

3.2 Aesthetics

This section describes the regulatory and environmental setting for aesthetics. It also describes impacts on aesthetics that would result from implementation of the Climate Action 2020: Community Climate Action Plan (CAP) and includes mitigation for significant impacts, where feasible and appropriate.

3.2.1 Environmental Setting

This section describes the visual resources present in Sonoma County. This information has been drawn and modified from the *Sonoma County General Plan 2020 EIR* (Sonoma County 2006).

Visual resources are visible elements of the landscape such as landforms (i.e., hills and mountains), vegetative forms (i.e., trees and plants), bodies of water (i.e., lakes, oceans, and streams), and neighborhoods and communities (developed areas). The County is characterized by the Petaluma River and the Russian River, rolling hills, mountains, marshlands, valleys, coastal bluffs, estuaries and beaches, and vineyards. The Petaluma River meanders through the southern portion of the County towards San Pablo Bay. Marshlands, agricultural land, rolling hills, and the Petaluma River dominate the visual character of southern Sonoma County. Eastern Sonoma County is characterized by the Sonoma and Mayacamas mountains, agricultural valleys and slopes, and smaller developed areas like the City of Sonoma. The western portion of the County is characterized by the Coast Range Mountains. The central part of the County is characterized by the Santa Rosa Plain, the Russian River, agricultural lands, and the urban and suburban areas of Santa Rosa and Windsor. The northern part of the County is characterized by the Russian River Valley in the center, the coniferous forests and coastal range in the west, and the drier scrub and forested Mayacamas Mountains in the east.

Scenic resources in the County include community separators, scenic landscape units, and scenic highway corridors. A key characteristic of Sonoma County is the clear demarcation between cities and rural/agricultural areas. Community separators (i.e., undeveloped areas between cities) ensure that this characteristic exists. The Sonoma County General Plan designated eight community separators. These include: Petaluma/Novato, Petaluma/Rohnert Park, Rohnert Park/Santa Rosa, Santa Rosa/Sebastopol, Windsor/Larkfield/Santa Rosa, Windsor/Healdsburg, Northeast Santa Rosa, and Glen Ellen/Agua Caliente.

The Sonoma County General Plan identifies scenic landscape units throughout the County. The scenic landscape units in Sonoma County are the coast, Oak Valley, Alexander and Dry Creek valleys, hills east of Windsor, Eastside Road, River Road, Laguna de Santa Rosa, Bennett Valley, Highway 116, Atascadero Creek, Coleman Valley, Sonoma Mountains, hills south of Petaluma, Sonoma Valley/Mayacamas Mountains, and South Sonoma Mountains.

Brief descriptions of each community's existing visual character and scenic resources are provided below.

- The visual setting of Cloverdale is defined by hills to the west, north, and south, and the Russian River to the east. The Russian River separates Cloverdale from the other urbanized areas of the County. Visual resources in Cloverdale include the view of the hillsides surrounding the Cloverdale valley floor.

- The visual setting of Cotati is defined by the Sonoma Mountains to the east, and a series of low hills to the west. Significant visual resources in Cotati include views of the Sonoma Mountains, expansive views of agricultural lands, wildlife habitat areas, the Laguna de Santa Rosa, and various creek corridors.
- The visual setting of Healdsburg is defined by U.S. Highway 101, the Russian River, surrounding agricultural lands, and mountains to the east and west. View of wooded ridges and hillsides, the Russian River, and adjacent valleys are the primary scenic resources in Healdsburg, and Fitch Mountain is the most visible scenic landmark.
- The visual setting of Petaluma is defined by the Petaluma River, with a backdrop of hills to the west and south, and vistas of the Sonoma Mountains to the east. Visual resources in Petaluma include views of the Sonoma Mountains, western ridgelines, and hillsides.
- The visual setting of Rohnert Park is defined by low, rolling coastal hills to the west and the Sonoma Mountains to the east. Visual resources in Rohnert Park include these natural formations and designated scenic corridors.
- The visual setting of Sebastopol is defined by the Sonoma Mountains to the west, and a series of rolling hills to the east. Visual resources in Sebastopol include agricultural lands, grasslands, chaparral, woodlands, riverine, wetlands, scenic highways, scenic corridors, and Laguna de Santa Rosa.
- The visual setting of the City of Sonoma is defined by the surrounding greenbelt, which preserves open spaces, hills, and agricultural lands. Visual resources in Sonoma include views of hillside open spaces and vistas.
- The visual setting of Windsor is defined by the Russian River on the west, a ridgeline to the north, the PG&E transmission lines to the east, and Airport Creek to the south. Visual resources in Windsor include view of the surrounding foothills, open space areas such as community separators, agricultural lands, the creeks, and the woodlands.

