

3.13 Visual Resources

3.13.1 Introduction

This section analyzes the proposed project's potential impacts related to visual resources. It describes existing conditions in the project area and summarizes the overall Federal, state, and local regulatory framework for visual resources, and it analyzes the potential for the proposed project to affect these resources.

3.13.2 Existing Conditions

The following considerations are relevant to visual resources conditions in the proposed project area.

Federal and state scenic highways are not addressed in this section because there are no roadways in or near the project area that are designated in Federal or state (California Department of Transportation 2016) plans as scenic highways worthy of protection for maintaining and enhancing scenic viewsheds. Accordingly, there would be no effects on a Federal or state scenic highway and these are not analyzed further.

3.13.2.1 Regional and Vicinity Setting

The project area is located in California's Sacramento Valley along the east bank of the Feather River approximately 10 miles downstream of the Oroville Dam and across the river from the Thermalito Afterbay.

Agricultural land, planted predominantly with row crops and orchards, stretches for miles in the region. A patchwork of fields surrounds the suburban outskirts of cities and communities, separating developed areas. When haze is at a minimum, these fields offer expansive views that extend over agricultural fields and recent development in the foreground to the middleground and background. The Sutter Buttes can be seen vividly rising up from the flat valley floor in the background, based on the viewer's location in the landscape. Views of the Coast Range to the west and the Sierra Nevada to the east are common on clear days.

Although much of the valley is still in agricultural production, agricultural land has been, and continues to be, converted to suburban land uses. This trend is evident around the outskirts of Oroville, Gridley, and Live Oak. Smaller, agrarian communities have not experienced a great deal of new development or growth over the past decade. Development in the region is typified by a growing core of residential, commercial, and some industrial land uses, with agricultural fields surrounding the city outskirts. Older residential and commercial areas in the region are often distinct, with a wide variety of architectural styles, development layouts, and visual interest. Newer residential and commercial development, however, tends to be homogenous in nature, with similar architectural styles, building materials, plan layouts, and commercial entities; and development often lacks a distinctive character from one city to the next. Natural and human-made waterways, impoundments, and bypasses aid in limiting development but lead to development spreading outward where vast acreage of agricultural land remains. This growth is slowly changing the visual

character from rural to suburban. Overall, a mix of developed, cultivated, and highly disturbed and manipulated landscape characterizes the project vicinity.

3.13.2.2 Project Setting

The landscape within the project area has been highly manipulated and modified with nearly all surface topography being altered from the native surface. Previous human actions of gold dredging, drainage canal construction, and borrow during construction of the Oroville Dam have left behind extensive, isolated ridges and piles of rock (Appendix 1-A; Photos 1, 2, 19, 21, and 25). Some leveled areas within the project area are roughly 3 feet above the summer flow level of the Feather River. In some locations surface soils have been removed and gravel and cobble has been dumped in piles or strewn about, giving the ground surface a rough, rocky texture where few, if any, plants can grow (Appendix 1-A; Photos 1, 2, 3, 12, 24, and 25). In low areas where more excavation has occurred, water has filled the excavated basins to form small ponds (Appendix 1-A; Photos 3, 6, 7, and 16). Water-filled channels are present where linear excavation has removed soil and rock (Appendix 1-A; Photos 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11). Berms formed from spoiled soil and rock are present throughout the open space. The channels and berms linearly divide the space in an irregular fashion giving the appearance of a landscape transected by lines of water and rock. In some cases, the channels cross and link ponds and wetlands and the berms divide the waterways and form islands or peninsulas within the open space.

The north and west sides of the project area are defined by a large berm that is used as vehicular access within the Oroville Wildlife Area (OWA) and separates the project area from the Feather River. The berms slope up 15 to 20 feet higher than the surrounding landscape. Although the berms obscure ground level views of the river from most of the project area, they provide elevated scenic vista views from the edge of the project site out to the Feather River, riparian woodlands, and ponds and wetlands for viewers that are on top of the berms (Appendix 1-A; Photos 4, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 24, and 26). In addition, on clear days the Sierra Nevada Mountains may be seen to the north and east, in the distant background, rising above the undulating valley floor within vista views (Appendix 1-A; Photos 5, 6, 10, and 22). Scenic vista views are intermittently unavailable along sections of the berm where woodland tree groves along the river and berm limit views to the foreground. The berms are covered in gravel and cobble with very limited tree and vegetative cover. The sides of the berms have a uniform slope compared to the other topographic features within the project area. The cobble and gravel give the surface of the berms and other landscape features a coarse appearance. Weirs have been cut into the berm, allowing for flows from the river across the OWA during high flows. The weirs are devoid of vegetation, and have engineered slopes, gabions, and exposed cobble (Appendix 1-A; Photos 4, 18, and 20).

