

4.2 AESTHETICS

4.2.1 EXISTING CONDITIONS

VISUAL CHARACTER OF THE REGION

The visual character of Sacramento County is distinguished by a variety of conditions that make up its physical environment. The county primarily consists of agricultural lands with rivers, creeks, lakes and urbanized areas. Urbanization has occurred primarily in the northern and central portions of Sacramento County near the cities of Sacramento, Elk Grove, Citrus Heights, and Rancho Cordova. Agricultural and pasture lands occupy much of the surrounding area and dominate the visual landscape of the county.

The urbanized portion of the county exhibits the typical views of a combined urban and suburban area, distinguished by groups of commercial, industrial and office areas, rows of homes on broad streets, and numerous roadways connecting these areas. The rural expanse of the county surrounding this urbanized area exhibits little visual diversity with a distinctly agricultural character typical of the region.

Sacramento County contains few distinct topographic features. The Sierra Nevada foothills form the eastern boundary of the County; the Sacramento River forms the county's western boundary. The American and Cosumnes rivers flow through the central portion of the County, and a portion of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta region occupies the southernmost end of the county.

Much of the riverside berms along the lower Sacramento River are devoid of riparian vegetation, and large portions of the original berms have been eroded so that the riverbanks are now adjacent to the levees. Some locations in this reach, however, support mature riparian vegetation, which creates a striking view when combined with the large and wide river (USACE 1992).

VISUAL CHARACTER OF ZONE 40

In general, the visual character of Zone 40 is similar that of Sacramento County. Zone 40 consists of agricultural and urbanized land. Urbanization has occurred primarily around the City of Elk Grove, Vineyard Springs area, and the City of Rancho Cordova. Agricultural lands and urban development border these areas. The Deer Creek (a tributary to the Cosumnes River) and the Cosumnes River lie adjacent to the southern boundary of Zone 40, and Morrison Creek traverses the central area.

One of the surface water treatment options evaluated in the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP considers construction of a water treatment plant in the Bufferlands of the Sacramento Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant (SRWWTP). The Bufferlands are located in the western portion of Zone 40 and consist of a 1,000- to 3,000-foot-wide strip of undeveloped grassland and leased agricultural land around the south, east, and extreme north SRWWTP boundaries; and

natural preserve land around the Laguna and Morrison Creek drainages. The SRWWTP Bufferlands are relatively undisturbed despite the increasing urban development in the region. However, other than the undisturbed character, the area contains no unusual significant visual features.

One of the surface water treatment options considers construction of a water treatment plant in the central area of Zone 40 near Bradshaw Road and Florin Road. In general, this area consists of agricultural farmlands and limited rural residential and commercial development.

Two of the surface water supply options proposed in the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP would construct a surface water diversion structure in the Pocket area near the town of Freeport along Highway 160. Although not located within the boundaries of Zone 40, Highway 160 (Freeport Boulevard) is designated as a California state scenic highway from the Contra Costa County line to the southern city limits of Sacramento. The goal of the California Scenic Highway Program is to preserve and enhance the natural scenic beauty of California. Highways are evaluated on how much of the natural landscape a passing motorist sees and the extent to which visual intrusions (e.g., buildings, noise barriers) affect the scenic corridor. A scenic corridor is defined as the area of land generally adjacent to and visible from the highway.

The town of Freeport is a rural community located on the east bank of the Sacramento River on Highway 160. In general, the community consists of the Bartley-Cavanaugh Golf Course, limited commercial development (i.e., bait and tackle shops, restaurant, grocery store), and agricultural residences.

One of the surface water supply diversion options evaluated in the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP would expand the City of Sacramento's Water Treatment Plant diversion structure and treatment facilities. These facilities are located in the City of Sacramento (outside the Zone 40 boundaries) near the confluence of the American and Sacramento rivers in a predominantly urbanized and industrial area of the City. Highway commercial, industrial, and residential uses are located along Bannon Street to the north; the Southern Pacific Railroad rail yards are located to the south; mixed residential and industrial uses are located along North B Street to the east; and Interstate 5 is located to the west. The City recently evaluated the environmental effects, including effects on aesthetic resources, of expansion of this facility in a Final EIR for the City of Sacramento Water Facilities Expansion Project, which was certified in November 2000. The EIR concluded that expansion of this facility would not substantially affect views of the project area nor would it affect any significant visual resources onsite or in the project area (City of Sacramento Department of Utilities 2000).

