

## **10.0 AESTHETICS**

This chapter describes the existing visual setting of the project area, including the visual character of Marin County and the project area and views of the project site from surrounding areas. The chapter then analyzes the impacts of the Proposed Project and three alternatives on the visual character and views of the project site.

### *10.1. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT*

#### **10.1.1 Visual Character of Marin County**

Marin County offers a pleasing variety of dramatic coastlines, forested hills and mountains, and lowland marshes and agricultural lands. A large percentage of the County is preserved as scenic land or recreation land by various public agencies (e.g., USFS, BLM, and state and county agencies). “Scenic land” is defined in Section 65561 of the Government Code of California as “open space land which possesses outstanding scenic qualities worthy of preservation.” “Recreation land” is “any area of land or water designated on the state, or any regional or local open space plan, as open space land and which is actively used for recreation purposes and open to the public for such purposes with or without charge.”

Marin County’s natural beauty is often cited as a contributing factor to the high quality of life experienced by residents of the County, recreationists visiting the County, and small businesses seeking to relocate to the County. It is therefore important that the County develop in a manner that retains these characteristics.

#### **10.1.2 Visual Character of the Project Area**

The project is set within the North San Francisco Bay region. South of the site is a residential community, partly extending into woodland hills dominated by blue oaks. To the north and east are fringe marshes and waterways (Black John Slough on the north, the Petaluma River on the east), beyond which lie extensive areas of diked baylands, used largely for agriculture, open space, and wildlife conservation. Although the site is within the Novato city limits and is less than 3 miles from downtown Novato, it retains a rural character.

The East Bahia portion of the site is visible from State Route (SR) 37 as it crosses over the Petaluma River to the southeast. West Bahia is also partially visible across the Petaluma Marsh Wildlife Area (Rush Creek and Cemetery Marshes) from U.S. Highway 101 (US 101) to the west. The entrance to the Bahia residential community provides sweeping views from the crest of Bahia Drive of the entire project site, plus Black John Slough, the Petaluma River and lands beyond. Portions of the site are also somewhat visible from Bahia residences, particularly those on the side of Topaz Drive and Santana Road facing the West Bahia HOA Lagoon and those on the hillsides facing north towards the site. Views from some of the side streets off Topaz are obscured. The Topaz and Santa Bahia Parks (see Chapter 11, Recreation) look out primarily onto the West Bahia

Lagoon, although there may be limited views of portions of the project site beyond the lagoon. A maintained trail along the southern edge of West Bahia, skirting the blue oak woodlands, provides views of that portion of the site, and casual trails on the East Bahia peninsulas offer additional views of the site.

Since the failure of the on-site pump, the project site has remained largely inundated for most or all of the year. This large area of open water creates a striking visual impression, especially in the early morning and late afternoon periods when its reflective quality is increased.

## **10.2 CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING SIGNIFICANCE OF EFFECTS**

Visual impacts consist of negative changes from existing to post-project landscape character. These changes are the result of introducing foreign elements of line, form, color and texture to the existing landscape. New sources of light and glare are also considered visual impacts. The magnitude of the impact is usually related to the relative scale of the change, to the sensitivity of the viewing population, and to exposure time. The distinctiveness of an existing landscape contributes to sensitivity and impact significance.

Visual impacts must be evaluated from community perspectives. For instance, nighttime light or glare created by development set in an urban or suburban environment might not generate the same impact it would in a rural community. Impacts to viewsheds can differ significantly from urban and suburban environments to rural areas where vistas may be mostly undisturbed.

Appendix G of the *CEQA Guidelines*, the CEQA Environmental Checklist, poses the following questions to be considered in determining whether the project would cause significant visual impacts. The Proposed Project would have a significant impact on visual resources if it would:

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

## **10.3 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES**

Evaluation of the Bahia Marsh Restoration Project with respect to the CEQA criteria listed above leads to the conclusion that the Proposed Project and project alternatives would not cause significant visual impacts.

### **10.3.1 Proposed Project**

A site visit and preliminary analysis of aerial photography did not reveal any scenic resources in the areas designated for tidally influenced inundation. Scenic resources such as trees, rock outcroppings, and hills occur in the uplands adjacent to the Proposed Project. It is not anticipated that the project would affect such resources. Land acquisitions already completed ensure the adjacent uplands will be preserved.