Pacific Heights Road is elevated on the east side of the project area and also offers scenic vista views of the surrounding landscape and the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the north and east. However, scenic vista views of the OWA are limited and intermittent because there are only a few clearings and breaks in the woodland canopy between Pacific Heights Road and the OWA that allow for quick, passing glances of scenic vista views through to the project area. Scenic vista views are also available from the Feather River, but are limited except in locations where berms are set back from the river and there are breaks in the woodland canopy.

The vegetation within the project area is a mixture of native oak and riparian woodland, native scrub, and nonnative, invasive species. Oak and riparian woodlands are visible throughout the project area (Appendix 1-A; Photos 5, 11, 14, 16, and 23). In some areas within the OWA, clearings

and low-growing scrub allow for views out and over to the surrounding wetlands, ponds, grasslands, and low willow scrub (Appendix 1-A; Photos 8, 10, 12, 16, and 24).

The water within the project area wetlands and ponds appears green at certain times from a predominance of water primrose and algae (Appendix 1-A; Photos 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 16). In some areas, standing water is completely covered with a bright green algal mat. Informal (i.e., unmarked) gravel parking areas on the berms next to the Feather River connected to State Route 70 and Pacific Heights Road to the east of the project area provide access and parking for recreationists in this portion of the OWA (Appendix 1-A; Photos 2, 12, and 13).

3.13.2.3 Viewers

The primary viewer groups in the project area that would have views of the proposed project include recreational users within the OWA (described below) and travelers using nearby local roads such as Pacific Heights Road. Public roads located across the river from the project area are too far away with too much obscuring vegetation to provide public views of the project area. There are some residents and businesses less than 0.25 mile from the east side of the project area. However, mature trees and shrubs associated with woodland and creek corridors obscure views of the project area and residents and businesses would not be affected by the proposed project.

Recreational Users

As described in Section 3.15, *Recreation*, the OWA and adjacent Feather River provide numerous recreation opportunities for both passive and active recreation in and adjacent to the project area, and are adjacent to or within the footprint of the areas that would be directly affected by project implementation. The OWA amenities draw recreational viewer groups and provide visual opportunities to appreciate the river and surrounding environment.

Recreational users view the project area from the public open space, the Feather River, other waterways, roadways, and trails. Recreational uses consist of kayaking, boating, and fishing; hunting; birding and wildlife viewing; swimming; walking, running, and jogging; horseback riding; and bicycling along trails, levee crowns, and local roads. Users of the river and waterways are likely to seek out natural areas within the corridor, such as sand and gravel bars and beaches, in addition to using the waterways as a resource. Waterway users have differing views based on their location in the landscape and are accustomed to variations in the level of land uses and activities occurring in the project area. The amount of vegetation present along the waterway creates a softened, natural edge that can be enjoyed by all recreational users. Local recreational users have a high sense of ownership over the waterways and corridors they use, and these areas are greatly valued throughout the project vicinity.

Viewer sensitivity is high among recreational users in the project area because they are more likely to value the natural environment, appreciate the visual experience, have an enhanced sense of ownership, and be more sensitive to changes in views.

Roadway Users

Roadway users' views differ based on the roadway they are traveling and elevation of that roadway. The majority of views are limited to the foreground by vegetation; suburban, commercial, and industrial development; and landforms. Views to the middleground and background are present, but are limited to areas where vegetation or structures that otherwise would conceal background views

from the roadway are set back. Gravel roads within the OWA provide public views of the project area.

Travelers use roadways at varying speeds. Normal highway and roadway speeds differ based on speed limits and the traveler's familiarity with the route and roadway conditions (e.g., presence or absence of rain). Single views typically are of short duration, except on straighter stretches where views last slightly longer. Viewers who frequently travel these routes generally possess moderate visual sensitivity to their surroundings. The passing landscape becomes familiar to these viewers, and their attention is typically focused on the roadway, roadway signs, and surrounding traffic, not on the passing views. Viewers who travel local routes for their scenic quality generally possess a higher visual sensitivity to their surroundings because they are likely to respond to the natural environment with a high regard and as a holistic visual experience. Furthermore, scenic stretches of roadway passing by the project area offer sweeping views of the surrounding area that are of interest to motorists. For these reasons, viewer sensitivity is moderate among most roadway travelers.

3.13.3 Regulatory Setting

Regulations and policies applicable to visual resources are noted below.

3.13.3.1 Federal

There are no Federal policies related to visual resources that apply to the implementation of the proposed project.

3.13.3.2 State

There are no state policies related to visual resources that apply to the implementation of the proposed project.

3.13.3.3 Local

Butte County has adopted general plan goals and policies aimed toward protecting visual resources. It should be noted that visual resources tend to be associated with land use, cultural resources, and biological resources; accordingly, the regulatory information presented is more inclusive to recognize these relationships.

