

Chapter 6
Aesthetics

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Chapter 6

Aesthetics

This chapter analyzes the proposed action's anticipated effects on aesthetics and visual resources. Key sources for methods and information used in the preparation of this analysis include the following.

- The Federal Highway Administration's guidelines for the analysis of visual resources impacts, together with other standard visual resources analysis methodologies (Federal Highway Administration 1983, U.S. Forest Service 1974, Jones et al. 1975, Soil Conservation Service 1978).
- The general plan guidelines published by the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (Rivasplata and McKenzie 1998).
- The California Scenic Highway System website (California Department of Transportation 2004a, 2004b, 2004c).

Affected Environment

Regulatory Framework

Aesthetics and visual resources are regulated indirectly through a variety of federal, state, and local laws and programs. For example, the federal government does not explicitly regulate visual resources, but recognizes their value and preserves them under the aegis of the National Park, National Wildlife Refuge, National Monument, and National Scenic Byway Systems, and through protections afforded under the National Historic Preservation Act (see related discussion in Chapter 9, *Cultural Resources*). Similarly, aesthetic values are preserved at the state level through the establishment of state parks and preserves, and through the California Scenic Highway Program. In addition, although local jurisdictions are not required to address visual resources as a separate topic in their general plans, most do consider aesthetic values in developing their planning framework.

The following sections provide additional information on regulatory programs of greatest relevance in the action area: the California Scenic Highway Program and the general plan process. The National Park, National Wildlife Refuge, National Monument, and National Scenic Byway systems are not discussed further because they would not be directly affected by the proposed action.

California Scenic Highway Program

The California Legislature initiated the California Scenic Highway Program (Streets and Highways Code Sec. 260 *et seq.*) in 1963, with the goal of preserving and protecting the state's scenic highway corridors¹ from change that would diminish their aesthetic value. The State Scenic Highway System consists of eligible and officially designated routes. A highway may be identified as *eligible* for listing as a state scenic highway if it offers travelers scenic views of the natural landscape, largely undisturbed by development. Eligible routes advance to *officially designated* status when the local jurisdiction adopts ordinances to establish a scenic corridor protection program and receives approval from the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). Scenic corridor protection programs are required to provide for

- regulation of land use and development within the scenic corridor;
- detailed land and site planning;
- careful attention to and control of earthmoving and landscaping activity;
- careful attention to design and appearance of structures and equipment; and
- control of outdoor advertising, including a ban on billboards.

Caltrans stresses the need for citizen participation in developing the guidelines that implement these requirements (California Department of Transportation 2004a, 2004b).

Preservation of Aesthetic Values through the General Plan Process

California law requires local jurisdictions to develop comprehensive, long-term general plans to guide their land use decision-making and physical development (Government Code Section 65300 *ff.*). Of the seven required “elements” or chapters in a general plan, several relate directly or indirectly to the aesthetic issues faced by a community as it manages its growth. For instance, the **land use element** identifies an appropriate balance and distribution of the various types of land uses—residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, etc.—present in a growing community. The **conservation element** establishes guidelines for the conservation and use of the area's natural resources, including rivers, streams, and lakes; forest lands; soil resources; and mineral deposits. The **open space element** contains goals and strategies to preserve open space for a range of purposes, including outdoor recreation. General plans may also contain additional elements on topics of concern to the local community; common themes that bear on aesthetics and visual resources include recreation and parks, community design, and heritage or cultural resources. Some communities also

¹ *Scenic highway corridor* refers to the land adjacent to and visible from a highway, based on a motorist's line of sight.

adopt ordinances or municipal code provisions in support of specific aesthetic or community design goals.