3.2.1.1 Scenic Highways and Roadways

Many of the highways and roadways within Sonoma County offer views of scenic areas. The State has officially designated two scenic highways in the County for a total length of approximately 40 miles. The officially designated State Scenic Highways are Highway 12, from Danielli Avenue east of Santa Rosa to London Way near Agua Caliente, and Highway 116, from Highway 1 to the Sebastopol city limit. In addition, the undesignated portions of Highway 12 and 116 and Highways 1, 37, and 121 are eligible for official state scenic highway designation (California Department of Transportation 2015). The County also has designated roadways through the unincorporated area as Scenic Corridors, including State Highways 1, 12, 37, 101, 116, 121, and 128, and County roadways including Skaggs Springs Road, River Road, Chalk Hill Road, Lakeville Highway, Bennett Valley Road, Dry Creek Road, Mark West Springs Road, Arnold Drive, Petaluma Hill Road, Bodega Avenue, Fulton Road, and many more.

3.2.1.2 Greenbelts and Open Space Buffers

Greenbelts are not officially recognized as scenic resources but serve as open space buffers around urbanized areas, similar to community separators. These areas are also eligible for protection by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District. Priority greenbelts are areas close to cities that have one or more desirable characteristic, often where multiple conservation

goals can be achieved. Priority greenbelts include Cloverdale, Healdsburg/Windsor, Windsor/Santa Rosa, Sebastopol/Santa Rosa, Taylor Mountain, Sonoma Valley, Santa Rosa/Rohnert Park, Sonoma Mountain, Rohnert Park/Petaluma, Napa/Sonoma, and Sonoma/Marin. Expanded greenbelts are rural open space areas providing a one-mile buffer beyond cities and highways for extended protection and to preserve rural character. Expanded greenbelts run along the entire length of Highway 128, 12, 121, 37, parts of Highway 101, 116, and surrounding Cloverdale, Healdsburg, Windsor, Santa Rosa, Sebastopol, Sonoma, Petaluma, and Rohnert Park.

3.2.2 Regulatory Setting

3.2.2.1 Federal

There are no federal regulations for identifying impacts on aesthetics of the CAP.

3.2.2.2 State

State Scenic Highway Program

In 1963, the California legislature created the Scenic Highway Program to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from changes that would diminish the aesthetic value of lands adjacent to state highways. The state regulations and guidance governing the Scenic Highway Program are found in the Streets and Highways Code, Section 260 et seq. A highway may be designated scenic depending on how much of the natural landscape can be seen by travelers, the scenic quality of the landscape, and the extent to which development intrudes upon the traveler's enjoyment of the view. A scenic corridor is the land generally adjacent to and visible from the highway and is identified using a motorist's line of vision. A reasonable boundary is selected when the view extends to the distant horizon.

California Solar Rights Act and SB 226 (2012)

The California Solar Rights Act per Section 65850.5(c) does not allow a local government to deny a permit for a solar energy system unless it finds that the project would have specific, adverse impacts upon public health or safety and there is no feasible method to satisfactorily mitigate or avoid the specific adverse impact. Per SB 226 (2012), solar roofs do not have to comply with CEQA (unless one of a narrow list of exceptions applies, none of which are for visual or historic resources impacts).

3.2.2.3 Local

Appendix C, *Local General Plan Goals, Objectives, and Policies*, provides a list of the goals, objectives, and policies in the local general plans of the participating jurisdictions, including those related to aesthetics. These goals, objectives, and policies were reviewed to assess whether the Project is consistent with the general plans of participating jurisdictions. Disclosure of this consistency analysis is for informational purposes. An additional purpose of providing a list of relative local policies is, where appropriate, to provide the context within which the CAP will be locally implemented. As described in the CAP, most of the CAP measures represent implementation of many of the priorities outlined in existing local policies.

Inconsistencies with general plan policies are not necessarily considered a significant impact under CEQA unless it is related to a physical impact on the environment that is significant in its own right.

Implementation of the CAP is consistent with the applicable general plan goals, objectives, and policies of the participating jurisdictions in relation to aesthetics.

3.2.3 Impacts Analysis

3.2.3.1 Methodology

The following analysis takes into account the attributes of aesthetics or visual character, including the natural and man-made environment. Impacts regarding aesthetics or visual character typically include changes to the original visual character of an area or the elimination of a significant natural feature.

3.2.3.2 Significance Criteria

The State CEQA Guidelines Appendix G (14 California Code of Regulations [CCR] 15000 et seq.) has identified significance criteria to be considered for determining whether a project could have significant impacts on existing aesthetic resources.

