3.20 FARMLANDS

Under the Federal Farmland Protection Policy Act of 1981, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service (USDA-NRCS) defines farmlands, as follows:

What's in Section 3.20?

- **Prime Farmland.** Land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops. It can economically produce sustained high yields of these crops when treated and managed according to acceptable farming practices.
- **Unique Farmland.** Land other than prime farmland that is used to produce specific high-value food and fiber crops. It can economically produce sustained high yields of these specialized crops when treated and managed according to acceptable farming practices.
- **Farmland of Statewide Importance.** Land that has been identified by criteria determined by the Colorado State Experiment Station, the Colorado State Department of Agriculture, and the Colorado State Soil Conservation Board.
- **Farmland of Local Importance.** Land that has not been identified as having national or statewide importance yet may have local significance based on the goals of the community and of the various agricultural enterprises that maintain a viable agricultural community.

Lands that are currently located within 2000 census "urbanized areas" are not included in the calculation of existing prime and unique farmlands or farmland of statewide importance. Urbanized areas are generally developed with impermeable (paved) surfaces that are not available for agricultural production. Lands that are committed to urban development are also not considered farmland.

3.20.1 Affected Environment

To determine whether any prime or unique farmland soils or farmland soils of statewide or local importance are present in the North I-25 regional study area, data were downloaded from the NRCS, Soil Data Mart in 2006. The Brighton, Longmont, Fort Collins, and Greeley offices of the NRCS also were contacted. The NRCS identified six categories of soil types that are protected in the regional study area. Four of these categories were grouped together because all four represent prime farmland only if certain conditions are met. These categories are listed by county in **Table 3.20-1** and their locations are shown in **Figure 3.20-1**.

Table 3.20-1 Farmlands in the Regional Study Area

Study Area Counties	Farmland of Local Importance (acres)	Farmland of Statewide Importance (acres)	Prime Farmland If Certain Conditions Are Present* (acres)
Adams County	< 1	7,120	19,646
Boulder County	< 1	4,282	33,776
Broomfield County	0	438	6,033
Denver County	0	1	2
Jefferson County	0	0	12
Larimer County	3,542	6,770	76,788
Weld County	29,404	48,594	277,838
Regional Study Area Total:	**32,946**	**67,205**	**414,095**

