CHAPTER 4.9 Aesthetics

4.9.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the existing conditions relating to the Proposed Project area's visual and scenic qualities. Section 4.9.2, "Environmental Setting" identifies the scenic resources that occur within the project area. Section 4.9.3, "Regulatory Framework" details the federal, state, and local laws related to aesthetics and scenic resources. Potential impacts to aesthetics resulting from the Proposed Project are analyzed in Section 4.9.4, "Impact Analysis" in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) significance criteria (CEQA Guidelines, Appendix G) and mitigation measures that could reduce, eliminate, or avoid such impacts.

Other impacts related to visual quality are addressed in other chapters as follows: impacts to vegetation are addressed in Chapter 4.4 "Vegetation and Wildlife"; impacts to water quality are addressed in Chapter 4.2 "Water Quality"; and impacts to recreation are addressed in Chapter 4.5, "Recreation."

4.9.2 Environmental Setting

The visual setting for the Proposed Project includes the 1,485 square mile Russian River watershed located in Sonoma and Mendocino counties in northern California. The Russian River watershed is centered 60 miles northwest of San Francisco and empties into the Pacific Ocean near Jenner. The watershed is bordered on the west by the Outer Coast Ranges and on the east by the Inner Coast Ranges. Hills and mountains comprise 85 percent of the basin, and valleys make up the remaining 15 percent. Two reservoirs, Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma, augment instream flow in the summer and provide flood protection in the winter.

Lake Mendocino

Lake Mendocino is located on the East Fork Russian River near the City of Ukiah. Water-based boating, swimming, fishing, and camping are popular at Lake Mendocino. The reservoir is surrounded by views of oak woodland hills. A 15-mile network of trails can be used to hike, bike, or horse ride, and provides access to a 689-acre Wildlife Management Area. Fishing is popular at Lake Mendocino (USACE 2015). The public can view the reservoir from multiple view points from the trail network near the reservoir, as well as from boats on the reservoir.

Lake Sonoma

Lake Sonoma is located in the Dry Creek sub-basin of the Russian River watershed. Lake Sonoma is a popular destination for a number of lake-based recreational activities including boating, fishing, and water skiing. The land immediately surrounding Lake Sonoma is owned by the USACE and is part of the Lake Sonoma Recreation Area. Within the Lake Sonoma Recreation Area, approximately 40 miles of trails are available for hiking, backpacking, hunting, and horseback and mountain bike riding. The landscape is characterized by steep hillsides composed of oak woodlands and grasslands. The land surrounding the Lake Sonoma Recreation Area is privately held. The primary land use in the surrounding area is agriculture.

Both vineyards and relatively large undeveloped ranchlands surround the Lake Sonoma Recreation Area offering panoramic views. Many of these trails offer panoramic views of Lake Sonoma (Sonoma.net n.d.).

Russian River

The Russian River flows southward from its headwaters through small valleys and past the cities of Ukiah, Hopland, Cloverdale, and Healdsburg. Dry Creek joins the Russian River just downstream of Healdsburg. At Mirabel Park, the Russian River turns west where the river is joined by flows from Mark West Creek and the Laguna de Santa Rosa, which drain much of the southern portion of the basin. From Mirabel to the Pacific Ocean, low mountains along both banks confine the river for 22 miles. The Russian River area is characterized by its scenic river views, riparian areas, agricultural areas, and forested hillsides. The Russian River area is a popular destination for a variety of river-oriented recreational activities, as well as a popular location for people visiting wineries in the region. Scenic views are available from both the Russian River itself and along roadways, such as Highway 116, that are popular with bicyclists and for motorists traveling to wineries in the area.

There are three recreational and one municipal seasonal dams on the Russian River that influence water depth and the aesthetics of the river immediately upstream of the impoundments. Recreational impoundments are created by the Healdsburg Memorial Beach dam, Johnson's Beach dam, and the Vacation Beach dam. The municipal dam is the Mirabel Inflatable Dam located near Forestville, which is owned and operated by the Water Agency. The Healdsburg Memorial Beach dam consists of a 16.5-foot high concrete structure that accepts wooden flashboards (NMFS 2008). This dam is typically erected to 7 feet and historically has been between 6 and 9 feet tall (Johnson 2016). The Healdsburg Memorial Beach dam impounds water for approximately 2 miles (based on LiDAR data). The Vacation Beach dam consists of an 8 foot tall concrete structure that accepts flashboards. This dam impounds water to the Johnson's Beach dam, which is located approximately 2 miles upstream. The Johnson's Beach dam consists of an 8-foot-tall concrete structure that accepts flashboards (NMFS 2008). When this dam is erected the top of the dam is 6 feet tall with a 40 foot wide spillway notch that is one foot below the top of the dam (Condon 2016). Collectively, the Vacation and Johnson's Beach dams impound approximately 6.5 miles of the Russian River (based on LiDAR data). The Mirabel Inflatable Dam is located near Forestville and increases the depth of the Russian River for a distance of approximately 3 miles upstream. The recreational dams are permitted to be installed on June 15, or later, and are removed by October 1 (NMFS 2008). The Mirabel Inflatable Dam is inflated when flows are low enough to safely operate the dam (typically below 500 cfs) and deflated when water demands decline and flow in the river approaches 2,000 cfs. The Mirabel Inflatable is typically inflated in the spring and deflated in the fall. The seasonal impoundments influence the water surface elevation (water depth) of the Russian River during the summer months. The aesthetics within the impounded section remain relatively unchanged from year to year.

Dry Creek

The visual setting for the Proposed Project area also includes Dry Creek and the surrounding viewsheds,[1] consisting of the Coast Range to the west, the Mayacamas Mountains to the east, and Lake Sonoma's earthen dam spillway to the north. The Proposed Project area extends approximately a half mile downstream from Warm Springs Dam to the confluence with the Russian River approximately one mile downstream of Healdsburg. Current visible activities in the area consist of vineyard operations, including the use of large trucks to transport grapes; tourism associated with tasting rooms, including special events such as the annual Passport to Dry Creek event; and periodic maintenance of the roadways and facilities at Lake Sonoma. Those populations exposed to the viewsheds mentioned above include residents, winery visitors, cyclists, and visitors passing through the valley on route to Lake Sonoma for recreational opportunities including camping, boating, fishing, hunting and sightseeing. Recreation related to the wine industry, cycling, and Lake Sonoma draws many visitors to the Dry Creek Valley. The region is highly valued by residents and visitors for its unique mosaic of vineyards and architecturally distinct wineries, intense agriculture on the valley floor and contrasting wooded hillsides, as well as the networks of scenic rural roads which are a popular destination for cyclists. Dry Creek is almost entirely encompassed by private land and, unlike the Russian River, there are no known public access points to Dry Creek. The public roads in Dry Creek Valley are set back from the creek and offer few views of the creek. These views are limited to Board Bridge, Yoakim Road Bridge, Lambert Bridge, and Westside Road Bridge.