REGULATORY SETTING

Scenic Highway System

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) administers the California Scenic Highway Program. The goal of the program is to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from change that would affect the aesthetic value of the land adjacent to highways.

Sacramento County has adopted the Scenic Highway Element as part of the General Plan (1993). The purpose of this element is to take initial steps toward protection of the scenic values of routes nominated or designated as State Scenic Highways.

No scenic highways are located within Zone 40; however, one of the options evaluated in the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP would construct a diversion structure along Highway 160 in the town of Freeport. Highway 160 is a State-designated scenic highway that runs on tops of levees along the Sacramento River. The County has adopted several polices for the protection and enhancement of scenic highways within Sacramento County. These polices are identified on page 16 of the Scenic Highway Element of the General Plan (1993), which is hereby incorporated by reference. A copy of the General Plan can be reviewed at the Sacramento County, Department of Environmental Review and Assessment, 827 7th Street, Room 220, Sacramento, California 95814.

4.2.2 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

THRESHOLDS OF SIGNIFICANCE

The degree of impact of a project, either negative or beneficial, to the visual character of the area is largely subjective. Few objective or quantitative standards are available to analyze visual quality, and individual viewers respond differently to changes in the physical environment. Based on the State CEQA Guidelines, a project would have a significant impact on aesthetics if it would:

- ▶ have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- ▶ substantially damage scenic resources, including but not limited to trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- ▶ substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; and/or
- ▶ create a new substantial source of light and glare, which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

IMPACT ANALYSIS

Impact 4.2-1: Construction-Related Visual Impacts. Implementing the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP would temporarily affect the visual quality of the areas surrounding project facilities during construction. During this time, views of facility areas would include heavy equipment, construction materials, cleared land area, stockpiled soil, and other features typical of a construction site. These activities would be temporary and would cease once the project is complete. No lasting adverse visual impacts are anticipated from construction. This would be a less-than-significant impact.

Construction-related activities associated with the development of project facilities would include the excavation of soil, operation of heavy machinery, stockpiled materials, and the presence of work crews. Safety and directional signage would be a visible element near facility areas. The presence of work crews, heavy equipment, and signage, would temporarily degrade the visual quality of the surrounding area. All viewer groups (i.e., pedestrians, motorists, residents) would be affected by the change in visual quality; however, residents would be most sensitive to these changes as they would be exposed to these changes for longer periods of time. Construction activities would be temporary and would cease once the project is complete. Further, development and construction activity associated with increased urbanization occurs throughout Zone 40. These activities are common and would not substantially change views of the project area. Although the development of project facilities would expose residents to unsightly construction activities, these activities would be temporary and would not significantly affect the aesthetic and visual quality of the area. This would be a less-than-significant impact.

Impact 4.2-2: Visual Impacts of Increased Nighttime Lighting. Operation of project facilities could require the use of outdoor nighttime lighting, which could contribute to sky glow and adversely affect nighttime views of the project area. This would be a potentially significant impact.

Permanent lighting may be necessary for operations during nighttime hours and for security at project facilities including the surface water diversion structure, water treatment plant, and groundwater extraction wells. It is likely that permanent lighting would consist of pole-mounted light standards and building-mounted security lighting. This lighting could be visible from surrounding areas depending on their design and location. Further, the permanent light sources could contribute to sky glow, which could adversely affect nighttime views in the project area. Sky glow is the brightening of the night sky due to manmade lighting. This would be a potentially significant operational nighttime lighting impact.