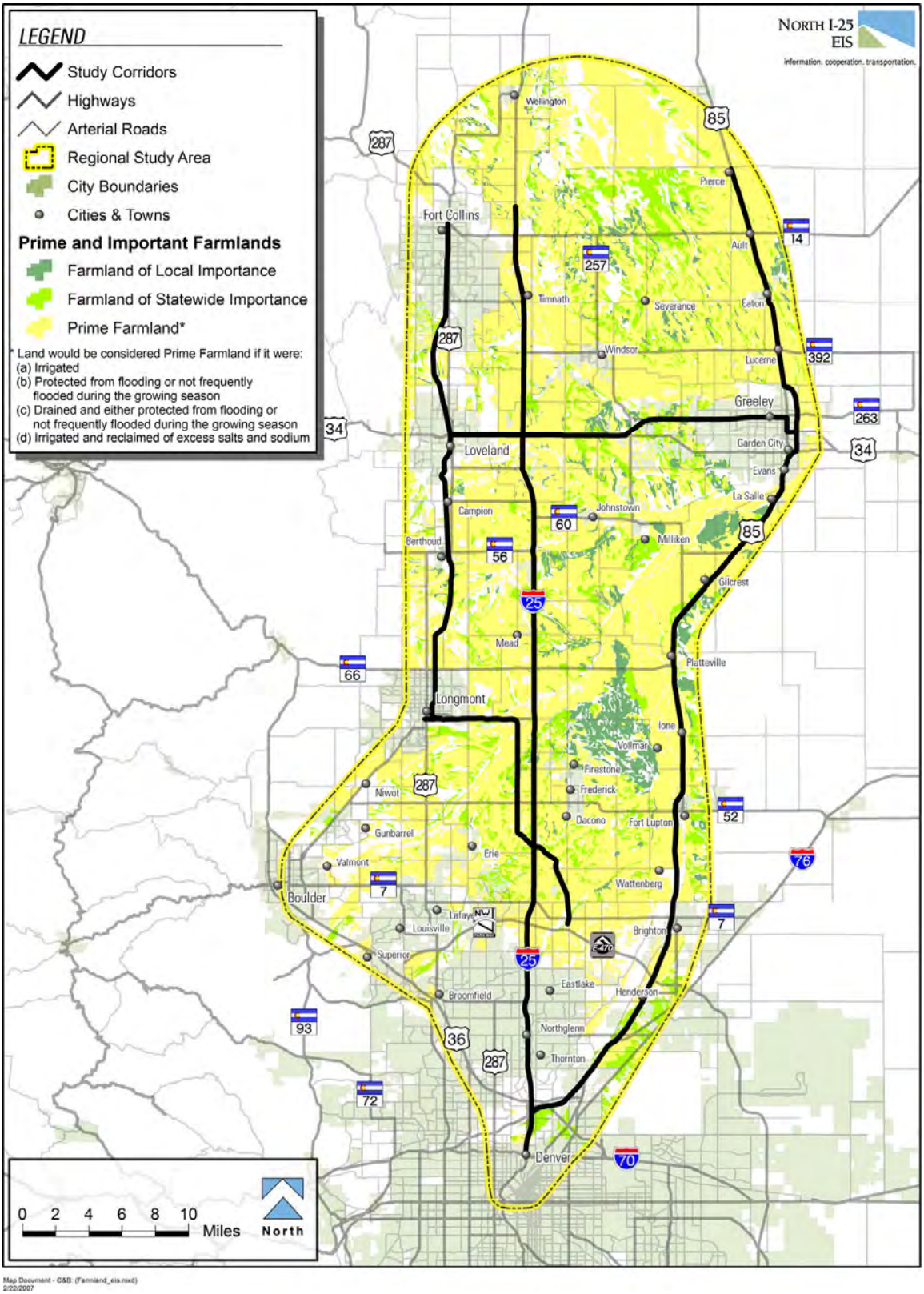
Source: NRCS, 2005.
* Land would be considered prime farmland if it were (a) irrigated; (b) protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season; (c) drained and either protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season; (d) irrigated and reclaimed of excess salts and sodium.

According to the most recent Census of Agriculture (2002), there are 31,369 farms in Colorado. Twenty-one percent of these farms are located in the seven counties that make up the regional study area. This represents over three million acres of land devoted to agricultural activities. Primary crops produced in the regional study area include wheat, corn, hay, and sugar beets. Land in the regional study area is also used to raise livestock and poultry.

Farmland decreased in every county in the regional study area between 1997 and 2002. The size of farms also has been decreasing, which may indicate that larger farms are going out of business and being resold as ranchettes. A ranchette is the acreage around a home that produces $1,000 or more of agricultural products annually, qualifying the land as a farm.

Of the counties in the regional study area, Larimer and Weld counties contain the largest number of farms. However, in 2002, 61 percent of all farms in Larimer County were less than 50 acres. Farms of 100 acres or more represented a little over a quarter of all farms in the county. Many of these farms are located in the rapidly growing North I-25 corridor, where much of the existing land is being re-zoned and converted for residential and commercial development.

Figure 3.20-1 Farmlands in the Regional Study Area



3.20.2 Environmental Consequences

Direct impacts to farmland occur when cultivated lands are converted to impervious surface or acquired for transportation right-of-way. Acres of important farmland lost as a result of the implementation of either of the build packages were calculated for each component using GIS and the limits of construction as defined through project design.

Indirect impacts to farmland occur when a farm is severed or access is limited in such a way that it prohibits continued agricultural use. Indirect effects also include farmland that would likely be converted as a result of accessibility to new or improved transportation facilities. For this analysis, indirect impacts were evaluated qualitatively and based upon the findings contained in **Section 3.1** *Land Use* as they pertain to the potential for indirect, induced growth effects.