Designated Scenic Resources

The Open Space and Resource Conservation Element of the Sonoma County General Plan 2020 (PRMD 2013) identifies two designated scenic resources in the project area: scenic landscape units and scenic highway corridors[2]. These designated scenic resources are discussed below.

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 urbanization, 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] A viewshed is a line of sight of an observer, looking toward an object of significance to the community (e.g., ridgeline, river, historic building, etc.), or the route that directs the viewers' attention. A viewshed is the area within view from a defined observation point.

[2] A scenic highway corridor is the area outside a highway right-of-way that is generally visible to motorists traveling on the highway

The Coast

The Sonoma Coast is a scenic resource vital to Sonoma County. Three basic types of landscapes are included: the flat terraces south of the Russian River, the hilly terraces from Fort Ross northward, and the cliffs and landslide area between.

Alexander and Dry Creek Valleys

Protection of the scenic beauty of these agricultural valleys and surrounding hillsides is not only important aesthetically, but also economically because agricultural marketing is closely tied to the area's scenic image.

Hills East of Windsor

These hills provide a scenic backdrop to the Santa Rosa Plain. North of Windsor the area extends into the Santa Rosa Plain and adjoins the low, rolling hills that form part of the Healdsburg-Windsor community separator.

Eastside Road

This area of rolling hills is an important transition between the community of Windsor and the rich agricultural and mineral resource areas of the Russian River Valley.

State Route 116/River Road

This area follows the Russian River and is comprised of a variety of landscapes, including valleys 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. This area also defines the community boundaries of Forestville, Guerneville, and Monte Rio and their adjacent rural residential development.

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.

Many residents of Mendocino and Sonoma counties value the variety and beauty of the many landscapes as viewed from rural roadways. Mendocino County does not have designated scenic corridors. Motorists can travel from urban centers into scenic corridor areas including orchard and forest-covered hills, rolling dairy lands, and scenic valleys planted in vineyards. Preserving these areas is important to the character of Mendocino County. There are numerous scenic corridor roadways identified in the Sonoma County General Plan. Of the Scenic Highways and Scenic Corridors designated by the General Plan the following lay within the project area and are described in detail below: Highway 101 between Cloverdale and Geyserville; Highway 128 between Highway 101 and Chalk Hill Road; Highway 101 approximately 2.5 miles south of Dry Creek Road; Westside Road between Healdsburg and River Road; River Road from Wohler Road to Highway 116; Highway 116 from Guerneville to Highway 1; Moscow Road from Monte Rio to Highway 116; and Highway 1 from approximately 1 mile north of the town of Jenner to Goat Rock State Park.

Scenic highways within the project area offer motorists and cyclists views of rural Sonoma County landscape. Portions of Highway 101, Highway 128, Westside Road, River Road, Highway 116, and Highway 1 are designated as scenic highways and follow the course of the Russian River. The views of the Russian River from these scenic highways vary in number and in distance from the river. Highway 101 travels north/south through Sonoma County. The sections of Highway 101 outside of Cloverdale, Healdsburg, Windsor, Santa Rosa, and Rohnert Park city boundaries are designated as scenic corridors by the Sonoma County General Plan. Highway 101 follows a similar path as the Russian River for 13 miles from Hopland to Cloverdale and offers many views of the Russian River. The wetted portion of the Russian River is not visible from Highway 101 from Cloverdale to Healdsburg. Highway 101 crosses the Russian River approximately one-half mile south of Healdsburg where it offers a brief view to motorists. There are no other views of the Russian River from Highway 101 south of the Highway 101 crossing at Healdsburg.

Highway 128 crosses the Russian River approximately one-half mile east of the intersection with Geyserville Avenue and offers motorists views of the Russian River. There are a number of views of the Russian River from the 5.7-mile section of Highway 128 that begins at the intersection with River Road east of Geyserville and runs south through the Alexander Valley scenic landscape unit to the intersection with Alexander Valley Road. However, this section of Highway 128 is set back at least 1,000 feet from the Russian River and, except for bridge crossings, the dense riparian vegetation blocks the wetted area from view.

Alexander Valley Road crosses the Russian River approximately 2.5 miles east of Highway 101. While Alexander Valley Road is not a scenic corridor it is within the Alexander Valley scenic landscape unit and offers motorists views of the Russian River. The Russian River can be viewed by motorists from the Highway 128 road crossing over the Russian River. However, this view point is somewhat restricted by riparian vegetation and the river can only be seen while actually traveling across the bridge.

Eastside Road is designated by the Sonoma County General Plan as a scenic corridor. “This area of rolling hills is an important transition between the community of Windsor and the rich agricultural and mineral resource areas of the Russian River Valley” (PRMD 2013). Eastside Road starts at Old Redwood Highway and travels south along the east side of the Russian River for 6.3 miles before ending at Wohler Road. However Eastside Road is set back at least 1,000 feet from the Russian River and does not offer motorists views of the river due to the dense riparian vegetation.

Westside Road travels south from Healdsburg 12.2 miles to River Road. Westside Road follows the general path of the Russian River. However, the riparian vegetation is dense and provides limited views of the wetted portion of the Russian River.

River Road begins at Guerneville and runs 15 miles east to Old Redwood Highway where it becomes Mark West Springs Road. An approximately 7.5-mile section of River Road from Guerneville to Mirabel Road follows the Russian River. According to the Sonoma County General Plan “[t]his area provides a variety of landscapes, including valleys planted in vineyards, orchard covered hillsides, and redwood groves adjacent to the Russian River”

(PRMD 2008). While River Road closely follows the Russian River there are limited views of the Russian River from River Road due to the dense riparian vegetation along the river.

Highway 116 begins at Highway 1 near the town of Jenner and travels south east to the town of Sonoma. Highway 116 is designated by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) as a scenic highway from Highway 1 to the Sebastopol city limits (Caltrans 2010). “The view corridor along Highway 116 contains unique views of orchards, redwood groves, and the Russian River. This area also defines the community boundaries of Forestville, Guerneville, and Monte Rio and their adjacent rural residential development” (PRMD 2008). A 12-mile portion of this scenic highway runs along the Russian River from Guerneville to Highway 1. Since gaps in the riparian vegetation vary in length, views of the Russian River along this stretch of Highway 116 can range from relatively brief and infrequent upstream of Duncans Mills, to relatively lengthy and frequent downstream of Duncans Mills.

