



DATE: September 4, 2026

TO: Stefan Galvez, Director of Environmental Services *Stefan Galvez*

FROM: Scott Rothenberg, Environmental Analysis Manager

CC: Frank Meraz, Environmental Compliance Manager; Brett Rushing, NEPA Assignment Manager

SUBJECT: CEQA Statutory Exemption under California PRC §21080.70 (SB 131) for the High-Speed Rail South Merced Station

The California High-Speed Rail Authority has identified the need for the South Merced Station within Merced County to support passenger operations for the California High-Speed Rail system. This station will serve long-term operational needs of the system and provide passenger access and circulation adjacent to the approved high-speed rail (HSR) alignment.

For the purposes of this memorandum, 'Project' refers solely to the South Merced Station located within the identified project footprint (Exhibit 1). This memorandum documents the Authority's assessment that the Project does not require additional environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the CEQA Statutory Exemption under Senate Bill (SB) 131, which added Section 21080.70 to the Public Resources Code (PRC). The South Merced Station is an integral component of operations for the high-speed rail system and was adequately discussed in the station planning and station area analysis presented in the 2012 Merced to Fresno EIR/EIS (MF EIR/EIS) (Reference 1). Chapter 3.13 of the certified MF EIR/EIS describes station planning, land use conditions, and station area development that provide the basis for this exemption determination (Reference 1.2).

Description of the South Merced Station

The Project will include passenger platforms along the high-speed rail mainline, a headhouse structure for passenger circulation and amenities, multimodal access features, utility connections, and site improvements needed to support station operations. These facilities reflect the station planning and station area development considerations presented in Chapter 3.13 of the MF EIR/EIS. The station will also include other station-area and operational features that support the high-speed rail system consistent with prior and future environmental documentation prepared for the project. Other important features of the station include appropriate parking and access roads in and out of the station.

The Project will be located within Merced County west of State Route 99 and adjacent to the approved high-speed rail alignment evaluated in the MF EIR/EIS. The station area includes various parcels generally bounded by East Mission Avenue to the north, Henry Road 0.5 mile to the west, Doppler Road and Healy Road to the east, and Vassar Avenue to the south. The station area consists of multiple parcels, which include non-prime farmland of statewide importance, and an existing industrial facility within the southeastern portion of the proposed footprint (Exhibit 1).

CEQA Exemption under PRC §21080.70 (Senate Bill 131)

The California Legislature adopted Senate Bill (SB) 131 on June 30, 2025. This bill exempts from CEQA a project that consists of the development, construction, or operation of stations and maintenance facilities for electrically powered high-speed rail, if specified conditions are met. These conditions include:

1. The station or station design change is located within the resource study area of a previously certified environmental impact report prepared pursuant to this division for a high-speed rail or passenger rail project.
2. The project incorporates all applicable mitigation measures identified in the previously certified environmental impact report.
3. The project avoids natural and protected lands as defined in Public Resources Code Section 21067.5.
4. This exemption applies exclusively to passenger rail stations described in subdivision (b) and does not exempt any other facilities, structures, or uses not expressly identified. These criteria apply exclusively to passenger rail stations as described in the statute.

Refer to Attachment A for the full text of relevant portions of SB 131.

Evidence of Exemption Conditions

1. *The station or station design change is located within the resource study area of a previously certified environmental impact report prepared pursuant to this division for a high-speed rail or passenger rail project.*

The South Merced Station is a proposed site selection and design advancement of the passenger station evaluated in the MF EIR/EIS, located within the station planning framework and resource study area addressed in the certified document. The Authority's Board of Directors certified the Merced to Fresno Final EIR/EIS (MF EIR/EIS) under CEQA on May 3, 2012, and approved the Hybrid Alternative for the north and south alignment of the high-speed train, including a passenger station in Merced (Reference 1). The Board adopted CEQA findings of fact and a statement of overriding considerations and approved the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program (MMRP) evaluated in Chapter 3 of the MF EIR/EIS (Reference 1.1). The MF EIR/EIS evaluated station planning, station areas, land use conditions, multimodal access, and station development considerations in Chapter 3.13 (Station Planning, Land Use, and Development), which provides the environmental baseline for passenger station facilities within Merced County.

