
PLACER COUNTY AIR POLLUTION CONTROL DISTRICT POLICY 8C

REVIEW OF LAND USE PROJECTS UNDER CEQA

Placer County Air Pollution Control District (District) hereby adopts this written policy that includes the thresholds of significance for criteria pollutants and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and the principles that serve as guidelines for District staff in the review of air quality impacts associated with land development projects that are under the purview of lead agencies who are considering projects subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

Statement of Purpose

The District is responsible for managing air quality within Placer County in a manner that protects and promotes public health through education, regulation, voluntary emission reduction programs, and by funding activities that reduce of air pollutants. As a part of its efforts, the District assists lead agencies in their review of the air quality impacts from land use development, taking into consideration the economic and social impacts associated with such proposed land use projects. The District offers advice, thresholds of significance, and mitigation strategies to help lead agencies reduce both criteria pollutants and GHG emissions.

Authority under CEQA

The District is established by the California Health and Safety Code as a public agency having primary responsibility for overseeing and regulating air pollution within Placer County¹. In general, the District reviews and comments on environmental documents which are prepared by lead agencies (cities, county, and other public agencies) for discretionary land use development projects within Placer County². CEQA recognizes the importance of input from public agencies like the District that have “jurisdiction by law” over natural resource areas³. The District takes an active role as a commenting agency in the inter-governmental review process under CEQA when assistance is requested by lead agencies. In addition to being a commenting agency, the District may also act as a responsible agency under CEQA when a project will emit air pollutants and require air district permits, such as gas stations or manufacturing facilities. On very rare occasions, the District may serve as a lead agency under CEQA.

District CEQA Review Program

The District provides local agencies information about how to comply with CEQA through its CEQA Review Program (Program). Staff review and sometimes comment on environmental documents, providing lead agencies with valuable information and technical support related to potential air quality impacts from land use projects. As a part of the Program, the District developed a CEQA Handbook in 2012, which was designed as an advisory tool, with recommended mitigation measures, emission estimation models, and step-by-step procedures for conducting a thorough air quality analysis for land use projects.

¹ California Health and Safety Code §40000

² CEQA Guidelines §15044

³ CEQA Guidelines §15201

In addition to the CEQA Handbook, the Program includes thresholds of significance and several Working Principles as articulated in this Policy Statement. The thresholds of significance can assist lead agencies in determining the level of significance for air quality impacts from land use projects. The Working Principles are used by District staff when reviewing and commenting on the environmental documents prepared by lead agencies. These two components of this Policy Statement, as well as the CEQA Handbook, ensure consistency and transparency in staff's reviews and recommendations, which assist lead agencies in preparing legally adequate environmental documents supported by the District's professional analyses, to address potential air quality impacts from land use projects.

District Thresholds

The District shall apply the following thresholds of significance for criteria pollutants and greenhouse gas (GHG):

Criteria Pollutant Thresholds								
Construction Phase			Operational Phase Project-Level			Operational Phase Cumulative-Level		
ROG	NO _x	PM ₁₀	ROG	NO _x	PM ₁₀	ROG	NO _x	PM ₁₀
(lbs/day)	(lbs/day)	(lbs/day)	(lbs/day)	(lbs/day)	(lbs/day)	(lbs/day)	(lbs/day)	(lbs/day)
82	82	82	55	55	82	55	55	82

Greenhouse Gas Thresholds			
Bright-line Threshold 10,000 MT CO ₂ e/yr			
Efficiency Matrix			
Residential		Non-residential	
Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
(MT CO ₂ e/capita)		(MT CO ₂ e/1,000sf)	
4.5	5.5	26.5	27.3
De Minimis Level 1,100 MT CO ₂ e/yr			

District Review Principles

When reviewing land use projects, the District:

- in most cases, acts as a “Commenting Agency” under CEQA to assist lead agencies with the review of air quality analyses prepared for land use projects;
- works with lead agencies as early as possible in the CEQA review process in order to assist lead agencies with any sensitive, controversial, or other issues which would be associated with the project’s related air quality impacts;

- advises lead agencies to use the CEQA significant thresholds approved by the District’s Governing Board for determining the level of significance for air quality impacts from land use projects;
- provides peer review based on its expertise and knowledge regarding the available computing models, the current air pollution regulations or control programs, and the feasible mitigation strategies which would address air quality issues from land use projects;
- prepares written responses to lead agencies when staff has comments regarding issues found within the analyses;
- provides lists of feasible on-site and off-site mitigation measures for lead agencies to consider, to mitigate the related air quality impacts to the maximum extent feasible;
- recommends on-site mitigation measures as the preferred mechanism to reduce air quality impacts; and
- encourages lead agencies to consider an off-site mitigation measure when feasible on-site mitigation measures considered by the project are insufficient to mitigate the project’s related air quality impacts to a less-than-significant level.

When an off-site mitigation measure is considered by lead agencies to offset the criteria pollutant emissions, the District shall:

- recommend to the lead agencies that the mitigation measure explicitly identify the anticipated emission reductions and the method to implement;
- recommend that the anticipated emission reductions from the mitigation measure implementation be calculated by one of the following scenarios:
 - 1) if the measure is applied as a feasible measure to offset additional emissions, the anticipated emission reduction shall be calculated based on the amount of emissions exceeding the thresholds for a single season (summer for ozone precursors or winter for PM₁₀)⁴, or
 - 2) if the measure is applied to support a “less-than-significant” conclusion, the anticipated emission reduction shall be calculated based on the total amount of emissions exceeding the thresholds for each season, until the year in which the project’s operational emissions will be equal to the thresholds, or for a maximum of 20 seasons⁵.

