

4.14 Aesthetics

4.14.1 Introduction

This section describes the existing aesthetic resources in the Russian River Estuary Management Project (Estuary Management Project or proposed project) area and evaluates potential impacts on aesthetic resources as a result of Estuary Management Project implementation. Aesthetic resources, commonly referred to as visual resources, are defined as the visible natural and built environment. Aesthetic resources provide visual enhancement and have often been acknowledged as worthy of preservation for purely aesthetic reasons. Scenic vistas, roadways, and corridors are documented in general plans and resource management plans for the purpose of protecting or preserving aesthetic resources. This analysis evaluates potential impacts of the Estuary Management Project on views from designated scenic roads, scenic areas, and/or public view corridors.

4.14.2 Setting

The visual setting for the Estuary Management Project includes the Russian River Estuary itself and the surrounding viewshed, from the Pacific Ocean up River Road to Duncans Mills and Austin Creek.¹ The Goat Rock and Willow Creek areas of the Sonoma Coast State Beaches are part of the visual setting. Current visible activities in these areas include the continual management of the Russian River through current breaching activities along the beach. Other recreational activities are nearly always evident; from sightseers on the roads and in Jenner, to hikers, bikers, and campers in the State Park lands.

The Open Space and Resource Conservation Element of the *Sonoma County General Plan 2020* (2008) identifies two designated scenic resources in the area: scenic highway corridors, and scenic landscape units. Those designated scenic resources within the project area are discussed below.

Designated Scenic Landscape Units

Landscape units are based on combinations of physical and cultural features that result in similar visual quality. A landscape unit is a geographically distinct portion of an area that has a particular visual character or set of topographic features. These units are strictly aesthetic delineations based on multiple factors including land use and degree of urbanization², position in the landscape, topography, and vegetation, among others. The following major landscape units designated in the Sonoma County General Plan occur within the project area:

¹ As previously noted in **Chapter 2.0, Project Description**, under certain closed conditions, the Estuary may backwater to Monte Rio, and as far upstream as Vacation Beach. Although this condition may periodically occur, potential impacts related to aesthetics are generally thought to be limited to the seven mile area downstream of Austin Creek, which is typically defined as the Russian River Estuary.

² Please refer to Section 3.6 for a detailed description of land use within the project area.

1. Sonoma Coast along State Route 1, overlooking the Pacific Ocean from hilly terraces north of the Russian River, flat terraces south of the Russian River, and from cliffs and landslide areas in between. The rocky coastline draws world travelers year-round.
2. State Route 116/River Road follows the Russian River and is comprised of a variety of landscapes, including the open Santa Rosa Plain planted with vineyards, orchard-covered hillsides, and open agricultural lands. The lower Russian River corridor narrows from broad agricultural valleys to dense forests with steep slopes and redwood groves. The towns of Forestville, Guerneville, and Monte Rio are located next to the Russian River and comprised of small commercial areas and rural residential development. Below the historic area of Duncans Mills, the scenic river corridor becomes less populated until it intersects State Route 1.

Designated Scenic Highways and Corridors

Scenic corridors are lands comprised of scenic and natural features visible from designated highway rights-of-way. Boundaries of a scenic corridor are determined by the visible landscape as defined by topography, vegetation, viewing distance, or jurisdictional lines. Duration of exposure is proportionate to the distance traveled, speed and the extent of the scenic corridor.

Roadways throughout the project area are designated as “scenic” by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and Sonoma County. State Route 116/River Road is an officially designated Caltrans State scenic highway from the intersection with State Route 1 to Sebastopol (Caltrans, 2005). State Route 1 from the northern county line to Bodega Bay is considered “eligible” classification as a Caltrans State scenic highway, but has not been officially designated. Similarly, State Route 116/River Road and State Route 1 are designated scenic corridors under the Sonoma County General Plan (Sonoma County, 2008).