An impact would be considered significant if construction or operation of the project would have any of the following consequences.

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

3.2.3.3 Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Impact AES-1: Implementation of the CAP could result in substantial adverse effects on scenic views or vistas, substantially damage scenic resources within a state scenic highway, or substantially degrade the existing visual character of the County (less than significant).

The CAP is a policy-level document that does not include any site-specific designs or proposals, or grant any entitlements for development that would have the potential to degrade the aesthetic quality of the environment or adversely affect visual resources. As a policy document, the CAP would have no direct impact on visual resources, but future implementation activities could change community aesthetics.

Several of the CAP measures, when implemented, would result in physical changes to the environment. Some of these changes may have the potential for adverse effects on the visual quality of the area in which they are situated, and in particular, could result in alteration or obstruction of scenic views from public viewing areas, vistas, or open spaces.

There are several CAP measures that could include the construction or installation of new facilities aimed to improve energy efficiency. The CAP includes measures that would increase renewable energy use by supporting the installation of small scale renewable energy systems, including solar photovoltaic and co-generation facilities within the County. Small-scale facilities, such as rooftop photovoltaic panels, generally do not involve construction that substantially changes roof lines or

add massive or tall new features that would have the potential to substantially alter or obstruct views. Therefore, visual impacts of small scale renewable energy systems are not expected to result in a significant impact on scenic views.

Solar panels are not as readily observable from street-level viewpoints and thus would have a limited effect on street-level views of neighborhoods and commercial districts and their visual character. While some reflection may be more observable from elevated viewpoints, the period of reflection will be limited in duration due to the transit of the sun. As such, while rooftop solar may alter views periodically from elevated viewpoints, given that they are not so prominent from street-level views and are generally in line with rooftop profiles, this is not expected to result in a significant aesthetic change in local visual character. Larger facilities, such as waste-to-energy facilities and anaerobic digesters, would mostly be installed within existing facilities (e.g., wastewater treatment plants, landfills, and dairies) and RCPA presently has no reason to conclude such facilities would have significant aesthetic impacts.

CAP measures aimed to encourage a shift in the mode used for transportation would involve generally minor changes to existing streetscapes. In general, these improvements are low-lying and do not involve the construction of massive new structures. Several CAP measures that promote the extension of recycled water lines would be located within existing utility right-of-ways and would not be visible at-grade. While these improvements could alter the visual quality of a neighborhood, these alterations would not generally result in a degradation of visual quality or have the potential to block or alter scenic views.

CAP measures intended to reduce travel demand through existing smart land use and development would promote mixed-use development, transit accessibility, and transit-oriented development (TOD) in city centers and along planned transit corridors. Communities have identified mixed-use development and affordable housing in city centers and TOD locations through their existing general plans, area plans, and specific plans. These changes may introduce new structures into the landscape, allow taller or more massive buildings, reduced set-backs, and altered streetscapes, all of which could introduce new elements to the urban landscape that could alter or block existing scenic views from public viewpoints, vistas, and open space, or that could adversely affect existing visual resources.

All future development projects that would implement CAP measures would be subject to applicable local regulations and requirements, as well as be subject to further CEQA analysis of project-specific impacts. Continued implementation of County or city general plan policy provisions and zoning regulations would manage the location and appearance of structural development in scenic corridors.

Impact AES-2: Implementation of the CAP could result in an increase of daytime glare and/or nighttime lighting (less than significant with mitigation).

Implementation of the CAP could introduce new sources of daytime glare and could change nighttime lighting.

As discussed under Impact AES-1, the CAP is a policy-level document that does not include site-specific designs or proposals or grant any entitlements for development that would increase daytime glare or nighttime lighting in the County. As a policy document, the CAP would have no direct impacts resulting from light and/or glare, but future implementation activities could result in changes that could alter lighting conditions in the County.

There are several CAP measures that promote and could include the construction of new facilities or retrofits to existing buildings aimed to increase energy efficiency, renewable energy use, solid waste diversion, recycled water and greywater use, and capture/use of methane from landfills and dairies. CAP measures aimed to reduce travel demand through smart land use and development would promote new infill development and redevelopment within the city centers and along transit corridors. Adherence to County or city general plan policies and community plan design standards is anticipated to minimize impacts related to glare from reflective surfaces and new sources of nighttime lighting from these new facilities and developments. Environmental review of individual projects requiring discretionary approval would provide additional opportunity to identify and mitigate site-specific and development-specific impacts of this kind. Mitigation measures, such as lighting design and use of non-reflective materials and architectural coatings, are generally effective at reducing such impacts to less than significant. Therefore, there is little potential for CAP measures aimed to reduce travel demand through smart land use and development to result in a substantial new source of light or glare, and the impact is less than significant.