CPUC Regulations and Aesthetic Values

The requirement that PG&E comply with local jurisdiction aesthetics standards is preempted by the exclusive jurisdiction of the CPUC. However, as discussed in Chapter 2 (see *PG&E's Existing Environmental Programs and Practices*), CPUC requires that PG&E consult with local jurisdictions concerning land use matters, including the locations of proposed new facilities. PG&E in turn directs its project managers and construction leads to work with local jurisdictions during the project development process to ensure that new facilities are as consistent as possible with local planning guidelines, including visual resources goals. Because of the nature of much of PG&E's infrastructure, safe and efficient function must often take priority over aesthetic values, and the appearance of electrical and natural gas infrastructure reflects its power delivery function. Nonetheless, CPUC requires PG&E to provide public notice on some types of new construction projects, including some of the minor construction activities that would be enabled under the proposed action. The type of public noticing required and the avenues for public comment vary depending on the type of facility.

Existing Conditions

The action area covers all or part of nine Central Valley counties, stretching from the Sierra Nevada foothills on the east across the valley floor to the Coast Range foothills on the west, and south to the Tehachapi Mountains. It includes PG&E facilities in or adjacent to undeveloped lands, agricultural areas, small communities, and rapidly growing urban centers such as Stockton, Modesto, Bakersfield, and Fresno. Consequently, it offers a tremendous diversity of visual resources, ranging from essentially undisturbed views of diverse types of rural open space to crowded urban viewsheds, and from historic small towns to new construction in actively growing centers of development.

Table 6-1 lists eligible and officially designated state scenic highways in the action area counties; there are no national scenic byways in the action area. The action area's federal and state parklands, reserves, and open space resources are discussed in Chapter 15 (*Recreation*).

Table 6-1. State Scenic Highways in and Near the Action Area

County	Highway/Route	Location	Mileposts	Status
Kern	14	State Route 58 near Mojave to State Route 395 near Little Lake	16.0–64.5	Eligible

County	Highway/ Route	Location	Mileposts	Status
Mariposa	140	North of Mariposa Town Planning Area to west of El Portal Town Planning Area	22.8–49.866	Designated
Merced	152	Santa Clara County line to I-5 junction	0.0–13.848	Designated
Merced/ San Joaquin	5	State Route 152 near Los Banos to I-580 near Vernalis	17.6–0.7	Eligible
Merced	5	State Route 152 to Stanislaus County line	17.6–32.5	Designated
San Joaquin	5	Stanislaus County line to I-580	0.0–0.7	Designated
Stanislaus	5	Merced County line to San Joaquin County line	0.0–28.1	Designated

Source: California Department of Transportation 2004b, 2004c.

Environmental Consequences and Mitigation Strategies

Methodology for Impact Analysis

Overview of Visual Impact Assessment Methods

Typically, the analysis of impacts on visual resources is based on the three key parameters.

- The visual character and scenic quality of potentially affected visual resources at the project site, in the immediate project vicinity, and in the surrounding region.
- The visibility of the project site and vicinity to members of the public.
- Public viewer response to the potentially affected visual resources.

Visual character refers to the nature of a view—put simply, what does it look like, or what is there to see? Visual character may depend on a combination of natural and artificial (urban or “built”) elements.

A view’s **visual or scenic quality** is described in terms of its vividness, intactness, and unity. *Vividness* describes the power or “memorability” of landscape components as they combine in visual patterns. *Intactness* refers to the visual integrity of the natural or built landscape and its freedom from encroaching elements; this factor can be present in well-kept urban and rural landscapes, as well as in natural settings. *Unity* is the visual coherence and compositional harmony of the landscape considered as a whole. Typically, high-quality views are highly vivid, relatively intact, and exhibit a high degree of visual unity. Low-quality views lack vividness, are not visually intact, and

possess a low degree of visual unity (Federal Highway Administration 1983, Dunne and Leopold 1978, Jones et al. 1975).