2. *The project incorporates all applicable mitigation measures identified in the previously certified environmental impact report.*

All mitigation measures applicable to station planning and station area development identified in the MF EIR/EIS and the associated Mitigation Monitoring and Enforcement Program (MMEP) / MMRP will be implemented as part of the Project. These measures address environmental topics evaluated in Chapter 3 of the MF EIR/EIS, including land use, agricultural lands, biological resources, cultural resources, air quality, noise and vibration, hazardous materials, hydrology and stormwater, transportation and access, and parks and recreation.

The Project will incorporate all mitigation measures applicable to station facilities and station areas identified for the Merced region in the MF EIR/EIS and will comply with the MMEP/MMRP requirements adopted by the Authority's Board of Directors in 2012.

3. The project avoids natural and protected lands as defined in Section 21067.5.

The South Merced Station site consists of agricultural land, disturbed ground, and existing industrial uses and does not occur on natural or protected lands as defined in Public Resources Code section 21067.5. This includes lands within state parks, wilderness areas, marine protected areas, national parks, national monuments, ecological reserves, wildlife management areas, hazardous waste sites listed under Government Code section 65962.5, regulatory floodways, conservation easements, wetlands, environmentally sensitive coastal areas, or lands protected under habitat conservation plans. The Project is within an Industrial Reserve area of Merced County. According to Merced County Zoning maps, the South Merced Station site is designated as M-2 (General Manufacturing) and is not mapped as prime farmland of statewide importance pursuant to PRC §21067.5(p) (Merced County, 2026). As shown in Exhibit 2, the Department of Conservation Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program designates the site as non-farmland and farmland of local importance. This confirms the Project avoids all categories listed under PRC §21067.5, including subsection (p) regarding prime and statewide important farmland.

Chapter 3 of the MF EIR/EIS identifies the regulatory setting and affected environment for land use, agricultural lands, parks and recreation, wetlands, floodplains, sensitive habitat areas, and hazardous sites within the Merced to Fresno Section and provides the environmental baseline used to confirm that station development avoids natural and protected lands.

4. This exemption applies exclusively to passenger rail stations described in subdivision (b) and does not exempt any other facilities, structures, or uses not expressly identified. These criteria apply exclusively to passenger rail stations as described in the statute.

The use of the SB 131 CEQA Statutory Exemption is for advancement of the design for the South Merced Station, which is an integral component of operations for the high-speed rail system and adequately discussed in Chapter 3.13 (Station Planning, Land Use, and Development) of the 2012 MF EIR/EIS.

Conclusion

The Authority Environmental Services Branch reviewed and compared the South Merced Station with the information and analysis of the station planning and station areas described in the 2012 Merced to Fresno Final EIR/EIS (MF EIR/EIS) and supporting environmental documentation. The evaluation confirms that because the South Merced Station is a passenger rail station adequately discussed in Chapter 3.13 of the certified EIR/EIS, incorporates applicable mitigation measures, is located adjacent to approved high-speed rail right-of-way, and is not located on natural or protected lands as defined in California PRC §21067.5, the South Merced Station project qualifies for the statutory CEQA exemption under SB 131. No additional CEQA documentation is required.

References

1. California High-Speed Rail Authority and Federal Railroad Administration. [Merced to Fresno Section Final Environmental Impact Report and Environmental Impact Statement \(EIR/EIS\)](#). Certified 2012.
 - 1.1. [Chapter 3.0 Affected Environment, Environmental Consequences, and Mitigation Measures](#).
 - 1.2. [Chapter 3.13 Station Planning, Land Use, and Development](#).