Butte County General Plan 2030

The Butte County General Plan 2030 establishes the Thermalito Afterbay as a Water-Based Scenic Area (County of Butte 2012:172, 263-271, 352). There are no other County-designated Land- or Water-Based Scenic Areas in the project area. Relevant goals and policies of the Water Resources Element, Conservation and Open Space Element, and Public Facilities and Services Element are listed below.

Goal W-6: Improve streambank stability and protect riparian resources

- **W-P6.1** Any alteration of natural channels for flood control shall retain and protect riparian vegetation to the extent possible while still accomplishing the goal of providing flood control. Where removing existing riparian vegetation is unavoidable, the alteration shall allow for reestablishment of vegetation without compromising the flood flow capacity.

Goal COS-16: Respect Native American culture and planning concerns.

- **COS-P16.2** Impacts to the traditional Native American landscape shall be considered during California Environmental Quality Act or National Environmental Policy Act review of development proposals.

Goal COS-17: Maintain and enhance the quality of Butte County's scenic and visual resources.

- **COS-P17.1** Views of Butte County's scenic resources, including water features, unique geologic features and wildlife habitat areas, shall be maintained.

Goal PUB-8: Coordinate an interconnected multi-use trail system.

- **PUB-P8.3** The development of abandoned railroad rights-of-way, levee tops, utility easements and waterways for new multi-use trails shall be pursued where appropriate.

3.13.4 Environmental Effects

Potential impacts of the proposed project on visual resources are discussed in the context of State CEQA Guidelines Appendix G checklist items.

a and c. *Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings, including scenic vistas?*

Impact VIS-1: Affect the existing visual character or quality of the site or a scenic vista as a result of project construction (less than significant for all components)

Vegetation Management: Removal of the vegetation would introduce heavy equipment and associated vehicles such as backhoes, excavators, and brush hogs into the viewshed of all viewer groups and create temporary effects on views seen of, and from, the project site during the construction period. See Chapter 3.9, *Vegetation and Wetlands*, for a description of expected short-term vegetation changes. Vegetation would be piled in upland areas to desiccate and decompose. Invasive plant removal actions would leave some spaces temporarily devoid of vegetation (i.e., clearings) through invasive plant removal. Existing woodlands both on the waterside of the berms and in the project area interior could be sparser following invasive plant removal, depending on the varied local densities of invasive species. The removal of invasive species and vegetation management activities would take place in both wetland and woodland complexes throughout the project area on both sides of the berm. These activities would be seen from ground-level and elevated vantages, including within scenic vistas views, by recreationists on the Feather River, within the OWA, and roadway users on Pacific Heights Road. However, construction actions would be temporary and would not introduce tall structures or barriers that would permanently affect scenic vistas that are available from river, berm, and Pacific Heights Road. This effect would be less than significant due to the temporary nature of construction, the transient nature of viewers passing by the project site, viewers' familiarity with heavy equipment for recent levee work within the project vicinity, project riparian vegetation plantings, and the use of native wildflower species in the erosion control grassland seed mix (refer to Section 2.3.5, *Construction*). No mitigation is required.

Hydraulic Improvements: During construction, installation of hydraulic improvements would require heavy equipment as described above for vegetation management. The hydraulic improvements would not introduce any new visual elements to the project area. The rock gabions, notch connections, flood control outflow weir, fish barrier berm, interior channel grading improvements, and interior road culvert crossings would result in a minor visual change in small, isolated pockets of the project area by adding new engineered features and removal of vegetation in the footprint of

these improvements. These improvement areas are surrounded by mature trees and shrubs and are not readily distinguishable in vista views or from other existing engineered gabion or rock features within the project area. Hydraulic improvements and disturbed areas would be hydroseeded after grading and limit visual impacts. This effect would be less than significant due to the temporary nature of construction, the transient nature of viewers passing by the project site, viewers' familiarity with heavy equipment for recent levee work within the project vicinity, similar visual elements used in construction, project riparian vegetation plantings, and the use of native wildflower species in the erosion control grassland seed mix (refer to Section 2.3.5, *Construction*).

Recreation Features: During construction, installation of recreation features would also require the same types of heavy equipment as described above for vegetation management. Construction of recreational features would include installing two new pedestrian footbridges and one vehicular bridge over existing channels; grading, resurfacing, and installing boulder barriers around two existing parking lots along the northwest and southwest sides of the project area; installing a concrete pad for existing portable restrooms; and re-grading the existing Feather River access trail over the berm to reduce the slope. Construction of the bridges could require some vegetation removal. No vegetation removal would be needed to construct the parking area improvements or the concrete pad for existing portable restroom facilities. Re-grading the trail would result in minor earthwork activities. The proposed recreational enhancements are relatively minor, and would not require a great deal of time, effort, or construction-related disturbance. Therefore, this effect would be less than significant due to the temporary nature of construction, the transient nature of viewers passing by the project site, viewers' familiarity with heavy equipment for recent levee work within the project vicinity, materials selected for use in construction, project riparian vegetation plantings, and the use of native wildflower species in the erosion control grassland seed mix (refer to Section 2.3.5, *Construction*).