Highway 1 begins in Dana Point, Orange County and runs north to the town of Leggett in Humboldt County. Highway 1 offers scenic views of the California coast and portions of the highway are designated as a scenic highway by Caltrans (Caltrans 2016). An approximately 3-mile section of Highway 1 from the entrance of Goat Rock State Park to approximately 1.25 miles north of the town of Jenner offers views of the Russian River estuary (Figure 4.9-1). This portion of Highway 1 is eligible to become a state scenic highway, but has not yet been designated as such. Most of the views of the Russian River from Highway 1 are located between the south end of the Highway 1 Bridge at Bridgehaven to about 2.25 miles north. Due to roadside vegetation the section of Highway 1 from the entrance to Goat Rock State Beach to the Highway 1 Bridge at Bridgehaven offers limited views of the Russian River.

Figure 4.9-1. A photo of one of the views of the Russian River estuary from Highway 1 near the town of Jenner.

Community Separators

A characteristic that distinguishes Mendocino and Sonoma Counties from many parts of the San Francisco Bay Area is the existence of separate, identifiable cities and communities. The Sonoma County General plan specifically addresses community separators. Open space between the various communities in Sonoma County is maintained in order to prevent corridor-style urbanization. Some of these lands may not necessarily be highly scenic, but their continued rural quality provides visual relief from a uniform landscape of urban and suburban development and maintains city and community identity. The community separators nearest to the project area are the Windsor/Healdsburg Community Separator, which includes approximately 1,200 acres along the Highway 101 corridor, and the Windsor/Larkfield/Santa Rosa Community Separator. This 2,000-acre separator provides an open space break along the Highway 101 and Old Redwood Highway corridors between Santa Rosa, Larkfield-Wikiup, and Windsor. Significant views are available to the west across fields and vineyards to the Mendocino Highlands and to the east over the Mark West Springs Hills to Mount Saint Helena.

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, scenic or visual quality, visual sensitivity, and viewer 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.

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 with varying degrees of visual quality. Along the Russian River and within the project area there are four primary types of characteristic views as can be seen in Figures 4.9-2 to 4.9-5 below:

- Views of Lake Mendocino and the surrounding oak woodland hills;
- Views of Lake Sonoma surrounded by vineyards, relatively large undeveloped ranchlands, and steep hillsides composed of oak woodlands and grasslands;
- Views of the Russian River, the surrounding valleys and vegetation, often surrounded by vineyards, rural ranching and cattle; and
- Views of Dry Creek from Yoakim Bridge, Lambert Bridge, Westside Bridge, and the surrounding valleys and vegetation, often surrounded by vineyards.

Figure 4.9-2. A view of the Russian River near Forestville taken from a canoe.

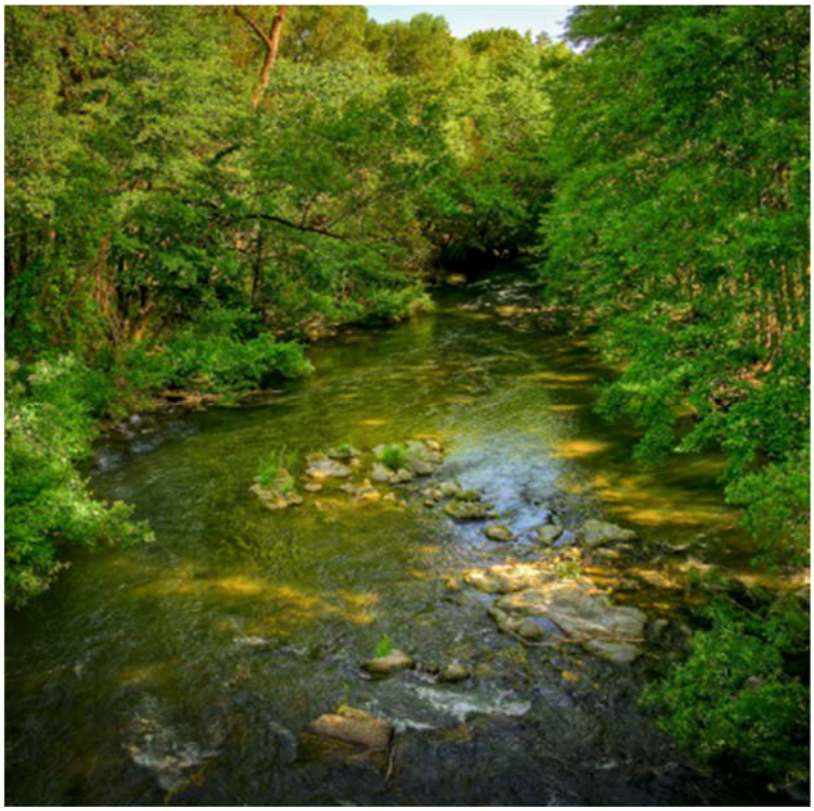

Figure 4.9-3. A photo of Dry Creek taken from Lambert Bridge.

Figure 4.9-4. Lake Mendocino taken from the north end of the lake looking south.

Figure 4.9-5. A photo of Lake Sonoma taken from the south end of the lake looking north.

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 Lake Mendocino, Lake Sonoma, the Russian River, and Dry Creek, the visual quality is consistently high with vivid and unified 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 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, would have high visual sensitivity to noticeable or contrasting changes in the existing views.

Overall, visual sensitivity in the Proposed Project area is generally high when considering noticeable change because the area traverses through a set of designated scenic landscape units, roadways and parklands.

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 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 be more visible than if it were in the background. Distance zones are typically divided into "foreground," "middleground," and "background" zones.

Landscape exposure is high in the project area because viewers:

- Live there (high numbers, long duration);
- Travel on Highway 116 (long duration with many miles of exposure and occasions to stop);
- Travel on Highway 101 (moderately high numbers) with an overview of the Russian River (moderate clarity)
- Visit Lake Mendocino, Lake Sonoma, the Russian River, state beaches, and Dry Creek Valley (long exposure, high clarity of up-close and distant views).

The aesthetics of Lake Mendocino, Lake Sonoma, the Russian River, and Dry Creek are valued by many people. The number of viewers, the number of different views experienced by each viewer, and the duration of views differ depending on the viewers activities. Many motorists

traveling along public roads of Mendocino and Sonoma counties may experience views of the Russian River. These views may be infrequent and brief, or frequent and relatively long-lasting depending on the route traveled. Reservoir users may experience many views of the reservoir depending on the distance traveled while undergoing various activities such as hiking or boating. Canoeists and kayakers may experience many views lasting long periods of time as they travel down the Russian River. Beachgoers may experience one view, viewed from one view point, but this view may be long lasting.