Factors in Assessing Aesthetic Resources

Aesthetic resources consist of landforms, vegetation, water features, and cultural modifications that impart an overall visual impression of an area’s landscape. Factors important in describing the aesthetic resources of an area include visual character, visual quality, and visual sensitivity. These factors together describe both the aesthetic appeal of an area, and communicate how much value is placed upon a landscape or scene by the general public. Scenic areas include designated and eligible scenic highways, protected open spaces and parks, and designated viewsheds.³

Visual Character

Visual character is the unique combination of landscape features that combine to make a view, including native landforms, water, and vegetation patterns as well as built features such as buildings, roads, and other structures. Landscape and built features combine to form unique perspectives

³ A view corridor is as the line of sight of an observer, looking toward an object of significance to the community (e.g., ridgeline, river, historic building, etc.), or as the route that directs the viewers attention. A viewshed shall be defined as the area within view from a defined observation point. A scenic highway corridor shall be defined as the area outside a highway right-of-way that is generally visible to motorists traveling on the highway.

with varying degrees of visual quality. In the seven-mile long Russian River Estuary Project Area there are three primary types of characteristic views as can be seen in **Figure 4.14-1**;

1. Views of the Russian River, the surrounding valleys and vegetation often surrounded by rural ranching and cattle;
2. Views of the Estuary from Jenner, Highway 1 and portions of the coast;
3. Views of the coastal jetty and Goat Rock State Beach from Highway 1 (naturally open beach in the lower right photo, 8/4/10).

Visual Quality

Visual quality describes the intrinsic aesthetic appeal of a landscape or scene due to a combination of physiographic characteristics (such as landform, water and vegetation) and cultural modifications (physical change to a landscape caused by human activity). Visual Quality is rated low, moderate or high, based on the arrangement of landscape and cultural attributes. In the Russian River Estuary the visual quality is consistently high.

Landscape Exposure

Landscape exposure is a component of visual sensitivity and is a measure of the duration, frequency and distance from which viewers see a particular landscape. The frequency refers to the number of observers that typically view the landscape. Duration is the amount of time the view is actually visible. For example, a rural landscape may be seen by only by a few residents, but for very long durations, whereas an uninhabited landscape crossed by an interstate might be seen by high numbers of travelers but for brief periods of time. Both the number of viewers and the duration of view are equally important in determining landscape exposure. The distance of a view helps to determine the clarity of a view. For example, if an area of interest is in the foreground of an observer's view, it would obviously be more visible than if it were in the background. Distance zones are typically divided into "foreground," "middleground," and "background" zones.

Landscape exposure is moderately high in the Russian River Estuary high because viewers:

1. Live there (few numbers, long duration),
2. Travel on Highway 116 (long duration with seven miles of exposure and occasions to stop),
3. Travel on Highway 1 (moderately high numbers) with an overview of the Estuary (moderate clarity) though details are passing
4. Visit the State Beaches (long exposure, moderate clarity of distant views).

Visual Sensitivity

Visual sensitivity refers to the level of interest or concern that the public has for a particular aesthetic resource. Visual sensitivity is a measure of how noticeable proposed changes might be in a particular scene and is determined based on the overall visual quality of the scene, the potential clarity and relative dominance of the proposed changes, and the degree of landscape



Upper Reach above Duncans Mill Bridge



Penny Island and Jenner housing from Goat Rock State Beach



View of Goat Rock State Beach from Highway 1 in Jenner



Highway 1 Bridge over Middle Reach looking up Estuary



Lower Estuary from Highway 1 in Jenner



Naturally Open Beach (all photos 8/4/10)

exposure a view may have. Visual Sensitivity is rated as high, medium or low. For example, parks, trails, or scenic highways, where expectations for aesthetically-pleasing views are high, will have high visual sensitivity to noticeable or contrasting changes in the existing views.

Overall, visual sensitivity in the Russian River Estuary is generally high when considering noticeable change because the entire area is a set of designated scenic roadways and parklands. The primary question in this analysis is: *how noticeable or dominant will the proposed changes in water elevation be as compared to current Estuary management activities?*

Existing Visible Effects of Estuary Management

Currently the most visible activity associated with Estuary management is artificial breaching of the beach just north of the jetty in Goat Rock State Beach. Visible aspects of breaching include:

1. Equipment loading in the parking lot of Goat Rock State Beach
2. Movement of equipment to and from the excavation site
3. The excavation work
4. Public access to the beach is restricted using barricade tape and signage
5. Warning signs are posted prior to the breaching event 750 feet on each side of the proposed channel location.