Public viewer response to a view—and to potential changes in that view—depends on viewer exposure and viewer sensitivity. *Viewer exposure* is a function of the number of viewers, the distance from which they view the resource, and the duration of viewing. *Viewer sensitivity* describes the public's level of concern for particular views. It depends in part on viewer exposure, but is also affected by viewer activity, awareness, and expectations. For example, visual sensitivity is higher for views seen by people who are driving for pleasure; people engaging in recreational activities such as hiking, biking, or camping; and homeowners. Visual sensitivity tends to be lower for views seen by people driving to and from work or as part of their work (U.S. Forest Service 1974, Federal Highway Administration 1983, Soil Conservation Service 1978). Commuters and non-recreational travelers generally have fleeting views and tend to focus away from surrounding scenery and onto traffic. By contrast, residential viewers typically experience extended viewing periods; visual quality becomes a quality of life issue in this context, and may carry additional emotional weight because of its potential to affect real estate values. Views from recreation trails and areas, scenic highways, and scenic overlooks are generally assessed as having high visual sensitivity because visual quality is an important aspect of the recreational experience.

Methods Used in this EIS/EIR

Although the majority of activities enabled under the proposed action would take place within or immediately adjacent to existing PG&E ROWs, the precise locations of individual activities on these lands are not foreseeable at this time. Thus, it is not possible to identify either the specific views that would be affected or the likely viewer populations and their concerns. As a result, this analysis focuses on identifying the general types of visual changes that could result from activities enabled by the proposed action and determining which changes could result in adverse effects on visual resources or the viewer experience. Similarly, because specific impacts (i.e., specific locations affected, and the particularly nature and extent of visual changes) cannot be identified at this time, this document focused on identifying a strategy to ensure that an appropriate level of visual resources protection is provided on a case-by-case basis.

Impacts were analyzed qualitatively, based on professional judgment in light of the nature of the potential construction activities and the new facilities. Analysis assumed an ongoing commitment on PG&E's part to consult with local jurisdictions in locating and designing new facilities, to ensure that needed new facilities are as consistent with, and appropriate to, their setting as possible. Measures that might be implemented in support of consistency with local visual character include designing structures for visual compatibility with nearby structures, if any; restoring natural ground surface contours following construction, to the extent feasible; and revegetating sites disturbed by construction earthwork.

Significance Criteria

For the purposes of this analysis, an impact was considered to be significant and to require mitigation if it would result in any of the following.

- Substantial adverse effects on a scenic vista, or historic buildings or other resources, along a scenic highway.
- Substantial damage to a region's visual resources, including but not limited to natural features such as trees and rock outcroppings.
- Substantial degradation of the existing visual character or quality of a site and its surroundings, as experienced from public spaces.
- New substantial sources of light or glare that would result in permanent adverse effects on daytime or nighttime views of or from an area's public spaces.
- New substantial permanent shading or reduction in sunlight in public spaces.

Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Proposed Action

Impact AES1—Potential for adverse effects on visual resources, visual character, or visual quality as a result of O&M activities. O&M activities could result in short-term temporary visual disturbance related to ground disturbance/earthwork; the presence of vehicles, personnel, and supplies in undeveloped areas; glare generated by reflections from metal and glass vehicle surfaces; and introduction of high-intensity nighttime construction lighting. However, the visual disturbances associated with O&M activities would involve comparatively small areas and most would be of short duration, limited to the work or construction window. Even longer-term or permanent changes associated with O&M activities—such as those associated with some types of vegetation control—would affect limited areas within or immediately adjacent to PG&E rights-of-way, and would be consistent with the general visual character of the rights-of-way, which is typically dominated by existing power delivery infrastructure. In addition, as described in Chapter 2 (see *Visual Resources Practices* under *PG&E's Existing Environmental Programs and Practices*), PG&E requires work crews to follow good construction site housekeeping practices to minimize construction-related visual disturbance, such as maintaining sites in a clean orderly condition, storing building materials and equipment in construction staging areas and/or away from public view, and removing construction debris promptly at regular intervals. **As a result, visual resources impacts associated with O&M activities are expected to be less than significant.**

Mitigation Measure—No mitigation is required.

Impact AES2—Potential for adverse effects on visual resources associated with scenic highways and other designated scenic vistas as a result of new minor construction. A number of scenic highways are present in the action area (Table 6-1). However, CPUC regulations prohibit the installation of overhead distribution facilities within 1,000 feet of the ROW of any officially designated state or county scenic highway, if the facilities would be visible to travelers on the highway (California Public Utilities Code Sec. 320).