⁴ Offsetting a single season’s emissions was endorsed by the District’s Land Use Air Quality Mitigation Funds Policy as economically feasible and has been applied by many major land use development projects in Placer County since 2001.

⁵ When a project is built out, the operational emissions are anticipated to occur continuously every day as a long-term impact throughout the project’s lifetime. Usually it can be estimated to be 40 years for new residential units or 25 years for conventional commercial buildings.

- recommend that the off-site mitigation measure for criteria pollutants be implemented by one of the following methods:
 - 1) the applicant can propose its own off-site mitigation project, which is verified by the District that the proposed project will result in an equivalent emission reduction identified by the mitigation measure, or
 - 2) the applicant can pay a mitigation fee, which is calculated based on the anticipated emission reduction and cost-effectiveness adopted by the District Board of Directors.
- manage any received off-site mitigation funds under the Board’s approved “Land Use Air Quality Mitigation Funds Policy”⁶, to fund eligible emission reduction projects, with the District Board’s approval.

When an off-site mitigation measure is considered by lead agencies to offset the GHG emissions, the District shall:

- assist lead agencies with the development of a general program for off-site mitigation review, or analysis on a case by case basis, of the mitigation measure documentation provided by a project related to the offset emissions calculations used to determine off-site mitigation measure validity;
- recommend to lead agencies that the mitigation measure should explicitly identify the anticipated emission reductions and the method to implement, using the following principles:
 - 1) any GHG reduction emissions proposed should be analyzed by lead agencies by going through an independent review process, to ensure reductions meet the lead agencies’ criteria, and
 - 2) any criteria established by lead agencies should be real, permanent, quantifiable, verifiable, enforceable, and in addition to any GHG emission reduction already required by law or regulation as defined by the State of California⁷. The District does not suggest, however, that a lead agency is limited to using the definitions of these terms under the State’s Cap and Trade Program.
- recommend that the anticipated emission reductions from the off-site mitigation measure implementation be calculated by one of the following methods;
 - 1) if the measure is applied as a feasible measure, the anticipated emission reduction shall be calculated based on the amount of emissions exceeding the thresholds for one year, or
 - 2) if the measure is applied to support a “less-than-significant” conclusion, the anticipated emission reduction shall be calculated based on the total amount of emissions exceeding the threshold for each year, until the year in which the project’s emissions will be equal

⁶ Policy of Land Use Air Quality Mitigation Funds was adopted by the PCAPCD Board in 2001 and amended in 2008. <http://www.placer.ca.gov/departments/air/landuseceqa>

⁷ California Health and Safety Code §38562(d)(1) and (2)

to the threshold, or for a maximum of 20 years.

- recommend that lead agencies encourage the applicant to consider conducting off-site projects within the District, and or purchasing local and California-only carbon credits as the preferred mechanism to implement the off-site mitigation measure;
- recommend that lead agencies allow developers to buy credits from experienced vendors or known carbon credit registries and ensure the purchased credits meet the expectations set by the lead agency. It is important the applicants provide calculations that demonstrate GHG emissions equivalent to the anticipated emission reductions needed, which can be calculated using the methodologies found in California Air Resources Board (CARB) Compliance Offset Program⁸, California Air Pollution Control Officers Association (CAPCOA) GHG Reduction Exchange Program⁹, American Carbon Registry (ACR)¹⁰, Climate Action Reserve (CAR)¹¹, Verra¹², or the Placer APCD developed or approved offset protocols; and
- recommend that lead agencies allow developers to do offset projects or use credit purchases for GHG mitigation to set the same expectations and apply the same thorough review of those measures as would be required for an on-site mitigation measure. .

The Directive to maintain the District’s CEQA Handbook

The District commits to maintaining its CEQA Handbook, which shall:

- disclose the criteria and references used by District staff to evaluate and comment on air quality impacts from land use projects;
- include the identification of potential impacts, the feasible computer models used for evaluating air quality impacts, the recommended CEQA thresholds for criteria pollutants and GHG, the lists of considerable mitigation measures, and other tools and guidance developed by other public agencies which might be used by lead agencies within the CEQA process;
- provide updates on the latest modeling developments, results of recent legislation and court cases, updated guidance from state agencies, feasible mitigation measure developments, and local agency planning priorities; and
- enhance communication and coordination with lead agencies to identify areas for further improvement on the CEQA review process.

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⁸ CARB Offset Protocols for the Cap-and-Trade Compliance Offset Program <https://ww2.arb.ca.gov/our-work/programs/compliance-offset-program/compliance-offset-protocols>

⁹ CAPCOA Greenhouse Gas Reduction Exchange (GHG Rx) <http://www.ghgrx.org/>

¹⁰ America Carbon Registry <https://americancarbonregistry.org/>

¹¹ Climate Action Reserve <http://www.climateactionreserve.org/>

¹² Verra (formerly Carbon Verified Standard) <https://verra.org/>