Impact VIS-2: Affect the existing visual character or quality of the site or a scenic vista as a result of project operation (beneficial for vegetation management and hydraulic improvements; no impact for recreational features)

Vegetation Management: During operation, new riparian woodland and riparian scrub plantings would mature, mostly concentrated along the eastern side of the project area and along the sides of the berm on the north and west sides of the project area. See Chapter 3.9, *Vegetation and Wetlands*, for a description of expected long-term vegetation changes. Clearings created by invasive species removal would be surrounded by the remaining native vegetation. Natural recruitment of native vegetation would likely colonize the voids and grow quickly so that the clearings would not be very visually apparent within a year or two. Vegetation removal could create new vistas to increase available vista views from the river, berm, and Pacific Heights Road. The quality of vista and ground-level views would be enhanced by the improved health and quality of wetland and riparian habitat during project operation and by ongoing vegetation management during operation to prevent the future spread of invasives. Higher-quality riparian habitat as a result of invasive species removal, project riparian vegetation plantings, and seasonal interest provided by wildflower displays in areas of disturbance per Section 2.3.5, *Construction* would result in a beneficial impact on the existing visual character or quality of the site or scenic vistas.

Hydraulic Improvements: Post-construction, hydraulic improvements would be visible primarily from within the OWA and only visible from the river at isolated locations where changes to the perimeter berm are planned. Hydraulic improvements within the project area would not be conspicuous because of existing disturbed conditions. Hydraulic improvements along the river

would result in visible notches that could be seen in passing in the form of breaks in the mostly-unvegetated berm that would be similar to existing inflow and outflow weir structures already present on the berm. The improved and increased frequency of flows of water at lower flow flow events could create more dynamic vistas in certain periods. Improved water flows from hydraulic improvements would not interrupt scenic vista views out from the Feather River or over from the berm or Pacific Heights Road. Improved water quality and increased open water and reflective surface would result in a beneficial impact on the existing visual character or quality of the site or scenic vistas.

Recreation Features: The recreation features that would be visible after construction include footbridges, a shared vehicular/pedestrian bridge, and Feather River pedestrian access grading improvements for improved pedestrian access. These features would be visible in vista views available from the berms, ground-level views from within the OWA, and in isolated locations from the river where recreation features would be on the water side of the berm, but would not be visible in vista views from Pacific Heights Road due to intervening vegetation and topography. Visible portions of proposed bridges would be steel with weathering steel trusses. The materials would weather to a brown and not be conspicuous. These improvements would result in limited visual changes in scenic vistas because the bridges would be obscured by vegetation and would blend in with the existing visual landscape.

The re-graded pedestrian river access trail over the berm would only reconfigure the existing trail, which is a part of the existing visual environment, be on the existing engineered slope, and small compared to the berm face so that it would not stand out visually. Similarly, parking lots and portable restroom facilities are a part of the existing visual environment. Parking lot enhancements and a new concrete pad for existing portable restrooms could be visible in vista views, but would likely go unnoticed as the change would be surface only. Ground-level and vista views of the parking area improvements and concrete pad for the portable restroom facilities would be flat, ground-surface elements and would be visually consistent to existing conditions. The new boulders would restrict vehicular access but would aid in visually framing the parking areas and complement the natural setting. The parking area improvements and concrete pad would not be visible to highly sensitive river viewers because the berm prevents views. Pedestrian improvements and formalization of trails could prevent or reduce the number of volunteer trails and help preserve more of the native vegetation within the project area. Improved recreation opportunities, pedestrian and vehicular access, and designated river access would not interrupt views out from the Feather River or over from the berm or Pacific Heights Road and there would be no impact on the existing visual character or quality of the site or scenic vistas. There would be no impact.

b. Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings along a scenic highway?

The project area is not near a state scenic highway or other designated scenic corridor and therefore there would be no impact.

d. Create a new source of substantial light or glare that would adversely affect daytime or nighttime views in the area?

Impact VIS-3: Create a new Source of Light or Glare (less than significant for all components)

The proposed project would not introduce any new sources of permanent lighting. Reflective surface area may increase, however, where invasive vegetation removal exposes underlying gravel or cobble surfaces and where parking lot paving would occur. However, the additional amount of sunlight and the amount of added reflective surface area is not enough to substantially increase glare at this location, given the density of the remaining and planned vegetation that shades or will shade the project area.

Fugitive light from the use of portable light sources used for safety purposes would create temporary visual impacts. However, the minimization of fugitive light from portable sources used for construction (refer to Section 2.3.5, *Construction*) would ensure that these temporary impacts would be less than significant. No mitigation is required.