Visual resources associated with scenic highways and other types of scenic vistas would be further and substantially protected by PG&E's obligations under generally applicable CPUC regulations, and by PG&E's standard business practices. As described in Chapter 2, PG&E will carry all of its standard business practices and BMPs—which reflect CPUC requirements for the company's operations—forward in all O&M and minor construction activities enabled under the proposed action. In siting needed new facilities, the company works with appropriate agencies, including local jurisdictions, to avoid or minimize conflicts with existing and planned land uses; this typically includes identifying any feasible approaches to address visual resources impacts. Depending on the type of facility and its location, typical measures under PG&E's visual resources program include

- modifications to siting and design of new facilities; design modifications may include the types of materials used for the visible surfaces of structures, pavement elements, etc., as well as other aspects;
- use of Dark Sky–friendly lighting components;
- finished grade contouring at the project site to provide a natural appearing landform upon completion of construction activities; and/or
- revegetation of disturbed areas using methods consistent with the setting and compatible with facilities.

The business practices and BMPs PG&E brings forward under the proposed action would substantially lessen the potential for significant impacts on the visual quality of scenic vistas in general. Accordingly, **visual impacts on scenic highways and designated scenic vistas as a result of new construction are expected to be less than significant.**

Mitigation Measure—No mitigation is required.

Impact AES3—Potential for medium- and long-term degradation of visual character of public viewshed as a result of vegetation removal and earthwork for new minor construction. Many, if not all, minor construction projects enabled by the proposed action would entail some vegetation clearing and some degree of earthwork at the work site and possibly also at a nearby construction laydown or staging area, if staging could not be accommodated at the work site. Vegetation removal creates a temporarily denuded surface that may contrast strongly with the surrounding area in terms of color and visual texture. Grading further modifies the work site by producing barren cut and/or fill areas; it may also create slopes that are unnaturally steep or unnaturally flat

compared to the surrounding area. Visual changes associated with vegetation removal and grading would begin early in the construction period. Depending on the nature of the surrounding vegetation—grassland, chaparral, woodland, landscaping, etc.—vegetation impacts could continue to be apparent for some time; topographic alterations could be essentially permanent.

As described in Chapter 2 (*Proposed Action and Alternatives*), the total acreage of the area disturbed for minor construction, including construction staging and the new facility footprint, would be several acres or less. Some viewers might feel that adverse effects on a site of this size substantially degrade the area's visual character, depending on the nature of the surrounding viewshed and the characteristics of the viewing population. This is most likely to be the case in residential and open space contexts, where sensitivity to changes in the viewshed is typically highest. Where viewers experience earthwork and/or vegetation removal as substantially degrading the viewshed experienced from a public space such as a park, a significant impact would be considered to occur.

However, as discussed in *CPUC Regulations and Aesthetic Values* above, the CPUC process provides avenues for public comment on the design of some proposed new facilities. In addition, as described above and in Chapter 2 (see *PG&E's Existing Environmental Programs and Practices*), PG&E will carry all of its standard business practices and BMPs—which reflect CPUC requirements for the company's operations—forward in all O&M and minor construction activities enabled under the proposed action. In siting new facilities, the company works with appropriate agencies, including local jurisdictions, to avoid or minimize conflicts with existing and planned land uses. This typically includes identifying any feasible approaches to address visual resources impacts; depending on the type of facility involved, and its location, measures to protect visual resources could include but are not necessarily limited to siting, finished grade contouring at the work site, and landscape design/site revegetation. In light of the business practices and BMPs PG&E brings forward under the proposed action, **medium- and long-term visual impacts related to vegetation removal and construction earthwork are expected to be less than significant.**

Mitigation Measure—No mitigation is required.