The Proposed Project would not obstruct any major viewsheds, result in substantial permanent changes to existing views, or degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site. As noted above, the project site is visible from SR 37, a California Department of Transportation (CalTrans) eligible “scenic roadway” in Marin and Sonoma Counties (CalTrans 2000). Currently, views of the site from SR 37 and elsewhere consist primarily of estuary, marsh, agricultural lands, and oak woodlands. The restoration project will not cause permanent adverse effects to scenic vistas from this roadway.

Development of marsh habitat will involve flooding the project site to create the conditions necessary for colonization by marsh vegetation. Creation of new areas of open water could create additional reflective light and glare. However, the site is already flooded a good portion of the year and any additional light or glare that would occur is not likely to impact nearby residents or motorists on SR 37.

As the project proceeds, portions of the site will be graded to permit tidal inundation and marsh development. De-vegetated ground at the site will be temporarily visible from roads and residences in the immediate vicinity. Due to tidal inundation and colonization by pioneer and early successional vegetation, temporary de-vegetation of graded sites will be inconspicuous. As the site restoration matures, a scenic view of marsh habitat will evolve. Permanent visual changes to the site as a result of implementing the Proposed Project will be compatible with the surrounding viewshed.

Changes in site vegetation, as well as changes in the birds and wildlife frequenting the site would have subtle indirect visual effects. It cannot be clearly said whether these changes would be positive or negative. Permanent visual changes to the site as a result of implementing the Proposed Project would be compatible with the surrounding viewshed. To the extent that the aesthetics of the project area are enhanced by the presence of an abundance and diversity of birds and other wildlife, alternatives that support an abundance and diversity of wildlife are most likely to have a positive visual impact.

Construction equipment and vehicles at the project site would cause temporary impacts to the quality of project area views. However, because these impacts would be very limited in extent and duration, they are deemed less than significant.

**Visual Impact-1. Impacts to views of the project site resulting from changes in wildlife populations.** The project areas would continue to support an abundance and diversity of birds and other wildlife. Therefore, the quality of the visual setting, which relies to some extent on this diversity and abundance of wildlife, would not be significantly impacted.

**Significance:** Less than significant.

**Visual Impact-2. Temporary impacts to views of the project site resulting from de-vegetated ground in graded portions of the site.** As noted above, this impact will be short-term as the site is rapidly colonized with pioneer and early successional vegetation. Use of fill from the East Bahia site and implementation of measures included in the project Vegetation Management Plan (VHMP; e.g., construction of marsh nuclei clusters) will further speed plant colonization and are believed to reduce the impact to less than significant.

**Significance:** Less than significant.

**Visual Impact-3: Temporary impacts to views of the project site resulting from the operation of heavy construction equipment, vehicles, and material storage.** As noted above, this impact would be temporary and the project is not located in a designated scenic area. Therefore, this impact is deemed less than significant.

**Significance:** Less than significant.

### **10.3.2 No Project Alternative**

The No Project Alternative would not cause visual impacts. The No Project Alternative would not result in the improvements to wildlife diversity and abundance anticipated under the Proposed Project and Alternatives 1 and 2. Therefore, the indirect visual benefits that could result from each of those alternatives would not apply to the No Project Alternative.

### **10.3.3 Alternative 1 (Reduced Fill Removal from East Bahia)**

Visual impacts under Alternative 1 are anticipated to be the same or nearly the same as those under the Proposed Project. There will not be as much East Bahia fill available for restoration purposes under this alternative. This may have some impacts on wildlife diversity and abundance. It may also reduce the extent and duration of construction phase impacts, compared to the Proposed Project, to a small degree.

### **10.3.4 Alternative 2 (No Fill Removal from East Bahia)**

Visual impacts under Alternative 2 are anticipated to be the same or nearly the same as those under the Proposed Project and Alternative 1. East Bahia fill will not be available for restoration purposes in Central Bahia under this alternative. This may have some

impacts on wildlife diversity and abundance. Since greater earth-moving activities would occur within East Bahia, Alternative 2 is not expected to reduce the extent and duration of construction phase impacts, compared to the Proposed Project and Alternative 1.