Exhibit 1: South Merced Station Project Site Location

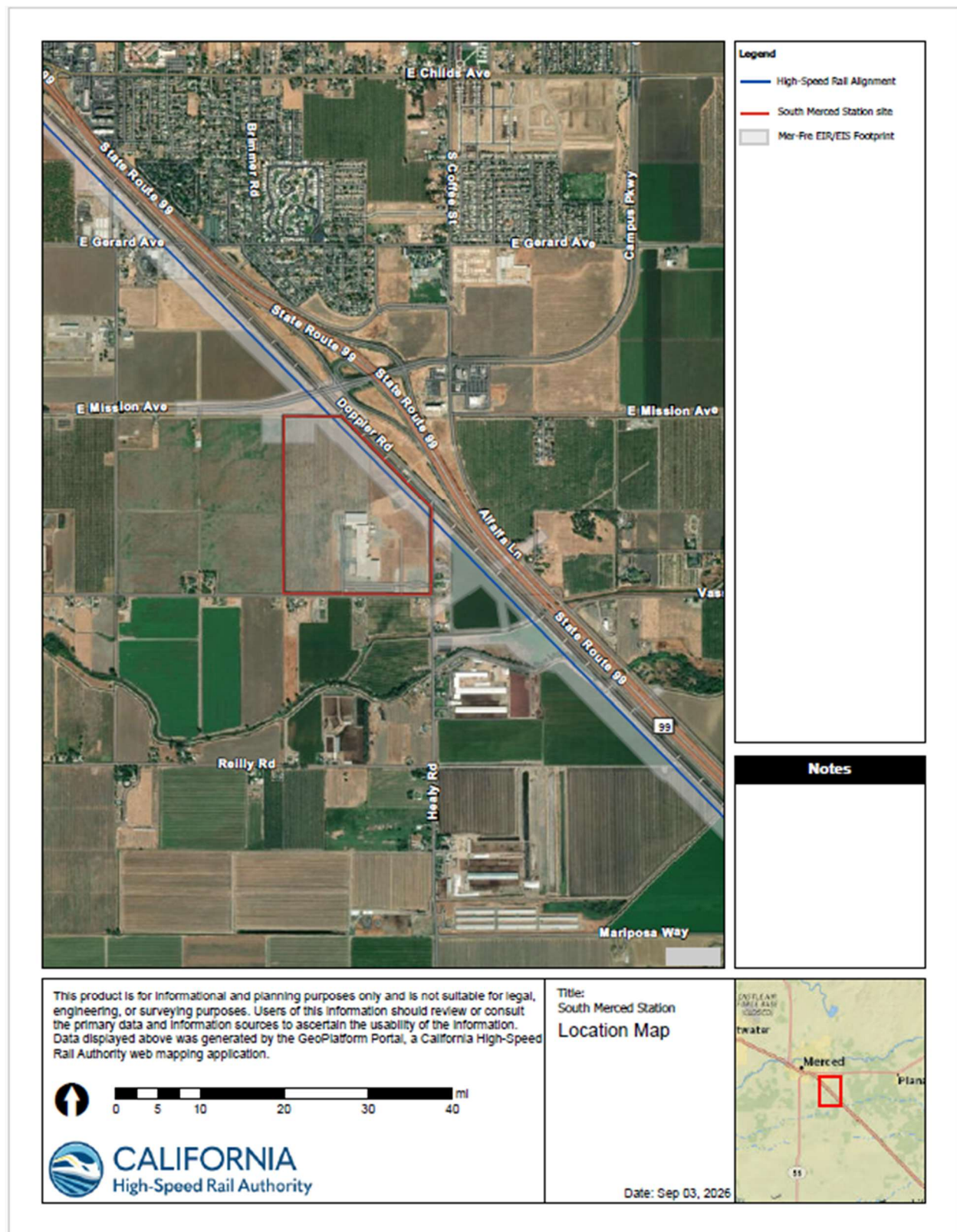
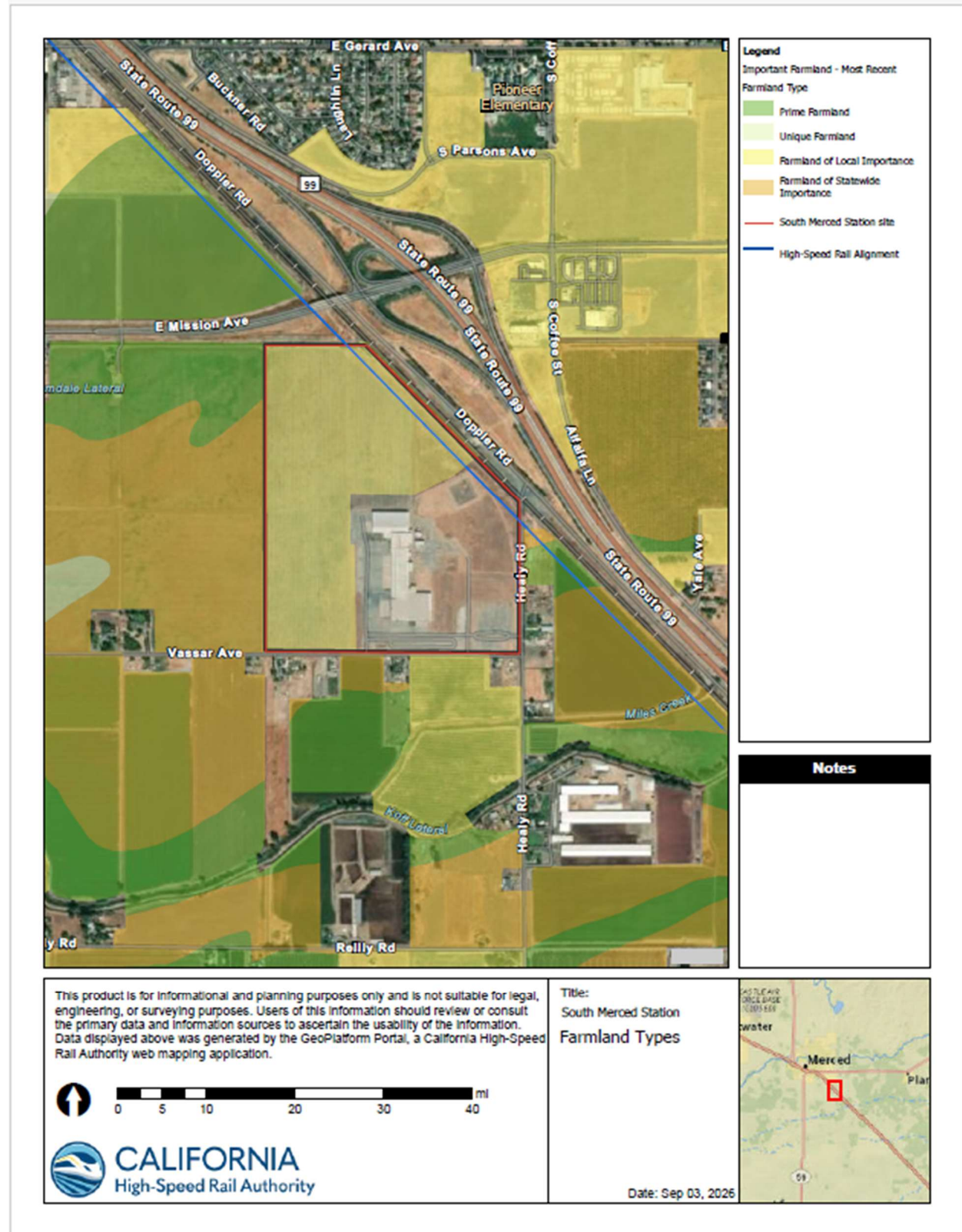