Water levels currently rise and fall within the Estuary and during the management period. The rate at which the water rises depends on the amount of water flowing into the Estuary, the amount of water that seeps through the beach to the ocean, overall tidal conditions and artificial breaching activities. **Section 4.2, Hydrology and Flooding**, describes the process in more complete detail. Ordinarily, a casual observer would not visually discern changes in water levels since they fluctuate over periods of days, weeks and months. Informed observers would expect water levels to rise and fall because the Russian River/Estuary is a dynamic system.

4.14.3 Regulatory Framework

State

Caltrans administers the State Scenic Highways Program, established through the State Legislature in 1963 under Senate Bill 1467, to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from projects that would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to highways (Sections 260 *et seq.* of the California Streets and Highways Code). Scenic highway corridors are defined as the land generally adjacent to and visible by motorists from a scenic highway, and are generally comprised of scenic and natural features. Scenic corridor boundaries are defined by topography, vegetation, and/or jurisdictional lines (Caltrans, [no date]). The State Scenic Highway System includes a list of highways that are either eligible for designation as scenic highways or have been so designated. These highways are identified in Section 263 of the Streets and Highways Code.

The State Scenic Highway Advisory Committee defines characteristics of scenic highways to include landforms, the dominant physical characteristics of the natural corridor, such as gently

rolling hills or rugged cliffs, streams, geologic formations, and distant ridges; vegetation, distinctive vegetation within view, such as row crops, orchards, chaparral, or woodlands; structures, buildings may be included in scenic corridors and may add to scenic quality; and panoramas, scenic overlooks with panoramic views of urban, rural, or natural areas should be included when available.

Local

Local policies established in the *Sonoma County General Plan 2020* that govern visual resources in the project area are summarized in Section 4.14 in **Appendix 4.0, Local Regulatory Framework Governing Environmental Resources**.

4.14.4 Environmental Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Significance Criteria

In accordance with Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, implementation of the Estuary Management Project would have significant impacts on aesthetic resources if it would:

1. Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista
2. Substantially degrade the existing visual character of the site and its surroundings
3. Substantially damage scenic resources, such as scenic highway corridors and scenic landscape units
4. Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area, or
5. Conflict with adopted environmental plans.

Impairment of existing aesthetic resources may result from the degradation of a visual feature that has aesthetic significance, or from the introduction of objects or patterns that exhibit a relatively high degree of visual contrast with the existing objects and patterns on the site. Physical changes that may impair the quality of important views include changes in scale, form, color and texture of natural features existing on the site. Such changes could result from grading and excavation, or elimination of existing vegetation.

Based on the nature and function of the Estuary Management Project, several of the criteria included in Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines do not apply to this analysis and are not used, as explained below.

New sources of light and glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area. The current breaching activities and proposed lagoon outlet channel would not require any new lighting features or cause substantial light or glare and does that would adversely affect day or nighttime views of the area. Modifying the schedule when breaching is performed would not produce a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views of the area and therefore there is no impact.

Conflict with adopted environmental plans. The project is mandated by the National Marine Fisheries Service. It would not conflict with implementation of adopted environmental plans.

Approach to Analysis

As noted in **Chapter 2.0, Project Description**, the Water Agency would continue its current practice of artificial breaching outside of the lagoon management period of May 15 through October 15. Timing, implementation, access, sensitivity to pinniped haulout, personnel, equipment, and general procedures would be equivalent to current practices, as described in **Section 2.2.2**. No change to artificial breaching outside of the lagoon management period would occur under the Estuary Management Project.

The aesthetic setting and visual character, quality and sensitivity are all consistently rated high and landscape exposure is also rated relatively high, based on the scale described above. The variation of project conditions from baseline conditions reveals two primary aspects of the project which might produce a visually significant effect.

1. The creation and maintenance of a new outlet channel through the beach in Goat Rock State Beach, and
2. The potential for noticeable variation from current water levels within the Estuary.

Creation and Maintenance of a New Outlet Channel

Visible activities related to creation of the new outlet channel would be similar to the current artificial breaching activities that occur now on Goat Rock State Beach. **Figure 4.14-2** shows a natural barrier beach closure and subsequent creation of an outlet channel in July 2010, executed under existing permit authorization. During the lagoon management period, the Water Agency would establish an outlet channel, and conduct periodic channel maintenance (i.e. minor modifications) to maintain a freshwater lagoon. The orientation of the lagoon outlet channel would be toward the northwest; however it would be established within the historic beach management zone, and consistent with the general location and orientation of past artificial breaching channels and natural openings.

