

4.11 AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES

4.11.1 Summary of Environmental Consequences

Agriculturally important farmland and agricultural productivity would not be significantly affected under any of the Phase 1 alternative restoration actions.

4.11.2 Significance Criteria

Significant impacts to agricultural resources would occur if one of the alternatives were to directly or indirectly result in conversion of agriculturally important farmland to nonagricultural uses. The significance of the agricultural land conversion is determined using the land evaluation and site assessment methodology (LESA) discussed below.

4.11.3 Assessment Methods

Agricultural land conversion is assessed by comparing the footprint of the areas of disturbance or conversion under each alternative to mapped areas of agricultural importance (Figure 3.11-1). Federal agencies are required to consider the significance of the potential agricultural land conversions by the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) (Pub. L. 97-98) of 1981. If no agriculturally important farmland is to be converted to non-agricultural uses, FPPA does not apply. If agriculturally important farmlands would be converted to non-agricultural uses, the significance of agricultural conversions is assessed using the LESA methodology. The LESA methodology enables the agricultural quality of land to be rated according to a series of agricultural land use criteria, such as acres of important farmland to be converted, and site assessment criteria, such as surrounding land uses, distance to urban land uses, and impacts to agricultural support services.

4.11.4 No Action Alternative

No agriculturally important farmland would be converted under the No Action Alternative, and no impacts to agricultural resources would occur. The Sea would continue to function as a drain for agricultural water under the No Action Alternative.

Effect of No Action Alternative with Continuation of Current Inflow Conditions

Continuation of current inflow would have no effect on agricultural resources. At current levels of inflow the elevation of the sea would remain fairly constant and would not inundate any agriculturally important land. Agricultural economics of the region would not be affected.

Effect of No Action Alternative with Reduced Inflows

Reduced inflow conditions would have no effect on agricultural resources. By the end of Phase 1, if the average inflow to the Sea is reduced to 1.06 maf/yr, the level of the Salton Sea is expected to drop by about 7 feet from its current elevation. The potential for additional salt drift from newly exposed lands to agricultural lands is expected to be negligible since salt on these lands would be washed back into the Sea. Any salt deposits remaining in depressions would be non-friable and not subject to substantial wind movement, similar to current conditions. No agriculturally important farmland on the

perimeter of the Sea would be affected by this reduction. Agricultural production in the region would not be affected.

4.11.5 Alternative 1

Construction and operation of the north and south evaporation ponds, and the pupfish pond under Alternative 1, and the associated land disturbance, would have no significant effect on agricultural resources with either current or reduced inflow conditions. Construction and use of the haul road with current inflow conditions would not affect any agriculturally important lands.

Under reduced inflow conditions, approximately 175 acres of agriculturally important farmland in the Imperial Valley could be temporarily taken out of production to accommodate the haul road to the displacement dike. No significant impacts to agriculturally important lands would occur since construction of the haul road would be temporary and would not result in conversion of agricultural land to nonagricultural uses.

Short-term impacts to agricultural productivity may occur as a result of the temporary loss of arable land and indirect effects, such as interference with agricultural practices or lost productivity on adjacent agricultural lands from dust generated by the haul road. While some effect on agriculture may occur, it is not expected that agricultural production in the region would be significantly affected. Standard practices to minimize dust, such as applying water to the roadway, and use of existing rights-of-way or avoidance of agriculturally important lands, when feasible, would further reduce any potential short-term impacts

4.11.6 Alternative 2

Construction of the EES north of Bombay Beach and the associated land disturbance, with either current or reduced inflow conditions, would have no significant effect on agricultural resources. Land that would be developed under this alternative is open desert that is not agriculturally productive. As described under Alternative 1, temporary impacts to agriculturally important farmland and agricultural economics may occur under reduced inflow conditions from construction and use of the haul road, however these impacts would be less than significant. No agriculturally important lands would be affected and agricultural production in the region would not be significantly affected.

4.11.7 Alternative 3

Construction of the EES at the former Salton Sea Test Base would not directly affect any agriculturally important lands. This alternative may, however, indirectly impact to Farmland of Local Importance south of the proposed facility. A citrus orchard occupies approximately 300 acres of land south of the base and between the Sea and Highway 86. The eastern portion of these lands, adjacent to the Sea, is considered Farmland of Local Importance. The remainder of the land occupied by this orchard has not been classified. A barrier of trees is between the base and the orchard, however, prevailing southerly winds could carry salt drift from the EES units to these farmlands. Indirect impacts to Farmland of Local Importance is likely to be less than significant since these lands are

slightly removed from the site, a barrier of trees exists between the site and these farmlands, and the EES system would not operate during periods of high winds when the risk of salt drift would be greatest.

In addition, as described under Alternative 1, temporary impacts to agriculturally important farmland and agricultural economics may occur under reduced inflow conditions from construction and use of the haul road, however these impacts would be less than significant. Agricultural production in the region would not be significantly affected.

4.11.8 Alternative 4

Constructing the evaporation ponds and the EES at the former Salton Sea Test Base and the associated land disturbance, with either current or reduced inflow conditions, would have no significant impacts on agricultural resources. As described above for Alternative 3, no agriculturally important lands would be directly affected and indirect effects would be less than significant.

As described under Alternative 1, temporary impacts to agriculturally important farmland and agricultural economics may occur from construction and use of the haul road, however these impacts would be less than significant. Agricultural production in the region would not be significantly affected.

4.11.9 Alternative 5

Collocation of the north evaporation pond and the EES may result in an indirect impact to Farmland of Local Importance south of the proposed facility, as described under Alternative 3. This impact is likely to be less than significant.

As described under Alternative 1, temporary impacts to agriculturally important farmland and agricultural economics may occur from construction and use of the haul road, however these impacts would be less than significant. Agricultural production in the region would not be significantly affected.

4.11.10 Cumulative Effects

Other actions, as discussed in Chapter 2 of this EIS/EIR, could affect agricultural lands and production in the region. While a few of these actions, such as development of wetlands in agricultural areas, may result in minor loss of agricultural land, many of these actions also seek to ensure the agricultural viability in the region. Proposed Phase 1 alternatives would not significantly affect agriculturally important lands or agricultural production in the region and would not contribute to cumulatively significant impacts.

4.11.11 Mitigation Measures

No impacts to agricultural resources would occur, and no mitigation measures would be required.

4.11.12 Potentially Significant Unavoidable Impacts

No potentially significant unavoidable impacts to agricultural resources would occur as a result of any of the alternatives.