The CAP includes measures that would increase renewable energy use by supporting the installation of small scale renewable energy systems, including solar photovoltaic and co-generation facilities within the County, which could have the potential to be new sources of light or glare. Some facilities could require lighting that could affect offsite receptors. The potential for glare from a photovoltaic panel surface exists when the angle of photovoltaic surface to the sun is such that sunlight is reflected toward a viewer. For instance, at midday, if a solar panel were flat, then the reflections from the surface of the panels would be toward or near the sun's position in the sky. At a certain angles and time of day, photovoltaic panels could present glare impacts for motorists traveling in the vicinity as well as to residents in the area if reflections from the surface of the panels were directed toward a roadway or residences.

An anti-reflective coating or glass on a solar panel can reduce the amount of sunlight that is reflected and increase the amount of sunlight that is absorbed. Most solar panels are now designed with at least one anti-reflective layer and some panels have multiple layers.

In most cases, rooftop solar installations will be above the street level line of sight and thus will not create glare that could be a safety hazard to ground-level vehicle transit or would substantially affect daytime views. Potential rooftop solar installations in the vicinity of airports or airstrips would be subject to the compatible uses for the airport influences areas per Federal Aviation Regulations airspace policies. While the California Solar Rights Act prohibits local jurisdictions from restricting on-site solar installations for visual or aesthetic purposes, the Act does not prohibit local jurisdictions from restrictions or conditions that promote public health or safety. As such, the local government can impose requirements to avoid light and glare that would affect public safety, but cannot impose requirements for aesthetic impacts unrelated to public safety. RCPA presently has no reason to conclude such facilities would have significant aesthetic impacts.

Recommended Mitigation Measure AES-1 would require responsible agencies to develop of design guidelines for rooftop photovoltaic solar energy panels to minimize daytime glare for motorists traveling in the vicinity or for nearby airports/airstrips. The design guidelines prescribed in recommended Mitigation Measure AES-1 would set parameters and provisions for appropriate siting of photovoltaic solar panels to prohibit off-site day time glare impacts that could result in adverse impacts on public safety. Thus, with implementation of recommended Mitigation Measure AES-1, daytime glare impacts resulting from potential photovoltaic solar energy panels would be less than significant.

Mitigation Measure AES-1: Design guidelines for photovoltaic solar energy panels on rooftops regarding glare and safety.

To ensure that photovoltaic solar energy panels on rooftops do not result in glare impacts on motorists traveling in the vicinity or on nearby airports/airstrips, the responsible agency shall develop a set of design guidelines for the siting of such facilities. The guidelines shall contain specific provisions for design. At a minimum, the guidelines shall require solar installations to meet the following standards:

- Solar panels shall be required to use non-reflective coatings wherever they have the potential to result in glare on public roadways or facilities.
- Exposed frames and components should have a non-reflective surface.
- Reflection angles from collector surfaces should be oriented away from neighboring windows and, to the extent possible, away from public areas.

3.2.3.4 Cumulative Impacts**Impact C-AES-1: Implementation of the CAP, in combination with other foreseeable development in the surrounding area, could have a significant cumulative impact on aesthetics (less than considerable contribution with mitigation).**

The cumulative context for the evaluation of cumulative impacts on aesthetics addresses the effects of the CAP in combination with other development in Sonoma County. The cumulative context for light and glare would be development that could affect the same sites that would be affected by light or glare generated by the CAP.

The proposed CAP does not propose any specific development, and any development that would occur in the County would be required to comply with the same general plan policies discussed above with regard to protection of scenic vistas. Implementation of these policies on a countywide basis would ensure a less-than-significant cumulative impact on scenic vistas.

Lighting emanates from the existing development in the County, and probable future development in the County would also include structures that emit glare or lighting, increasing daytime glare and nighttime lighting limiting views of the nighttime sky. This would be considered a significant cumulative glare and lighting impact. The CAP promotes the development of a limited number of facilities that would include exterior lighting. The CAP also promotes photovoltaic solar energy panels on existing and future buildings that may emit glare. Potential project lighting and glare, in addition to lighting and glare generated from other cumulative development, could create a new source of glare or light that would affect daytime or nighttime views in the area.

However, the number of facilities that would be developed under the CAP would be limited and would generally be of the type that lighting would only be required for security, which would be less intense than lighting required for occupied uses. In terms of potential glare generated by photovoltaic solar energy panels, recommended Mitigation Measure AES-1 would require the responsible agencies to develop siting guidelines to minimize potential glare impacts on motorists traveling in the vicinity and on nearby airports/airstrips. Therefore, the CAP's contribution to cumulative light and glare impacts would be less than considerable.

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