3.20.2.1 No-Action Alternative

The No-Action Alternative would not directly impact Prime Farmland, Farmland of Statewide Importance, or Farmland of Local Importance. As discussed in **Section 3.1.2.2**, growth would continue to occur largely on undeveloped agricultural land at the fringe of the study area's urbanized areas in accordance with municipal and county comprehensive plans. As major roadways such as I-25 become more congested, development would likely be pushed towards outlying areas to avoid this congestion. This would hasten the conversion of agricultural land as market forces push towards the path of least resistance. This may also be the case for many of the east-west and alternate corridors (e.g., US 34, SH 7, SH 52, SH 402) in the regional study area.

The more dispersed development pattern that would occur in response to the No-Action Alternative would result in greater land consumption. The continuation of leap-frog type growth practices in southern portions of the regional study area east of I-25 would further fragment remaining agricultural lands, reducing the long-term viability of the remaining lands. The extent of this impact would depend upon existing policies and regulations pertaining to the protection of environmental resources, which vary from community to community and from county to county.

3.20.2.2 Package A

As shown in **Table 3.20-2**, Package A would result in the direct conversion of 1.8 acres of Farmland of Local Importance, 44.4 acres of Farmland of Statewide Importance, and 936.1 acres of farmland that is considered prime only if certain conditions are present (e.g., if the land is irrigated, protected from flooding, drained, and reclaimed of excess salts). Because Package A improvements occur primarily along existing transportation corridors, no farms would be severed or lose access. Impacts are a result of the acquisition of right-of-way immediately adjacent to the existing I-25 and BNSF corridors and the development of parking lots, transit stations, queue jumps, and water quality detention ponds. As shown in **Table 3.20-2,** most of the farmland impact is associated with Component A-H2, which consists of widening to accommodate six general purpose lanes in each direction between SH 14 and SH 60, plus auxiliary lanes between Harmony Road and SH 60.

Table 3.20-2 Package A - Direct Impacts to Farmlands by Component

Component	Impacts (Acres)			
	Farmland of Local Importance	Farmland of Statewide Importance	Prime Farmland if Certain Conditions are Present*	Total
A-H1	0.3	0.6	73.8	**74.7**
A-H2	1.0	8.6	384.7	**394.3**
A-H3	0.0	14.2	193.1	**207.3**
A-H4	0.0	0.0	2.4	**2.4**
A-T1	0.5	4.8	146.8	**152.1**
A-T2	0.0	16.2	133.3	**149.5**
A-T3	0.0	0.0	2.0	**2.0**
A-T4	0.0	0.0	0.0	**0.0**
Total Package A	**1.8**	**44.4**	**936.1**	**982.3**

* *Land would be considered Prime farmland if it were (a) irrigated; (b) protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season; (c) drained and either protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season; (d) irrigated and reclaimed of excess salts and sodium.*

Ongoing conversion of agricultural land to residential and urbanized land uses would continue throughout the regional study area, particularly along I-25. As discussed in **Section 3.1.2.2,** the provision of commuter rail would likely facilitate a shift in growth towards urban centers within the regional study area (e.g., Fort Collins, Loveland, and Longmont). As a result, the rate at which environmental resources (including farmlands) would be affected in undeveloped and suburban areas within the regional study area would likely be slowed. This would be the case along the I-25 corridor in particular where substantial agricultural lands exist.

Indirect Impacts

Outside of established urban centers, farmland would likely be converted to residential and commercial development around transit stations and along feeder bus routes. In some cases, this development is already planned. For example, the City of Longmont has plans for transit-oriented development along the proposed alignment at SH 66. However, without commuter rail as a catalyst, this area would likely develop at typical suburban densities and would consume more land.

3.20.2.3 PACKAGE B

As shown in **Table 3.20-3,** Package B would result in the direct conversion of 1.7 acres of Farmland of Local Importance, 35.7 acres of Farmland of Statewide Importance, and 889.4 acres of farmland that is considered prime only if certain conditions are present (e.g., if the land is irrigated, protected from flooding, drained, and reclaimed of excess salts). Because Package B improvements occur primarily along existing transportation corridors, no farms would be severed or lose access. Impacts are a result of the acquisition of right-of-way immediately adjacent to the existing I-25 corridor and the development of parking lots, queue jumps, transit stations, and water quality detention ponds. As shown in **Table 3.20-3,** most of the farmland impact is associated with Components B-H2 and B-H3, which consist of widening to accommodate additional buffer or barrier separated tolled express lanes in each direction.

