

3 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

3.1 LOCATION AND PHYSICAL SETTING

Mariposa County is located in central California bridging from the San Joaquin Valley to the west, to the Sierra Nevada foothills, to the Sierra Nevada Mountains on the east (see Figure 3-1). Mariposa County is bordered by Tuolumne County on the north and east, Madera County on the south, and Merced and Stanislaus Counties to the west. Access into and through the County is provided primarily via State Routes 41, 49, 120, 132, and 140.



Figure 3-1
Mariposa County Location Map

Elevation in the County ranges from approximately 300 feet along the western boundary to over 10,000 feet in the mountainous eastern part. The western half of the County consists of gently sloping foothills with generally thin soils and hard underlying metamorphic bedrock. The northeastern half of the County (generally above Highway 49) consists of steep to extremely steep foothills and mountains that generally ramp upwards to the northeast to the crest of the Sierra Nevada range.

The three major hydrologic basins in the County include the Merced River basin, the Chowchilla/Fresno basin, and a cluster of streams known as the Lower Mariposa group of

streams. These watersheds are the primary areas for surface water drainage. Due to the level of snow and water accumulation, these watersheds provide recreational resources for winter and summer activities, such as skiing, boating, fishing, and swimming.

Important natural resources include recreation and scenic areas, timber, minerals, and agriculture. Soils, primarily in the western portion of the County, support agricultural uses including cropland, orchards, and grazing. The timber (and hardwood) resources are primarily located on Stanislaus and Sierra National Forest lands. Mineral resources in the County include lode gold, placer gold, copper, lead, zinc, silver and tungsten, all of which have been mined in the County. Nonmetallic minerals have also been found, including barite, limestone, dolomite, mica, schist, slate, granite, silica, and sand and gravel. It was these resources which first attracted the Euroamerican settlers to the region in the 1800s. Eastern Mariposa County also includes a portion of Yosemite National Park, an international recreational and scenic resource.

A wide variety of vegetation and habitat types are found in the County, including conifer, mixed conifer, mixed conifer-hardwood, hardwood, shrub, grassland, riparian, and aquatic. These habitat types support many wildlife species including a number of special status species.

3.2 PROJECT BACKGROUND

California state law requires each county to adopt a general plan for the “physical development of the County and any land outside its boundaries which...bears relation to its planning” (Government Code Section 65300). The role of the general plan is to act as the County’s constitution for the physical use of the county’s resources, the foundation upon which all land use decisions are made. The general plan expresses the community’s development goals and embodies public policy relative to the distribution of future public and private land use. The State Office of Planning and Research (OPR) recommends that a comprehensive plan update be completed every five years. The law requires a plan to contain mandatory elements of issues important to the people of the State. General plans may also contain optional elements to address issues important to the people of the local government.

The County’s General Plan was prepared in 1981 and has been periodically amended from 1981 through 2005. The major difference between the 1981 General Plan and the Draft General Plan November 2006 is the policy foundation. The 1981 General Plan was prepared at a time when Mariposa County lacked a strong zoning code, and the Plan served as both general plan and zoning ordinance. Mariposa enacted its zoning code in 1988, eliminating the regulatory role of the General Plan. The Draft General Plan November 2006 provides the overall policy guidance for land development and capital infrastructure for Mariposa County.

The update was prepared utilizing a process that was driven by consideration of over 500 issues that were raised during Planning Fairs in 2001 and subsequent meetings. The Mariposa County Board of Supervisors considered public opinions and suggestions and incorporated 176 distinct issues into the General Plan.

These were added to the components required by California law and found important to move forward from the 1981 General Plan.

3.3 PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The General Plan will diversify the County’s economy by providing safe, decent housing while maintaining the rural character. This General Plan update was spurred by recognition and a

desire for the County to improve its systems for serving its constituency during the development process. The objective of the General Plan is to meet community needs for all constituencies. Therefore, General Plan goals and policies shall:

- result in programs which coordinate and integrate decision-making, thereby providing a fair, efficient, and predictable permitting process;
- provide the parameters to meet the decision-making needs of project-specific challenges and opportunities; and
- define the growth potential for Mariposa County, its direction and its character.

General Plan implementation measures shall:

- create opportunities for citizen participation in the County decision process;
- ensure project review is based on merits and completed in a timely manner;
- provide project applicants with options and choices;
- identify lands for commerce and industry to accommodate the business sector of the County;
- provide adequate guidance so a property owner or project applicant can find sites, when available, for a proposed project conforming to County requirements; and
- consider the highest and best use as viewed in relation to the values of the community.

3.4 PROJECT CHARACTERISTICS

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of Volume I of the Mariposa County Draft General Plan November 2006 describe the characteristics of the project. Volume II provides information on the area plans for the County and contains the interim land use diagrams for those communities for which a plan has not yet been prepared and adopted. Volume III of the update presents a description of the affected environment, which provides supporting technical data and is the basis for evaluating impacts.

3.5 INTENDED USES OF THE EIR

As indicated in the introduction, this Program EIR is an informational document for both agency decision-makers and the public. The County of Mariposa is the lead agency for the project under consideration in this EIR, and as such, is responsible for certification of this EIR and approval and adoption of the proposed General Plan. The County would generally be the lead agency for subsequent development projects on land under its jurisdiction.

Discretionary approvals of individual projects, such as subdivision maps, rezonings, or use permits may rely on the EIR only to the extent that the EIR provides sufficient site-specific information. Each individual project may be subject to preparation of an initial study as defined by CEQA to verify that no different or additional significant impacts identified in this EIR would result from the individual project approval.