Potential for Noticeable Variation from Current Water Levels

Baseline of operations for the Russian River Estuary includes variations of water levels associated with different river flows, breaching, tidal influence, and wave conditions. Breaching activities are currently initiated in response to rising water in the Estuary to protect low lying structures from flooding. When artificial breaching occurs, water levels drop rapidly. During the proposed lagoon management period, water levels in the Estuary would still fluctuate, however the intent is to establish a freshwater lagoon to enhance steelhead habitat and the outlet channel created on the barrier beach would control the rate of outflow, resulting in elevated water levels in the Estuary.



July 1, 2010 Natural Open Channel. Photo from Highway 1 Overlook.



July 7, 2010 Channel Closed by Tidal Action. Photo from Highway 1 Overlook.



July 8, 2010 Created Outlet Channel. Photo from Highway 1 Overlook.



July 9, 2010 Created Outlet Channel Reclosed by Tidal Action. Photo from Highway 1 Overlook.

Impact Analysis

Impacts associated with aesthetic resources are summarized and categorized as either “no impact,” “less than significant,” “less than significant with mitigation,” or “significant and unavoidable.”

Impact 4.14.1: Scenic Vistas. The Project may have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista. (Less than Significant)

Potentially affected scenic vistas include views of the Russian River Estuary from State Route 1 and State Route 116, as well as views of Goat Rock and Willow Creek areas of Sonoma Coast State Beaches. Creation and maintenance of the new lagoon outlet channel on Goat Rock State Beach would be visible activities and are located in a sensitive location. Outlet channel creation requires similar procedures to current artificial breaching. The dimensions and orientation of the outlet channel on the barrier beach are variable, but would be located within the general historic beach management zone. The project would not alter or degrade the visual quality of these designated scenic vistas.

Extended duration of high water levels during the management period would generally not be perceivable. Most viewers would not notice the visual effect of subtle changes in water elevation, especially since proposed water elevations would be within the range of historic water levels. There is no adverse effect on a scenic vista and therefore there is no impact.

Impact Significance: Less than Significant; no mitigation measures are required.

Impact 4.14.2: Visual Character. Implementation of the Estuary Management Project may degrade the existing visual character of the area. (Less than Significant)

As described above in **Section 4.14.1, Setting**, the project area is generally characterized as designated scenic coastal and river corridor areas. Urban areas are concentrated in communities like Duncans Mills and Jenner, however most of the bordering area along the Estuary is open private land. The visual character of the coast, the Russian River corridor and the Goat Rock State Beach would remain the same after the project. The location, orientation, and design of the outlet channel would be within the existing beach management zone. The visual character of the area would not change as a result of the project and therefore there is no impact.

Increased frequency and duration of inundation during the lagoon management could slightly alter the visual character of recognizable areas, such as Penny Island; however inundation at these locations would be within the historic range of water levels and is therefore not considered a significant effect to visual character.

Impact Significance: Less than Significant; no mitigation measures are required.

Impact 4.14.3: Scenic Resources. Implementation of the Estuary Management Project may substantially damage scenic resources, such as scenic highway corridors and scenic landscape units. (Less than Significant)

The visual character of the coast, the Russian River corridor and the Goat Rock State Beach would remain the same after the project. The project allows Estuary higher water levels for a longer duration, but not to an extent that could affect visual resources within the scenic highway corridors along State Routes 1 and 116, nor any portion the adjacent scenic landscape units, therefore the impact is less than significant.

Impact Significance: Less than Significant; no mitigation measures are required.

4.14.5 References

California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), California Street and Highway Code 263.

California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), 2005. California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), *California Scenic Highway Mapping System*, Sonoma County, http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/LandArch/scenic_highways/index.htm, Accessed July 2010.

Sonoma County Permit and Resources Management Department, Draft Environmental Impact Report for Sonoma County General Plan 2020 Update, Visual Resources, SCH No. 200301202, January 2008.

Sonoma County Permit and Resources Management Department, *Sonoma County General Plan 2020*, Open Space and Resource Conservation Element, including Figure OSRC-1: Scenic Resource Areas, September 23, 2008.