Existing Visual Effects of Water Supply Releases

Water levels currently rise and fall within the project area with different river flows associated with reservoir releases, unimpaired flows, seasonal impoundments, and tidal influence. Section 4.2, Hydrology, describes the process in more detail. Seasonal fluctuations in Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma water surface elevations occur as part of reservoir operations. Water surface elevations increase with inflows into the reservoirs and decrease as dam releases are made to support downstream beneficial uses and maintain minimum instream flow requirements. Water levels in the Russian River and Dry Creek fluctuate with the seasons. They are generally higher with unimpaired flows in the winter and spring, then decline in the spring, summer, and fall with the dry season when releases from Coyote Valley and Warm Springs dams most influence Dry Creek and Russian River flows. The recreation season (June through September) is a popular time for people to travel to and enjoy views of Lake Mendocino, Lake Sonoma, the Russian River, and Dry Creek. Ordinarily, a casual observer may not visually discern changes in water levels since they fluctuate over periods of days, weeks and months. More frequent observers would expect water levels to rise and fall seasonally because Lake Mendocino, Lake Sonoma, the Russian River, and Dry Creek comprise a dynamic system.

4.9.3 Regulatory Framework

State

Caltrans administers the State Scenic Highways Program, established by the State Legislature in 1963 through 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 2016). 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

General Plan Policies

Mendocino County General Plan

Local policies established in the Mendocino County General Plan 2009 that govern visual resources in the project area are summarized below.

The Resource Management Element of the Mendocino County General Plan 2009 established the regulatory framework for protecting, preserving, and enhancing scenic landscape features. The following goals and objectives address scenic landscape units, highways, and corridors.

Goal RM-14 (Visual Character): Protection of the visual quality of the county's natural and rural landscapes, scenic resources, and areas of significant natural beauty.

> **Policy RM-128:** Protect the scenic values of the county's natural and rural landscapes, scenic resources, and areas of significant natural beauty.
>
> **Policy RM-131:** Lakes, stream corridors, large reservoirs, and other water bodies have scenic values that shall be maintained or enhanced, and restored when necessary.

Sonoma County General Plan 2020

Local policies established in the Sonoma County General Plan 2020 that govern visual resources in the project area are summarized below.

The Open Space and Resource Conservation Element of the Sonoma County General Plan 2020 (PRMD 2008) establishes the regulatory framework for protecting, preserving, and enhancing scenic landscape features. The following goals and objectives address scenic landscape units, highways, and corridors.

GOAL OSRC-2: Retain the largely open, scenic character of important Scenic Landscape Units.

> **Objective OSRC-2.1:** Retain a rural, scenic character in Scenic Landscape Units with very low intensities of development. Avoid their inclusion within spheres of influence for public service providers.
>
> **Objective OSRC-2.2:** Protect the ridges and crests of prominent hills in Scenic Landscape Units from the silhouetting of structures against the skyline.
>
> **Objective OSRC-2.3:** Protect hills and ridges in Scenic Landscape Units from cuts and fills.

GOAL OSRC-3: Identify and preserve roadside landscapes that have a high visual quality as they contribute to the living environment of local residents and to the County's tourism economy.

Objective OSRC-3.1: Designate the Scenic Corridors on Figures OSRC-5a through OSRC-5i along roadways that cross highly scenic areas, provide visual links to major recreation areas, give access to historic areas, or serve as scenic entranceways to cities.

Objective OSRC-3.2: Provide guidelines so future land uses, development and roadway construction are compatible with the preservation of scenic values along designated Scenic Corridors.

Policy OSRC-3i: Recognize Highway 116 from Highway 1 to the southern edge of Sebastopol as an official state scenic highway. The unique scenic qualities of this portion of Highway 116 shall be protected as generally outlined in the 116 Scenic Highway Corridor Study, September 1988. Consider requesting official state scenic highway designations for Highways 1 and 37. Upon the request of local residents, the County may pursue similar state status for other Scenic Corridors.

Consistency

The Proposed Project is consistent with the Mendocino County General Plan 2009 and Sonoma County General Plan 2020. The Proposed Project would not change the scenic character of scenic landscape units, the intensity of development in rural areas, or have any effect on ridges or crests. Furthermore the Proposed Project would not degrade roadside landscapes, scenic values along scenic corridors or along scenic highways. Therefore the Proposed Project is consistent with the Mendocino County General Plan 2009 and Sonoma County General Plan 2020.

4.9.4 Impact Analysis

This section describes the impact analysis relating to aesthetics for the Proposed Project. It describes the methods used to determine the impacts of the project and lists the thresholds used to conclude whether an impact would be significant. Measures to mitigate potentially significant impacts accompany each impact discussion, where applicable.

Significance Criteria

Based on the Appendix G of California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, project implementation would have significant impacts and environmental consequences on aesthetic resources if it would:

1. Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista.
2. Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway.
3. Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the sites and its surroundings.
4. Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

Both Mendocino and Sonoma counties do not have designated scenic vistas. Mendocino County also does not have designated state scenic highway corridors. However, the Mendocino County General Plan does contain the goal to preserve and protect viewsheds, which includes river views, and water features such as the Russian River and Lake Mendocino (County of Mendocino GP 2008). Sonoma County has established three types of scenic resources that signify particularly important areas of the counties that warrant protection: scenic landscape units, community separators, and scenic corridors (PRMD 2013). The area along River Road is both a County-designated scenic landscape unit and County-designated scenic corridor.

Based on the nature and function of the Proposed Project, the following criteria included in Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines do not apply to this analysis and are not discussed further, as explained below.

> *Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.*

Implementation of the Proposed Project would not produce a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect day or nighttime views of the area because the Proposed Project does not involve any construction activities or new or changed facilities. Therefore, there is no impact from the Proposed Project or No Project 1 and No Project 2 Alternatives.

Methodology

Potential impacts to aesthetics were determined by identifying whether the Proposed Project or the alternatives would result in the loss or degradation of a scenic attribute or result in a demonstrable negative effect. Of particular concern would be the loss or degradation of scenic areas that have been identified as important scenic highway corridors or scenic landscape units. The Proposed Project would not involve constructing, improving, or eliminating any facilities, therefore, there would be no temporary or permanent changes due to construction. As a result there will be no change in view conditions such as viewpoints, viewsheds, or scenic vistas. Potential effects on scenic resources are limited to Lake Mendocino, Lake Sonoma, the Russian River, and Dry Creek. Only the visual character or quality of Lake Mendocino, Lake Sonoma, the Russian River, and Dry Creek would be effected by the Proposed Project.

