile north of the U.S. border. The community of Boulevard is approximately 65 square miles and includes the communities of Manzanita, Tierra del Sol, and Live Oak Springs. As of 2022, the community of Boulevard had a population of 1,673, a total of 756 housing units, and a housing vacancy rate of 12.7% (San Diego Association of Governments 2022).

The entire project site is currently undeveloped. It lies within the boundaries of the privately owned Empire Ranch, an approximately 3,795-acre ranch that stretches from south of Old Highway 80 to the U.S. border with Mexico. Beyond the project site boundaries, Empire Ranch currently contains a ranch compound with residential buildings, structures for livestock, private roads, and an airstrip. The project does not include any residential or commercial uses that would directly increase population growth in the area, nor does it include the extension of infrastructure that would indirectly induce population growth. The project would construct and operate an unoccupied renewable solar energy generation and storage facility to improve electrical reliability for the San Diego region. The electricity generated by the project would be fed directly into the regional San Diego Gas and Electric electricity grid and would not serve or facilitate any growth of the local population directly.

Construction of the project would employ approximately 75 workers per day during the peak construction period for Phase I and 210 workers per day during the peak construction period for Phase II. Local hiring would be encouraged when feasible, so it is not anticipated that all workers would need to relocate to the area. Due to the short-term nature of construction, it is not anticipated that any non-local hires would permanently relocate to the area with their families. Further, occasional operations and maintenance workers are not anticipated to relocate near the project site as the project would operate largely autonomously and would not have any full-time personnel on-site. Thus, the proposed project would not affect population or housing in the project vicinity or in the greater San Diego County area. Therefore, the project would not induce substantial unplanned population growth or displace people or housing. Impacts would be **less than significant**.

3.2.3 Parks and Recreation

The project includes the construction and operation of an unoccupied renewable energy solar and battery storage facility. The project does not include any new parks or recreational facilities, which would increase visitors in the area, nor does it include the extension of infrastructure that would indirectly induce population growth. Construction of the proposed project could temporarily increase the local population by up to 125 workers. Local hires would be encouraged when feasible, so it is not anticipated that the entire construction workforce would require relocation. Further, occasional operations and maintenance workers are not expected to relocate near the project site as the project would operate largely autonomously and would not have any full-time personnel on-site. The project would not substantially increase the demand for parks and recreational facilities, nor would it introduce new or expanded recreational facilities.

A community plan trail, the Jewel Valley Road Pathway, is proposed along Jewel Valley Road, which intersects the project site (County of San Diego 2020). The project does not include construction of this trail. The proposed community plan trail may be temporarily affected during construction, assuming the trail is established by then; however, impacts would be temporary and minimal, if they occur at all. There are no other parks or recreational facilities in the project vicinity. Therefore, the project would not increase the use of existing neighborhood and regional parks or other recreational facilities such that substantial physical deterioration of the facility would occur or be accelerated. Impacts would be **less than significant**.