Impact AES4—Potential for long-term degradation of region's visual resources through introduction of built elements. As discussed above, the proposed action would enable various types of small construction projects, all or most of which would have some potential to result in visual changes at and near the work site. The maximum length of line extensions would be 1 mile, and the maximum area of new facilities would be 5 acres on average. Moreover, new facilities would be designed to be as consistent as possible with the visual character of their surroundings. Because new facilities would be areally limited and would be designed for consistency with the surrounding viewshed, most are not expected to result in substantial degradation or elimination of visual resources in public spaces, and the majority of long-term visual impacts would be less than significant. However, some of the types of features introduced could still be experienced as having a meaningfully adverse effect on viewsheds, particularly in residential and/or open space areas, where viewer sensitivity is

likely to be high, and where the introduction of additional built features is likely to be considered particularly undesirable. Thus, in some cases, the introduction of some new facilities could represent a significant impact on visual resources in public spaces.

As discussed under Impact AES2 above, PG&E will carry forward all of its standard business practices and BMPs (reflecting CPUC requirements for the company's operations) in all O&M and minor construction activities enabled under the proposed action. In siting new facilities, the company works with appropriate agencies, including local jurisdictions, to avoid or minimize conflicts with existing and planned land uses. This typically includes identifying any feasible approaches to address visual resources impacts. Depending on the type of facility involved, and its location, measures to protect visual resources could include modifications to facility siting; modifications to facility design, including the types of materials used for the visible surfaces of structures, pavement elements, etc.; finished grade contouring at the project site to provide a natural appearing landform upon completion of construction activities; and/or revegetation of disturbed areas using methods consistent with the setting and facility type. In light of the business practices and BMPs PG&E brings forward under the proposed action, **visual impacts related to the introduction of new built elements into local viewsheds are expected to be less than significant as experienced from public spaces.**

Mitigation Measure—No mitigation is required.

Impact AES5—Potential introduction of new substantial sources of light or glare. The construction of some types of new facilities would add pavement, cement block, metal, glass, painted wood, and/or other potentially reflective surfaces to the viewshed around work sites. Some types of facilities would also require nighttime security lighting. Depending on the design of new facilities and the nature of surrounding land uses, increases in glare or nighttime lighting could pose a concern for viewers in public spaces. This is most likely in residential areas, where viewer sensitivity is particularly high. It could also be a concern in open space, where viewer sensitivity is high and there is additional potential to disturb sensitive nocturnal or crepuscular wildlife. However, as described in Chapter 2 (see *PG&E's Existing Environmental Programs and Practices*), PG&E will carry forward all of its standard business practices and BMPs (reflecting CPUC requirements for the company's operations) in all O&M and minor construction activities enabled under the proposed action. This includes consultation with appropriate local agencies regarding the location and design of new facilities. In addition, consistent with the company's Dark Sky Initiative, new facilities will incorporate standard measures to minimize light pollution, including glare and nighttime fugitive light. Because of the business practices and BMPs PG&E brings forward under the proposed action, **visual impacts related to potential introduction of new substantial sources of light or glare are expected to be less than significant as experienced from public spaces.**

Mitigation Measure—No mitigation is required.

Impact AES6—Potential introduction of substantial new shading on adjacent parcels. Most of the new facilities constructed under the proposed action would have little potential to increase shading on adjacent parcels. For instance, electric transmission lines would create shadows but would not substantially block sunlight. A small number of facilities would include small one-storey buildings, which could produce perceptible shading in public spaces, depending on their design, orientation, and location with respect to parcel boundaries. Concerns are most likely to arise in residential areas, where viewer sensitivity is particularly high. However, PG&E's land use consultations with local jurisdictions typically include shading issues where these are identified as relevant, and, as part of the standard business practices and BMPs carried forward under the proposed action, PG&E will work with local authorities to identify an acceptable means of addressing shading through facilities siting and design, if needed. Consequently, **visual impacts related to potential introduction of new substantial sources of new shading on adjacent parcels are expected to be less than significant as experienced from public spaces.**

Mitigation Measure—No mitigation is required.