The aesthetic setting and visual character, quality and sensitivity in the project area are all consistently rated high and landscape exposure is also rated relatively high, based on the scale described above. The variation of Proposed Project conditions from Baseline Conditions reveals four primary aspects of the Proposed Project that might produce a visually significant effect:

- The potential for noticeable variation of water surface elevations and the potential effects to Lake Mendocino and the surrounding area.
- The potential for noticeable variation of water surface elevations and the potential effects to Lake Sonoma and the surrounding area.
- The potential for noticeable variation from baseline minimum instream flows in the Russian River and the potential effects to the Russian River.

- The potential for noticeable variation from baseline minimum instream flows in Dry Creek and the potential effects to Dry Creek.

As discussed in Chapter 4.5, Recreation, the State Water Resource Control Board's 2009 Order (WR 2009-0034 EXEC) temporarily reduced minimum instream flows in the Russian River (SWRCB 2009), which were similar to the Proposed Project minimum instream flows and allowed for comparisons between the Proposed Project, the No Project 1 and No Project 2 alternatives, and Baseline Conditions.

During implementation of the 2009 Order, summer flows in the Russian River ranged from 65 to 115 cubic feet per second (cfs), depending on location. The Water Agency conducted a recreation assessment in 2009 and focused on the sections of the Russian River where most boat-based recreational activities occur. The 2009 Russian River Recreation Assessment (2009 Recreation Assessment) included an inventory of photographs taken when instream flows were between 66 and 101 cfs. The photos allow for a visual comparison and are useful for this aesthetic impact analysis. The survey began at Diggers Bend near Healdsburg and concluded at Casini Ranch near the town of Duncans Mills. Two sets of photos were taken during the assessment. The first set of photos were taken in June 2009 when instream flows at United States Geological Survey (USGS) gage sites (SCWA 2009) near the locations that photos were taken ranged from 138 cfs to 173 cfs. The second set of photos were taken in July and August 2009 when flows measured at USGS gage sites near the locations where the photos were taken ranged from 72 cfs to 80 cfs. The 2009 Recreation Assessment did not include comparison photos for the sections of the Russian River downstream of Guerneville to Monte Rio or upstream of Healdsburg. One photo was taken of a site just downstream of the Vacation Beach dam during the 2009 Recreation Assessment. This photo was compared to photos taken in 2011 to analyze the aesthetic change near Vacation Beach.

Recent photos (from 2011, 2013, 2014, and 2015) of the Russian River at a variety of instream flows were taken in addition to the photos taken in the 2009 Recreation Assessment. Photos taken opportunistically or during other studies have been compiled along with photos from the 2009 Recreation Assessment in Appendix C. Photos were taken at multiple points along the Russian River between Hopland and Jenner. To analyze the effect of summer flow reductions on the visual character of the river, photographs taken near baseline flows (138 cfs to 180 cfs) were compared to photos taken at flows similar to Proposed Project flows (72 cfs to 80 cfs).

As discussed in Chapter 4.2, Hydrology, decreases in river stage (height) arise from alterations to releases from Coyote Valley Dam and Warm Springs Dam which could increase exposure of previously submerged shoreline along banks adjacent to the Russian River and Dry Creek. Compared to Baseline Conditions, changes in river stage range from decreases of 1.5 ft to increases of 2.5 ft depending on water supply condition, flow alternative, time of year, and reach of the river (see Chapter 4.2 Hydrology). These variations in river height are similar to the conditions noted in the 2009 Recreation Assessment. Since the 2009 Recreation Assessment included photo documentation of the sites surveyed, it is useful for determining the potential impacts to aesthetics that could arise as a result of variations of river height. As described above, one municipal and three recreational seasonal dams on the Russian River influence

water depth and the aesthetics of the river immediately upstream of the impoundments. The seasonal impoundments largely influence the water surface elevation and water depth (distance from the water surface to the channel bottom) of the Russian River during the summer months. The aesthetics within the impounded section remain relatively unchanged from year to year.

The analysis of the potential effects of the Proposed Project and alternatives on aesthetics focuses on the change in water levels in Lake Mendocino, Lake Sonoma, the Russian River, and Dry Creek. Using both historic hydrology from 1910 to 2013 and projected climate change hydrology from 2000 to 2099, the Russian River ResSim (RR ResSim) Model (see Appendix G for further information on system modeling) simulated water surface elevations in the two reservoirs and flows downstream of the reservoirs and the corresponding changes under No Project 1, No Project 2, and Proposed Project conditions. Projected changes in reservoir surface elevations and streamflow were then compared against Baseline Conditions to determine potential impacts. Please see Chapter 4, Environmental Setting, and Chapter 4.1, Hydrology, for Baseline Conditions and modeling results.

Impacts and Mitigation Measures

The following section presents a detailed discussion of potential aesthetic resource impacts associated with the project alternatives, including the No Project 1 and No Project 2 alternatives, and the Proposed Project. Each impact discussion includes an analysis of the impact, a summary statement of the impact and its significance, and proposed mitigation measures, where applicable. Impacts are summarized and categorized as either “no impact,” “less than significant,” “less than significant with mitigation,” “significant and unavoidable,” or “beneficial.”

> **Impact 4.9-1: Implementation of the Proposed Project could have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista or degrade the visual character or quality of Lakes Mendocino and Sonoma and their surroundings. (No Impact)**

Potential visual impacts could occur at Lake Mendocino and Lake Sonoma as a result of fluctuating water surface elevations within the reservoirs. Typically, as the reservoir water surface elevations (WSE) decline under Baseline Conditions, a non-vegetated band of shoreline is exposed until the band naturally revegetates with sparsely distributed herbaceous plants. Even after the exposed area is revegetated, it leaves a "bathtub-ring" common to constructed reservoirs. This results in an alteration of the visual character or quality of the site over the course of a year.

Lake Mendocino

Under Baseline Conditions monthly median WSE in Lake Mendocino fluctuates 27 feet from the lowest monthly median WSE to the highest monthly median over the course of a year (Figure 4.9-6). For the Proposed Project, there would be a 12-foot fluctuation in the monthly median WSE over the course of a year (Figure 4.9-6). The much smaller WSE fluctuation result from changes to the hydrologic index and reduced minimum instream flow requirements. These proposed changes improve reservoir storage and reduce reservoir releases from Coyote Valley Dam, which conserves water in the reservoir over the summer. As a result the reservoir WSE is drawn down less under the Proposed Project compared to Baseline Conditions, minimizing the

"bathtub-ring" appearance by reducing the width of the sparsely vegetated exposed band along the perimeter of the reservoir. This reduces the amount of change in visual character and quality at Lake Mendocino over the course of a year. Therefore, there would be no potential impacts to a scenic vista or degradation of the visual character or quality of Lake Mendocino and its surroundings associated with the Proposed Project.