Impact 4.2-3: Visual Impact of Project Facilities. Depending on the size, location, and design of new facilities, significant visual impacts may occur with implementation of the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP. Once additional information becomes available, and specific projects are proposed, additional environmental analysis would be required to determine the magnitude of impacts, if any, that would result. Because the visual impacts of the proposed project cannot be determined at this time, aesthetic impacts associated with facilities recommended in the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP would be potentially significant.

Implementation of the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP would involve the construction and operation of several facilities including groundwater extraction wells, water treatment plant, pump stations, diversion structure, and conveyance pipelines. In general, the extraction wells, pump stations, and diversion structures would be located throughout the 2030 Study Area on sites that are ¼ acre to 5 acres in size. These facilities would be constructed as water demands increase in the service area and would be sited to avoid potential land use conflicts, where possible.

The water conveyance pipelines would be located beneath the ground surface and would not be visible. Therefore, visual impacts associated with the water conveyance pipelines would be less than significant.

The new water diversion structure would include construction of a river intake pier and pump station. A diversion structure near Freeport was evaluated in the EIR/EIS for the Freeport Regional Water Project. The EIR/EIS indicated (page 16-18) that construction of a new intake facility in this location would alter the visual character of the site from a riprapped levee and abandoned wastewater treatment plant site, to a built area consisting of new large structure located on the river and large structures on the land-side of the levee. The intake structure would be visible from the levee recreational trails, some area residences, the southbound lane of I-5, and by recreationists on the Sacramento River. The EIR/EIS indicated that construction of a large structure on the river would introduce a prominent element within the viewshed, which would substantially alter views of the project area. However, this structure would be consistent with existing development patterns in the river corridor. Further, the Freeport Regional Water Authority has committed to implementing a public process to address architectural issues such as visual buffers and lighting standards. The EIR/EIS concluded that construction of an intake facility on the Sacramento River would have less-than-significant visual impacts.

The water treatment plant would be located either on the SRWWTP Bufferlands or in the central portion of the 2030 Study Area near Bradshaw Road and Florin Road. This site would be 100 to 120 acres in size. Specific information on the locations of project facilities is not known at this time. Depending on the site that is ultimately selected, project facilities could substantially change the visual character of the surrounding area.

Depending on the size, location, and design of new facilities, significant visual impacts may occur with implementation of the proposed project. As more information becomes available, and specific projects are proposed, additional environmental analysis would be required to determine the magnitude of impacts, if any, that would result. Because the impacts of the proposed project cannot be determined at this time, aesthetic impacts associated with construction of facilities recommended in the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP would be potentially significant.

4.2.3 ENVIRONMENTAL MITIGATION GUIDELINES

No mitigation is necessary for the following less-than-significant impact:

4.2-1: Construction-Related Visual Impacts.

Environmental mitigation guidelines are recommended for the following significant impacts.

4.2-2: Visual Impacts of Nighttime Lighting. SCWA shall install hooded shields or other devices around the permanent lights at the proposed facilities to minimize cutoff of glare, and

upward or horizontal casting of light. All lighting will be positioned so that minimize intrusive light is cast beyond the facility footprint.

4.2-3: Visual Impact of Project Facilities. SCWA shall conduct appropriate CEQA environmental analysis prior to the siting and construction of project facilities. This analysis shall include, but is not limited to, a visual survey of the proposed site and surrounding area. Visual simulations of the proposed project may be required. If potentially significant impacts are identified, appropriate mitigation shall be recommended to reduce, where possible, impacts to a less-than-significant level. This mitigation may include visual screening (i.e., vegetation), redesign, or relocation of project facilities.

4.2.4 LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE AFTER MITIGATION

Adherence to the above environmental mitigation guidelines would reduce the project's aesthetic impacts to a less-than-significant level with the exception of the visual impacts of project facilities. Although the 2002 Zone 40 WSMP would conduct additional environmental analysis to determine the project-specific visual impacts of project facilities, the proposed facilities may result in significant visual changes in the environment for which no feasible mitigation is available. Because not enough information is available at this time to determine the visual impacts of the project, these impacts would be significant and unavoidable.