Table 3.20-3 Package B - Direct Impacts to Farmlands by Component

Component	Impacts (Acres)			
	Farmland of Local Importance	Farmland of Statewide Importance	Prime Farmland if Certain Conditions are Present*	Total
B-H1	0.3	0.6	73.8	**74.7**
B-H2	1.3	10.3	444.5	**456.1**
B-H3	0.0	24.8	331.5	**356.3**
B-H4	0.0	0.0	37.5	**37.5**
B-T1	0.1	0.0	2.1	**2.2**
B-T2	0.0	0.0	0.0	**0.0**
Total Package B	**1.7**	**35.7**	**889.4**	**926.8**

* Land would be considered Prime farmland if it were (a) irrigated; (b) protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season; (c) drained and either protected from flooding or not frequently flooded during the growing season; (d) irrigated and reclaimed of excess salts and sodium.

Ongoing conversion of agricultural land to residential and urbanized land uses would continue throughout the regional study area, particularly along I-25. As discussed in **Section 3.1.2.2**, the introduction of bus rapid transit along the I-25 corridor would represent a more modest improvement in transit than commuter rail and as a result would provide less incentive for transit oriented development. As a result, growth would continue to be market-driven and would continue to expand towards the east, spreading—rather than shifting—in its concentration.

Indirect Impacts

The more dispersed development pattern that could occur in response to Package B would result in greater land consumption and a broader potential impact to the regional study area's environmental resources. The continuation of non-contiguous growth practices in southern portions of the study area east of I-25 would further fragment remaining agricultural lands, reducing the long-term viability of the remaining lands. The extent of this impact would be dependent upon existing policies and regulations pertaining to the protection of environmental resources, which vary from community to community and from county to county.

3.20.3 Mitigation Measures

Coordination with the NRCS was conducted throughout the project and is contained in Appendix B. Form NRCS-CPA-106, *Farmland Conversion Impact Rating Form for Corridor Type Projects*, was submitted to the Brighton, Longmont, Fort Collins, and Greeley service centers in September 2007. This form calculates the relative impacts of each build package on farmlands within the regional study area under two methods. The first identifies the total amount of both Prime Farmland and Farmland of Statewide and Local Importance present within the regional study area and weighs them against the converted amount of farmland by each build package within the regional study area. The second method addresses the type of farmland impacts that could occur. The result is a score of up to 260 points that represents the value of the farmland being impacted. If the score is less than 160, no further action is required. The scores assigned to each package by the NRCS service centers are provided in **Table 3.20-4.**

Table 3.20-4 NRCS Site Assessment Scores

Service Center	NRCS Site Assessment Score	
	Package A	Package B
Brighton	132.7	127.7
Longmont	138.7	169.7
Fort Collins	175.0	186.0
Greeley	164.0	167.0

The impacts to farmland were calculated by component; however, total acreage impacted by Package A is 982.3 acres and by Package B is 926.8 acres. Coordination with the NRCS during the Draft EIS regarding impacts by county indicate that although Package A directly impacts more land, the relative value of the farmland impacted by Package B is higher. Therefore, it can be concluded if Package B were to be constructed in its entirety, there would be greater impacts to farmlands. When a preferred alternative has been identified, additional coordination will be conducted with NRCS to establish whether avoidance and/or mitigation measures are required based on consideration of the entire preferred alternative.

For scores above 160, there is the potential for an adverse impact. Because the majority of soils classified as prime farmland are adjacent to existing transportation corridors, an adverse impact is not likely. Coordination with the NRCS is on-going to determine whether avoidance and/or mitigation measures are required.

If any important agricultural features are affected as design is further defined, mitigation will be considered as appropriate, such as replacement of irrigation ditches and pipes. Loss or damage to crops resulting from construction activities will be compensated.

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