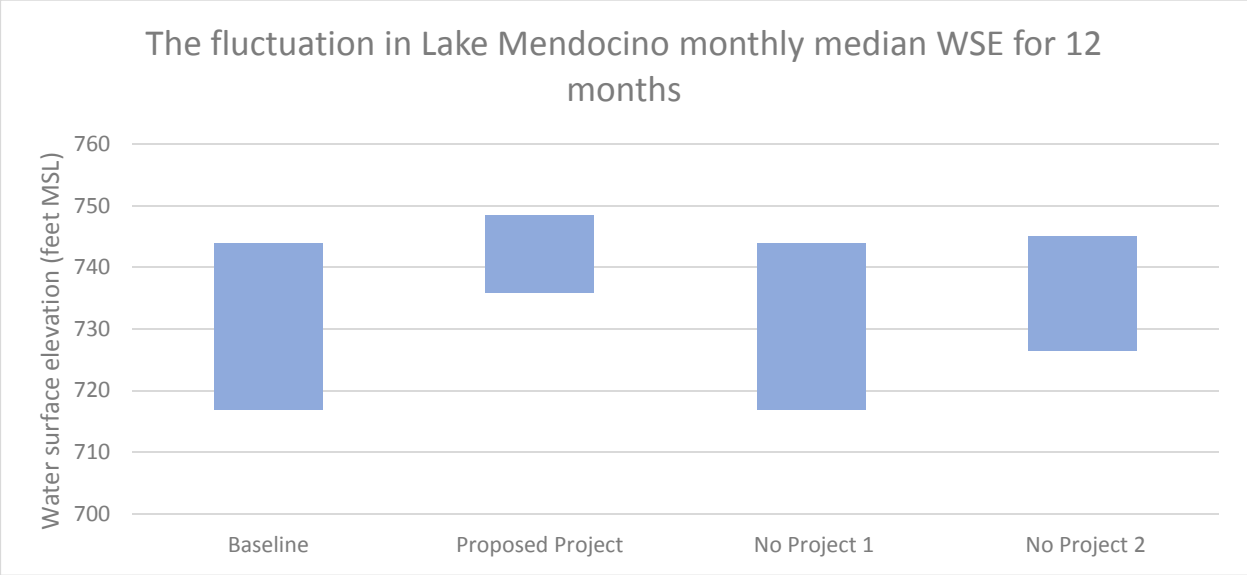

Figure 4.9-6. The fluctuation in monthly median water surface (WSE) elevation for a 12 month (January through December) period. The monthly median WSE is the 50th percentile for a 104 year period of record.

Fluctuations between the lowest and highest monthly median WSE in Lake Mendocino would be the same under the No Project 1 Alternative as under Baseline Conditions. The No Project 1 Alternative utilizes the Decision 1610 hydrologic index and minimum instream flow requirements and releases from Coyote Valley Dam are the same as Baseline Conditions. Therefore, there would be no impacts to a scenic vista or degradation of the visual character or quality of Lake Mendocino and its surroundings associated with the No Project 1 Alternative.

Fluctuations between the lowest and highest monthly median WSE in Lake Mendocino would be smaller under the No Project 2 Alternative compared to Baseline Conditions. As stated previously, under Baseline Conditions monthly median WSE fluctuates 27 feet from the lowest monthly median WSE to the highest monthly median over the course of a year. Under the No Project 2 Alternative Lake Mendocino fluctuates 19 feet over the course of a year (Figure 4.9-6). The difference in WSE fluctuation is because the No Project 2 Alternative uses with the Russian River Biological Opinion's recommendations for temporary lower minimum instream flow in the Russian River during the summer months to enhance juvenile steelhead rearing habitat. These lower minimum instream flows would require reduced releases from Coyote Valley Dam, which in turn conserves water in the reservoir over the course of the summer. As a result the reservoir is drawn down less under the No Project 2 Alternative compared to Baseline Conditions, minimizing the "bathtub-ring" appearance by reducing the width of the sparsely vegetated exposed band along the perimeter of the reservoir. This reduces the amount of change in visual

character and quality at Lake Mendocino over the course of a year. Therefore, there would be no potential for impacts to a scenic vista or degradation of the visual character or quality of Lake Mendocino and its surroundings associated with the No Project 2 alternative.

Lake Sonoma

The fluctuation between the lowest and highest monthly median WSE in Lake Sonoma over the course of a year for the Proposed Project, the No Project 1 Alternative, and the No Project 2 Alternative would be nearly identical to Baseline Conditions. Under Baseline Conditions, Lake Sonoma's monthly median WSE fluctuates by 17 feet over the course of a year. Under the Proposed Project, the No Project 1 Alternative, and the No Project 2 Alternative, the WSE fluctuates by 18 feet, 19 feet, and 18 feet, respectively. The slight WSE fluctuations are due to the Russian River ResSIM hydrologic model's accounting for the Water Agency's full water right of 75,000 acre-feet per year (AFY). The Russian River ResSim model uses the estimated water demands for 2040 when modeling the Proposed Project, No Project 1, and No Project 2 alternatives. When modeling Baseline Conditions the Russian River ResSim model uses averages of water demands between 2009 and 2014. The full water right demand under the Proposed Project and the No Project 1 and No Project 2 alternatives is met by releasing more water from Warm Springs Dam. This in turn draws Lake Sonoma down slightly more and would expose slightly more shoreline. However, fluctuating reservoir WSEs are typical of reservoir operations. An increase in fluctuation between one and two feet over the course of 12 months would be difficult to visually detect and may go unnoticed by most viewers. Therefore, there would be no substantial adverse effects on a scenic vista or degradation of the visual character or quality of Lake Sonoma and its surroundings associated with implementation of the Proposed Project, the No Project 1 Alternative, or the No Project 2 Alternative.