Exhibit 2: South Merced Station Project Site – Department of Conservation Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program



Attachment A: Full Text of Relevant Portions of SB 131

SEC. 16.

Section 21080.70 is added to the Public Resources Code, to read:

21080.70.

- a) This division does not apply to a project that consists of the development, construction, or operation of a heavy maintenance facility or other maintenance facility for electrically powered high-speed rail, if all of the following conditions are met:
 - (1) The project has been evaluated in a prior project-level environmental impact report prepared pursuant to this division and that prior report evaluated one or more similar high-speed rail maintenance facility sites.*
 - (2) The project incorporates all applicable mitigation measures identified in those prior project-level environmental impact reports.*
 - (3) The project site is located within one mile of rail right-of-way approved for high-speed rail service.**
- b) This division does not apply to a project that consists of the development, construction, or modification of a proposed passenger rail station, or design changes to a passenger rail station, for the purpose of serving electrically powered high-speed rail, if both of the following conditions are met:
 - (1) The station or station design change is located within the resource study area of a previously certified environmental impact report prepared pursuant to this division for a high-speed rail or passenger rail project.*
 - (2) The project incorporates all applicable mitigation measures identified in the previously certified environmental impact report.**
- c) For purposes of this section, "high-speed rail" means the California high-speed rail project and other high-speed rail projects in California that are planned to directly connect to the California high-speed rail project.*
- d) This section does not apply to any project on or within natural and protected lands as defined in Section 21067.5.*
- e) The exemptions provided in subdivisions (a) and (b) shall apply exclusively to projects described in those subdivisions and do not exempt any other facilities, structures, or uses not expressly identified. Any other project uses shall be subject to this division unless independently exempt under a separate provision of law.*

SEC. 5.

