

E - ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES

9.0 AESTHETICS RESOURCES

9.1 Applicable Laws, Ordinances, Regulations, Statutes and Plans

Aesthetic resources in California are protected by federal and local laws, ordinances, regulations, and statutes. In addition, numerous comprehensive plans and programs have been developed that include detailed policies and guidelines for management of aesthetic resources present in the vicinity of the Project. These laws, ordinances, regulations, statutes, laws and plans and their application to aesthetic resources in the Project area are summarized below.

9.1.1 Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, as Amended

The Eldorado National Forest (ENF) Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (SNFPA) is discussed in Section E1.1.1. Specifically with regards to aesthetic resources, the LRMP states that the ENF should protect the most visually sensitive areas of the ENF by placing the major roads, trails, streams, and areas of concentrated visitor use in scenic corridors and managed viewsheds.

9.1.2 El Dorado County General Plan

The El Dorado County (EDC) General Plan is discussed in Section E3.1.11. The Land Use Element of the plan includes Goal 2.3 regarding natural landscape features and includes objectives to retain topographic features, conserve native vegetation, and maintain the visual integrity of hillsides and ridgelines. Policies address continued enforcement of tree protection provisions in the zoning code and discouragement of development on slopes greater than forty percent. Goal 2.6 addresses corridor viewsheds and calls for the protection and improvement of scenic values along designated scenic road corridors. Objectives include identification of scenic and historical roads and corridors and development of a Scenic Corridor Ordinance to protect the identified roads and corridors.

The Conservation and Open Space Element of the EDC General Plan includes a planning objective to maintain the visual integrity of historic resources (Objective 7.5.2.1) and policies to create design control districts and design guidelines for districts that can include areas, places, sites, structures, or uses that have special historic significance. In addition, maintaining areas of outstanding scenic value is a policy under Objective 7.6.

9.1.3 Sacramento County General Plan

The Sacramento County General Plan is discussed in Section E3.1.12. The plan addresses aesthetic resources in two of its elements. The Scenic Highways Element (Sacramento County 1974) includes the Gold Rush Parkway Plan that identifies a series of roads leading from downtown Sacramento to the Gold Rush Country in Placer and El Dorado Counties. One of these roads, Naioma Road, is in the vicinity of the Project transmission line and Folsom Junction.

One of the Scenic Highways Element policies is to re-evaluate the Gold Rush Parkway Plan in order to de-emphasize encouragement of auto travel, to emphasize multi-modal transportation, and to integrate the Plan into an overall program of protecting and enhancing the urban aesthetics of the County.

The Electric Distribution Policy in Section VIII, Energy Facilities, in the Public Facilities Element of the General Plan (Sacramento County 1998) addresses transmission facilities in regards to aesthetics as well as other resources. Most of the policies in the Electric Distribution Policy address siting of new transmission lines and substations in a manner that avoids impacts to aesthetic as well as other resources.

9.1.4 Federal Power Act

The Federal Power Act, in particular sections 4(e), 10(j) and 18 of the act, are described in Section E1.1.4.

9.2 **Overview**

The UARP lies on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada Landscape Province. This province forms a massive and continuous mountain range that extends from the northwest to southwest for 415 miles, and is about 60 miles across at its greatest width. The western slope of the province is characterized by a summit of high altitude snow-capped peaks that descend across a gently sloping dark blue-green forested plateau of moderately rugged terrain dissected by deeply incised river canyons. Most of the drainages on the western slope run east to west and have minor lateral drainages. Due to the steep terrain, viewing from one drainage to the next is difficult.

The Project transitions through three landscape zones of the Sierra Nevada Landscape Province: the crest zone, mixed conifer-red fir zone, and front country. The crest zone ranges in elevation from about 7,000 to 11,000 feet. This zone represents a small part of the ENF, but it offers extraordinary scenic quality. The crest zone is characterized by gray and tan towering-peaks with dense pockets of dark green conifers and light green aspens. There are meadows, streams, waterfalls, and glacial lakes. None of the Project facilities are located in the crest zone. However, Rubicon Reservoir and Rockbound Tunnel are just below this elevation and are located in the Desolation Wilderness.

The mixed conifer-red fir zone ranges in elevation from about 3,000 to 7,000 feet. This landscape is characterized by moderately steep, to steep terrain with a homogenous texture of dark-green forest, interspersed with scattered clusters of lava caps and rock outcroppings. Landscape variety is low to medium and the screening ability is generally high. Most of the Project generation and recreation facilities are located in the conifer-red fir zone.

The front country zone ranges in elevation from about 1,000 to 3,000 feet. The area is dominated by brushfields that are interspersed with oaks, bull or gray pine and ponderosa pine. Forested areas are light colored, open and sparse. Landscape variety is generally low and there is a low screening ability. Project generation facilities at the lowest elevations, such as White Rock

Powerhouse, and the Project transmission line leading to Folsom Junction, are located in the front country zone.

9.2.1 Historic Trends

The visual quality of the ENF has been altered over the last 40 years as a result of landscape modifications associated with timber clear-cuts, roads, utility rights-of-way, dams and other multiple-use management activities. Other modifications, such as the construction of reservoirs, while still considered an alteration to the appearance of the ENF, may enhance visual quality by introducing water features into the characteristic landscape.

More than half of the ENF landscape has been altered from its original visual quality condition. The ENF estimates that approximately 28 percent of the landscape alteration is noticeable to the average Forest visitor and the other 34 percent is not noticed (USDA 1989). Typically, reasons for alterations going unnoticed are because either the change is not visually evident and does not attract viewers' attention, or it is in a remote location of the forest not usually visited by the average ENF visitor.