Impact 4.9-2: Implementation of the Proposed Project could have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista or degrade the visual character or quality of the Upper Russian River and its surroundings. (Less than significant)

Potential visual impacts could occur in the Upper Russian River as a result of noticeable variation from baseline minimum instream flows. If minimum instream flows were reduced, the width of the water in the channel could shrink, streamflow could become disconnected between pools, and pools could shrink in size. This could result in an alteration of the visual character or quality of the river over the course of a year. Under the Proposed Project and the No Project 2 Alternative, instream flows in the Upper Russian River (from the confluence of the East Fork of the Russian River and mainstem Russian River to the mouth of Dry Creek) would change during the summer months. Instream flows from June through September are largely determined by reservoir releases from Coyote Valley Dam. Under Baseline Conditions, monthly median flows in the Upper Russian River (when measured at Healdsburg) range from 170 to 205 cfs during the months of June through September. Under the Proposed Project, monthly median instream flows in the Upper Russian River would range from 114 to 121 cfs. Under the No Project 2 Alternative, instream flows would range from 134 to 143 cfs during the same time period. As shown in Figure 4.9-7 below, in the Upper Russian River, instream flows of 70 cfs have a similar visual characteristic as flows of 249 cfs.

Figure 4.9-7. A series of photos taken near Hopland. The top photo was taken on December 1, 2014, when daily average flow was 249 cfs; the bottom photo was taken on November 26, 2014, when flow was 70 cfs. Flows where measured at the USGS gage at Cloverdale, CA.

Implementation of the Proposed Project or the No Project 2 Alternative could cause additional exposure to existing gravel bars or expose gravel bars that might not be seen at higher instream flows. However, rivers are highly dynamic systems, and gravel bars are a natural feature of rivers which are present under numerous flow conditions. Most viewers of this section of river would be traveling by car along Highway 101 at a high rate of speed. The views points from Highway 101 are often a few hundred feet from the river and often partially obscured by riparian vegetation and small hills. Since these observers would be traveling quickly and a few hundred feet from the river it would be unlikely that these observers would detect a change in the number or size of gravel bars.

In addition to motorists traveling along Highway 101, many people recreate on the Upper Russian River and would have long-lasting and close views of the river. However, variations in gravel bar exposure would not have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista or degrade the visual character or quality of the Upper Russian River and its surroundings. Therefore, there would be a less-than-significant effect.

Impact 4.9-3: Implementation of the No Project 1 Alternative could have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista or degrade the visual character or quality of the Upper Russian River and its surroundings. (No Impact)

Visual impacts to the Upper Russian River (from the confluence of the East Fork of the Russian River and mainstem Russian River to the mouth of Dry Creek) would not occur with implementation of the No Project 1 Alternative. Instream flows in the Upper Russian River under the No Project 1 Alternative would be the same as Baseline Conditions. The No Project 1 Alternative utilizes the Decision 1610 hydrologic index and minimum instream flow requirements and releases from Coyote Valley Dam would be similar to Baseline Conditions. Therefore, there would be no substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista or degradation of the visual character or quality of the Upper Russian River and its surroundings associated with the No Project 1 Alternative.

Impact 4.9-4: Implementation of the Proposed Project could have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista or degrade the visual character or quality of the Lower Russian River and its surroundings. (Less than significant)

Potential visual impacts could occur in the Lower Russian River as a result of noticeable variation from baseline minimum instream flows. If minimum instream flows were reduced, the width of the water in the channel could shrink, streamflow could become disconnected between pools, and pools could shrink in size. This could result in an alteration of the visual character or quality of the river. In the Lower Russian River (from the mouth of Dry Creek to the Pacific Ocean) implementation of the Proposed Project, or the No Project 1 and No Project 2 alternatives, would reduce instream flows during June through September, but would not alter the visual character or quality of the river.

Under Baseline Conditions, the monthly median instream flow in the Lower Russian River at Hacienda ranges between 159 and 226 cfs during the months of June through September. Under the Proposed Project, instream flows at Hacienda would range from 84 to 87 cfs

according to the model. Under the No Project 1 Alternative, instream flows at Hacienda would range from 159 to 193 cfs according to the model. Under the No Project 2 Alternative, instream flow would range 102 to 134 cfs according to the model.

Under Baseline Conditions, the Lower Russian River contains numerous gravel bars, which are a natural feature of Russian River. As depicted in Figure 4.9-8 below, implementation of the Proposed Project or the No Project 1 and No Project 2 alternatives could cause additional exposure to existing gravel bars or expose gravel bars that might not be seen at higher instream flows. However, rivers are highly dynamic systems, and gravel bars are a natural feature of rivers which are present under numerous flow conditions. Most viewers of this section of river would be traveling by car along Highway 116 at a high rate of speed. The views points from Highway 116 are often less than a few hundred feet from the river, but are heavily obscured by dense riparian vegetation. It is unlikely that observers traveling along Highway 116 would detect a change in the number or size of gravel bars since these observers would be traveling quickly and many of the views are obscured by dense vegetation.

In addition to motorists traveling along Highway 116, many people recreate on the Lower Russian River and would observe the river from a close distance and for long periods of time. However variations in gravel bar exposure would not have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista or degrade the visual character or quality of the Lower Russian River and its surroundings. Therefore, there would be a less-than-significant effect.