Section 21067.5 is added to the Public Resources Code, to read:

21067.5.

"Natural and protected lands" means sites located within any of the following locations:

- a) The state park system, as described in Article 1 (commencing with Section 5001) of Chapter 1 of Division 5.*
- b) A wilderness area, as defined in Section 5093.32.*
- c) A marine protected area, as defined in Section 2852 of the Fish and Game Code.*
- d) The national park system, as defined in Section 100102 of Title 54 of the United States Code.*
- e) A national recreation area.*
- f) A national monument.*
- g) The national wild and scenic rivers system, as defined in Section 1273 of Title 16 of the United States Code.*

- h) *Any ecological reserve or wildlife management area acquired and managed by the Department of Fish and Wildlife pursuant to Article 2 (commencing with Section 1525) or Article 4 (commencing with Section 1580) of Chapter 5 of Division 2 of the Fish and Game Code.*
- i) *A hazardous waste site that is listed pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code or a hazardous waste site designated by the Department of Toxic Substances Control pursuant to Section 25356 of the Health and Safety Code, unless either of the following apply:*
 - (1) The site is an underground storage tank site that received a uniform closure letter issued pursuant to subdivision (g) of Section 25296.10 of the Health and Safety Code based on closure criteria established by the State Water Resources Control Board for the use proposed by the project. This paragraph does not alter or change the conditions to remove a site from the list of hazardous waste sites listed pursuant to Section 65962.5 of the Government Code.*
 - (2) The State Department of Public Health, State Water Resources Control Board, Department of Toxic Substances Control, or a local agency making a determination pursuant to subdivision (c) of Section 25296.10 of the Health and Safety Code has otherwise determined that the site is suitable for the use proposed by the project.*
- j) *Within a regulatory floodway as determined by the Federal Emergency Management Agency in any official maps published by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, unless the development has received a no-rise certification in accordance with Section 60.3(d)(3) of Title 44 of the Code of Federal Regulations.*
- k) *Lands under conservation easement.*
- l) *On, or within a 300-foot radius of, a wetland, as defined in the United States Fish and Wildlife Service Manual, Part 660 FW 2 (June 21, 1993).*
- m) *An environmentally sensitive area within the coastal zone, as defined in Section 30107.5.*
- n) *Lands protected as preserve areas or reserve lands pursuant to an adopted natural community conservation plan pursuant to the Natural Community Conservation Planning Act (Chapter 10 (commencing with Section 2800) of Division 3 of the Fish and Game Code) or habitat conservation plan pursuant to the federal Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 U.S.C. Sec. 1531 et seq.).*
- o) *Within a very high fire hazard severity zone, as determined by the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection pursuant to Section 51178 of the Government Code, or within the state responsibility area, as defined in Section 4102. This subdivision does not apply to sites that have adopted fire hazard mitigation measures pursuant to existing building standards or state fire mitigation measures applicable to the development, including, but not limited to, standards established under all of the following provisions or their successor provisions:*
 - (1) Section 4291 of this code or Section 51182 of the Government Code, as applicable.*
 - (2) Section 4290.*
 - (3) Chapter 7A (commencing with Section 701A.1) of Part 2 of Title 24 of the California Code of Regulations.*
- p) *Either prime farmland or farmland of statewide importance, as defined pursuant to the United States Department of Agriculture land inventory and monitoring criteria, as modified for California, and designated on the maps prepared by the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program of the Department of Conservation, or land zoned or designated for agricultural protection or preservation by a local ballot measure that was approved by the voters of that jurisdiction.*

South Merced Station_Env Decision Memo

2026-09-04

Final Audit Report

2026-09-04

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