Most of the pre-1900 visual disturbances on the ENF have attenuated over with time, except for old railroad grades, mine shafts and dredge tailings. One of the most significant visual effects from these early years was the evolution of cross-country trails and wagon routes into the present-day transportation system. From 1920 to 1940, timber harvesting, construction of roads and railroads, and fire suppression activities significantly influenced the visual landscape of the ENF. From 1920 to 1950, recreation residences were constructed at some of the most attractive locations on the ENF. Most of these structures exist today. Post World War II, timber harvesting and road construction occurred at an accelerated rate on the ENF. Since selective timber cutting has been the predominant method of harvesting on the ENF, most of the commercial forest is natural appearing because of vegetation screening and revegetation. However, non-governmental commercial timber lands managed by private land owners have been heavily logged through means of clear-cutting. Development of major hydroelectric generation projects occurred between 1950 and 1960, although some impoundments are much older. Hydroelectric development has resulted in the introduction of structures such as reservoirs, dams, powerhouses, roads, transmission lines, and recreation facilities. Developed and non-developed recreational facilities have affected the visual resources. Major fires have also affected the visual resources of the ENF and have resulted in drastic changes to the visual landscape with long term effects on visual quality.

9.2.2 Current Conditions

The ENF has a highly varied and scenic landscape. Thirty three percent of nonwilderness lands are classified as distinctive. These are areas where landforms, vegetation patterns, water characteristics, and historical landscape features combine to provide unusual, unique or outstanding scenic quality. The remaining 67 percent of nonwilderness lands are classified as common. These landscapes generally have positive, yet common landforms, vegetation patterns, water characteristics, and historic landscape features.

Public concern for scenic quality on the ENF is high due to the heavy recreation use (much of which includes sightseeing) the ENF receives from visitors from various origins, but typically from the Sacramento metropolitan area and the San Francisco Bay region. All recreation activities have experienced an increase in visitor use days since the 1980s, and projections are for this growth to continue in the near future. Along with this increase in recreation use is a corresponding increase in concern for scenic quality.

An inventory of use patterns on the ENF indicated that 17 percent of non-wilderness lands are considered to have the highest level of visual sensitivity and 13 percent are considered average. The vast majority of the ENF (70 percent) was found to support the lowest level of visual sensitivity.

9.3 Eldorado National Forest Management Direction for Visual Resources in the Project Area

The United States Forest Service (USFS) considers the visual environment as a basic resource of national forest lands to receive equal consideration with other basic resources such as soil, wildlife and water. To manage this basic resource, in the 1970s the USFS developed the Visual Management System (VMS) which is a methodology for: 1) inventorying the visual resource; 2) establishing management objectives for the visual resource; and 3) assessing visual impacts associated with proposed actions. The ENF visual resources have been inventoried and management direction in the form of Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) has been set forth in the LRMP. Below is a description of the five possible VQO designations and the VQO designations for the Project reservoirs.

The preservation (P) VQO allows ecological change only. Management activities, except for very low visual-impact recreation facilities, are prohibited. This objective applies to Wilderness areas, primitive areas, other specially classified areas, areas waiting for classification and some unique management units that do not justify special classification. Project facilities located in Desolation Wilderness include the Rubicon diversion, reservoir, and tunnel and have a preservation VQO. Typically, such facilities do not meet the preservation objective, but because these facilities were present prior to Wilderness designation, they are managed for preservation.

The retention (R) VQO provides for management activities that are not visually evident. Under retention, activities may only repeat the form, line, color, and texture frequently found in the characteristic landscape. Changes in their qualities of size, amount, intensity, direction, pattern, etc., should not be evident. Most of the reservoirs and surrounding shorelines associated with the Project have a retention VQO, including Buck Island, Gerle Creek, Union Valley, Ice House, Robbs Forebay and Slab Creek. Most of Loon Lake, Buck Island and some of Camino reservoirs also have a retention VQO.

The partial retention (PR) VQO provides for management activities that remain visually subordinate to the characteristic landscape. Activities may repeat the form, line, color, or texture found infrequently or not at all in the characteristic landscape, but they should remain subordinate to the visual strength of the characteristic landscape. Portions of Buck Island and

Loon Lake and the surrounding area have a partial retention VQO. The area surrounding Junction Reservoir has a partial retention VQO.

Under a modification (M) VQO, management activities may visually dominate the original characteristic landscape. However, activities of vegetative and land form alternation must borrow from naturally established form, line, color, or texture so completely and at such a scale that its visual characteristics are those of natural occurrences within the surrounding area character type. Portions of the Camino and Brush Creek reservoirs have a modification VQO.

Under a maximum modification (MM) VQO, management activities of vegetative and landform alterations may dominate the characteristic landscape. However, when viewed as background, the visual characteristics must be those of natural occurrences within the surrounding area or character type. When viewed as foreground or middle ground they may not appear to completely borrow from naturally established form, line, color or texture. Alterations may also be out of scale or contain detail that is incongruent with natural occurrences as seen in foreground or middle ground. None of the Project reservoir areas are in a maximum modification VQO.

The USFS has recently replaced the VMS with a new but similar system, the Scenery Management System (SMS). This system incorporates ecological values into the management of visual resources. The ENF is in the process of implementing this new management approach and future revisions to the LRMP may include visual management direction based on the new SMS.

9.4 Literature Cited

Sacramento County. 1974. Scenic Highway Element of the Sacramento County General Plan, Adopted by Sacramento County Board of Supervisors, Resolution No. 74-1072, September 18, 1974.

Sacramento County Department of Agriculture. 1998. Public Facilities Element of the County of Sacramento General Plan, Amended by Resolution No. 980979, August 12, 1998.

USDA (USDA, Forest Service). 1989. Eldorado National Forest. Land and resource management plan final environmental impact statement and record of decision. USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, San Francisco, CA.