Impact AES7—Aesthetic enhancement as a result of habitat compensation. The proposed action provides for the preservation and enhancement of offsite habitat as a means of compensating for the biological effects of PG&E's O&M and minor construction activities. The acreage required for compensation is expected to consistently exceed the actual acreage impacted, and the mitigation lands would consist of high quality open space that meets specific biological parameters. As a result, over the long term, the proposed action would ensure the preservation and improve the quality of natural open space in the Central Valley, resulting in **aesthetic benefits.**

Mitigation Measure—Because this impact would be beneficial, no mitigation is required.

Alternative 1—HCP with Reduced Take

Alternative 1 would enable the same program of O&M and minor construction activities as the proposed action. Consequently, Impacts AES1 through AES5 would be the same under Alternative 1 as those described above for the proposed action.

Differences between Alternative 1 and the proposed action center on the strategy for mitigating the biological effects of PG&E's O&M and minor construction activities; Alternative 1 stresses reducing take. However, although the level of take would be reduced because of the increased stringency associated with implementation of the AMMs, compensation needs are expected to be similar under both alternatives because compensation acreages would be calculated based on acreage affected, not level of take. Consequently, under Alternative 1, impacts related to aesthetic resources would be similar to those described for the proposed action

Alternative 2—HCP with Enhanced Compensation

Alternative 2 would enable the same program of O&M and minor construction activities as the proposed action. Consequently, as with Alternative 1, Impacts AES1 through AES6 would be the same under Alternative 2 as those described above for the proposed action.

Differences between Alternative 2 and the proposed action center on the strategy for mitigating the biological effects of PG&E's O&M and minor construction activities; Alternative 2 would entail compensation at higher ratios than the proposed action, and thus is expected to require substantially larger compensation acreages. Aesthetic benefits related to the preservation of natural open space would thus be maximized under Alternative 2.

Alternative 3—HCP with Reduced Number of Covered Species

Alternative 3 would enable the same program of O&M and minor construction activities as the proposed action; Impacts AES1 through AES6 would thus be the same under Alternative 3 as those described above for the proposed action.

The key difference between Alternative 3 and the proposed action is that the Alternative 3 HCP would cover a smaller number of species, so the compensation acreages required under the Alternative 3 HCP are likely to be somewhat less. However, PG&E could still be required to consult separately with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding potential take of other special-status species not covered by the Alternative 3 HCP, and any such consultation could result in the identification of additional habitat compensation needs; as identified in Chapter 3 (*Land Use and Planning*), the net result of Alternative 3 could be the preservation of a somewhat larger number of smaller and more areally distributed parcels compared to the larger, more consolidated preserve acreages anticipated under the proposed action. Smaller, more widely distributed preserves could ultimately result in benefits to more viewers. On the other hand, smaller, more areally distributed preserves could be less aesthetically effective than larger parcels. In summary, it is difficult to predict benefits under Alternative 3, but it is likely that they would be slightly less than those offered by the proposed action.

Alternative 4—No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, PG&E would continue its existing program of O&M activities unchanged. Impacts AES1 through AES6 would be essentially the same under the No Action Alternative as those described above for the proposed action.

No HCP would be implemented under the No Action Alternative, but PG&E would nonetheless be required to obtain permits for any incidental take of special-status species on a case-by-case basis. As described in Chapter 1 (*Introduction*), the permitting process would require conservation planning and consultation with USFWS, with the expectation that habitat losses would be compensated at ratios similar to those required under the proposed action. There would thus be some potential for aesthetic benefits related to the preservation of natural open space under the No Action Alternative. However, because conservation planning would be less centralized, and habitat preservation would occur in a less systematic way, smaller acreages would probably be preserved at any one time. The scenario for the No Action Alternative would be similar to that for Alternative 3, but is likely to result in even less centralized compensation planning.

As described for Alternative 3, if compensation lands were widely distributed, they could ultimately benefit more viewers than would benefit from larger, more consolidated preserves. On the other hand, smaller, more areally distributed preserves could be less aesthetically effective than larger ones. In summary, aesthetic benefits under the No Action Alternative are difficult to predict, but are likely to be less marked than those offered by any of the action alternatives.

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