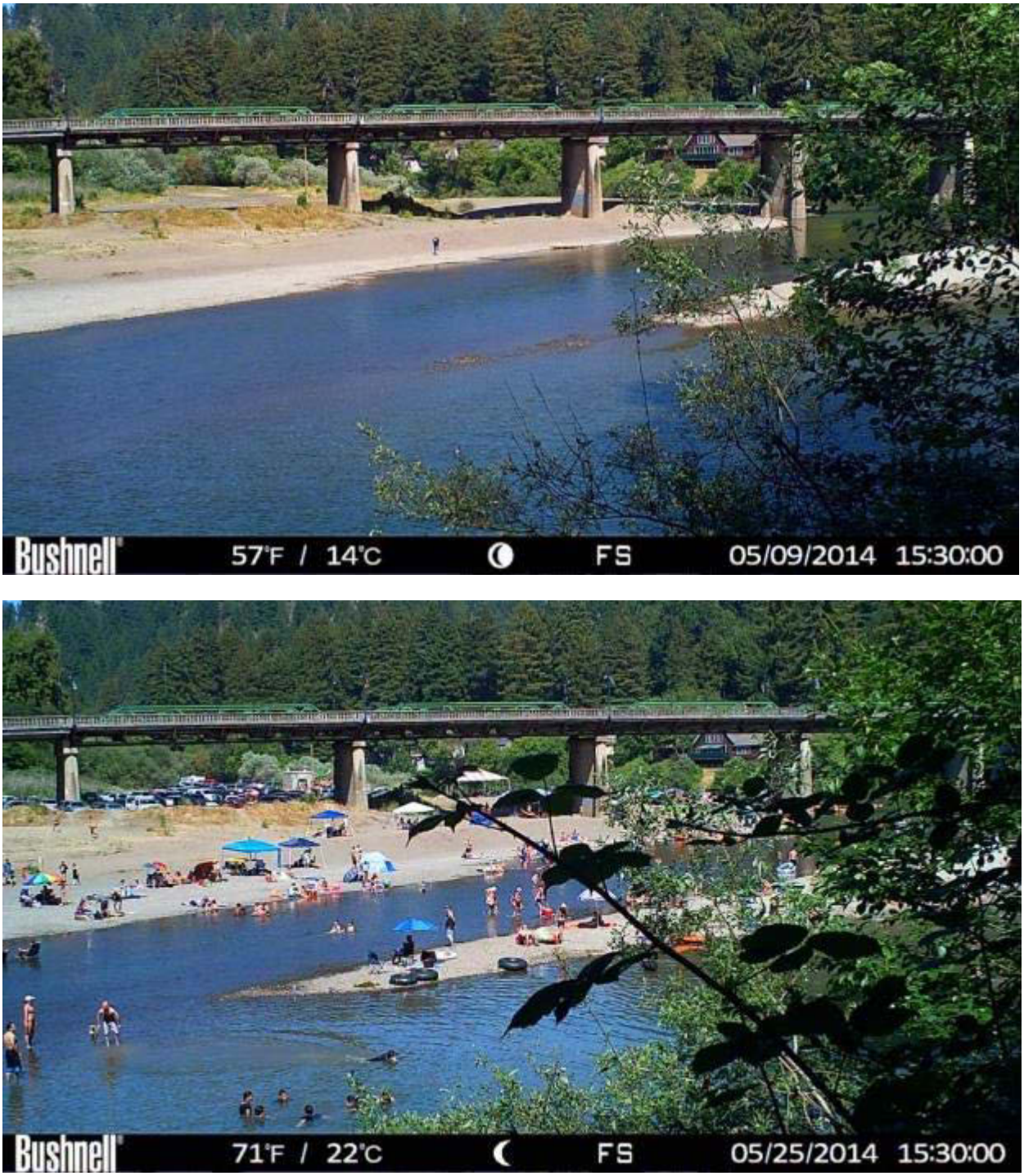

Figure 4.9-8. A series of photos of the Russian River taken downstream of the Bohemian Highway Bridge near Monte Rio, CA. The top photo was taken on May 9, 2014, when streamflow was 222 cfs; while the bottom photo was taken on May 25, 2014, when streamflow was 88 cfs. Flows were measured at the USGS gage at Hacienda, CA.

Impact 4.9-5: Implementation of the Proposed Project could have substantial adverse effects on a scenic vista or degrade the visual character or quality of Dry Creek and its surroundings. (No Impact)

Potential visual impacts could occur in Dry Creek as a result of noticeable variation from baseline minimum instream flows. If minimum instream flows were reduced, the width of the water in the channel could shrink, streamflow could become disconnected between pools, and pools could shrink in size. This could result in an alteration of the visual character or quality of Dry Creek. Under Baseline Conditions, the monthly median instream flow in Dry Creek (measurements taken at the mouth of Dry Creek) is 93 cfs during the months of June through September. Under the Proposed Project, the monthly median instream flow would range between 84 and 114 cfs. Under the No Project 1 Alternative, the monthly median instream flow would range between 93 and 125 cfs. Under the No Project 2 Alternative, the monthly median instream flow would range between 93 to 110 cfs. With implementation of the Proposed Project, the No Project 1 Alternative, or the No Project 2 Alternative, monthly median instream flow in Dry Creek during June through September would range between 84 cfs to 125 cfs.

The slight change in instream flow between Baseline Conditions and the alternatives would be difficult to visually detect and would likely go unnoticed by most viewers. There are relatively few view points for Dry Creek because Dry Creek is surrounded by private land, the public roads are set back over 1000 feet from Dry Creek, and views are heavily obscured by dense riparian vegetation. Viewpoints of the creek by the general public are limited to public road crossings (Board Bridge, Yoakim Road Bridge, Lambert Bridge, and Westside Road Bridge). While these bridges offer views of the creek the views would be of short duration because the observers would be traveling over the bridges quickly. It is unlikely that motorists or cyclists would notice changes in the visual character of Dry Creek when traveling across public road crossings.

The general public also has the opportunity to view Dry Creek from some wine tasting rooms located near the creek. For example, the Truett Hurst tasting room is located near Dry Creek and the winery provides a picnic area adjacent to Dry Creek for its customers. Tasting room customers would have the opportunity to view Dry Creek for extended periods of time.

Private landowners that live along Dry Creek would be the most sensitive to changes in Dry Creek aesthetics. These observes would have the longest lasting views and close viewpoints of the creek. Due to minimal change in flow compared to Baseline Conditions, there would be no substantial adverse effects on a scenic vista or degradation of the visual character or quality of Dry Creek and its surroundings associated with implementation of the Proposed Project, the No Project 1 Alternative, or the No Project 2 Alternative.

Impact 4.9-6. Implementation of the Proposed Project could substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway. (No Impact)

As described in Section 4.9. 2, Environmental Setting, Highway 116 is designated by Caltrans as a scenic highway from Highway 1 to the Sebastopol city limits (Caltrans 2010). A 12-mile portion of this scenic highway runs along the Russian River from Guerneville to Highway 1.

Since gaps in the riparian vegetation vary in length, views of the Russian River along this stretch of Highway 116 can range from relatively brief and infrequent upstream of Duncans Mills, to relatively long lasting and frequent downstream of Duncans Mills. The Proposed Project, No Project 1 Alternative, and No Project 2 Alternative do not involve construction activities and therefore could not substantially damage scenic resources, including trees, rock outcroppings and historic buildings, within a state scenic highway. As described in Impact 4.9-4 above, subtle changes in aesthetics to the Lower Russian River as a result of the Proposed Project would be difficult to detect while driving along Highway 116 and Highway 1. This is due to the distance these highways are from the river, the dense riparian vegetation growing along the river and the dynamic nature of rivers. Therefore, the Proposed Project would not substantially damage scenic resources along these highways.

4.9.5 General Plan Consistency

The Proposed Project, No Project 1 Alternative, and No Project 2 Alternative would not negatively affect the aesthetics of the Russian River. Therefore, the Proposed Project and its alternatives would be consistent with Mendocino County General Plan Goal RM-14 and policies RM-128 and RM-131 and with the Sonoma County General Plan 2020 GOAL OSRC-2, Objective OSRC-2.1, Objective OSRC-2.2, Objective OSRC-2.3, GOAL OSRC-3, Objective OSRC-3.1, Objective OSRC-3.2, and Policy OSRC-3i.

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