

3.3.9 Aesthetic Resources

The discussion of aesthetic resources is divided into four sections. The affected environment is discussed in Section 3.3.9.1, environmental effects of the Project are discussed in Section 3.3.9.2, proposed conditions are discussed in Section 3.3.9.3, and unavoidable adverse effects are addressed in Section 3.3.9.4.

Where existing, relevant, and reasonably available information from YCWA's PAD was not sufficient to determine the potential effects of the Project on aesthetic resources, YCWA conducted the one study (*Technical Memorandum 10-1, Visual Quality on Federal Land*), which is complete (Table E6-1 in Appendix E6).

3.3.9.1 Affected Environment

This section is divided into two subsections 1) regulatory context and 2) existing visual conditions.

3.3.9.1.1 Regulatory Context

The Project is located on federal land and private land primarily in Yuba County, California, and a small portion in Nevada County, and Sierra County, California. For this study the only federal lands discussed are managed by the Forest Service around Bullards Bar Reservoir, Log Cabin Diversion Dam, and Our House Diversion Dam. Land managed by the Forest Service is referred to as National Forest System Lands (NFS lands).

Forest Service

On NFS lands south of New Bullards Bar Reservoir, the North Yuba River, and then Canyon Creek, the Tahoe National Forest (TNF) has management authority. On lands north of New Bullards Bar Reservoir, the North Yuba River, and Canyon Creek, the Plumas National Forest (PNF) has management authority. For day to day recreation management the Tahoe National Forest is the lead Forest. On NFS land managed by the Tahoe National Forest, the TNF Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) established Visual Quality Objectives (VQOs) under Forest Standards and Guidelines and Management Area direction that require land management activities meet a specific VQO on various areas of NFS land. The VQOs are displayed on a map provided in the LRMP identified as the Recreation Element; Visual Quality Objective Map dated 1989. The VQOs are defined under the TNF LRMP Standards and Guidelines. For the Project, the pertinent VQOs are "Retention," "Partial Retention" and "Modification." The Retention VQO allows management activities that are not visually evident. The Partial Retention VQO allows management activities that remain visually subordinate to the characteristic landscape. The Modification VQO allows management that may visually dominate the original characteristic landscape, but activities alter vegetative and land form must borrow from naturally established form, line, color, or texture and at such a scale that the visual characteristics are those of natural occurrences within the surrounding area or character type. The VQO's and their definitions are primarily focused on forest land management activities, but they also apply to

existing facilities and proposed facilities. In a similar fashion, NFS land managed by the PNF is guided by the PNF LRMP established VQOs under Forest Standards and Guidelines and Management Area direction that require land management activities meet a specific VQO on various areas of NFS land. The VQOs are displayed on a map provided in the PNF LRMP identified as the Recreation Element; Visual Quality Objective Map dated 1988. The VQOs are defined under the PNF LRMP Standards and Guidelines. The definitions of the VQOs are the same as the TNF described above since they are part of a National Visual Management System.

Yuba County

YCWA used a simplified version of the Forest Service Visual Management System to assess facilities located on private land, including land owned by YCWA when it was adjacent to NFS lands. YCWA also identified the visual direction contained in the General Plan for Yuba County. In general, the General Plan has broad goals to maintain or enhance the visual quality of the lands within the county with an emphasis on a policy that states: “encourage the preservation and enhancement of the natural features of the County, including rivers and areas of scenic beauty, and native vegetation” (Yuba County 1973). In addition emphasis is placed on protecting views from scenic highways and other important highways that are specifically named. These highways include Marysville Road and State Highway 49. New Bullards Bar Dam and associated facilities along with a marina, two boat launches, and several recreation facilities are located in Yuba County on NFS lands and lands owned by YCWA.

Sierra County and Nevada County

Our House Diversion Dam and impoundment straddle the Sierra County/Nevada County line (Sierra County to the north and Nevada County to the south of the line). This is the only YCWA facility in these two counties. Both counties list State Highway 49 as an emphasis for retaining the natural visual quality along the highway corridor. However, Our House Diversion Dam is located deep in the Middle Yuba River Canyon and is not visible from State Highway 49 due to intervening terrain. Therefore there are no visual concerns for this facility in regards to Sierra and Nevada County Plan standards and will not be further addressed.

3.3.9.1.2 Existing Visual Conditions

The facilities and features of the Project are located in the northern Sierra Nevada mountain range (character type) and more specifically within the subregion of flat ridge tops and steep valley zone. The dominant visual character for the New Bullards Bar Reservoir area is a continuous cover of mixed conifer forest along with oaks and madrone. Madrone, live oak, and black oak are a significant component of the mixed conifer forest in the New Bullards Bar Reservoir area. Log Cabin Diversion Dam and Our House Diversion Dam are included in this area but both are located in the lower parts of the steep valley walls. The mixed conifer is composed primarily of ponderosa pine, white fir, and Douglas fir with a sprinkling of sugar pine. The forest vegetation is vigorous and dense with medium to fine texture and medium to dark green in color. In winter, the conifers keep the hillsides looking predominantly green. In the spring the hillsides look a more bright yellow green due to new growth on the conifers and new leaves on the deciduous trees. The terrain is rolling to flat ridge tops interspersed with deep

valleys. Natural rock outcroppings and cliff faces are not common to see in the flatter terrain but does show up along the steep valley walls that cut through the flat ridge tops and rolling hills. Red, yellow, and white soils along the shoreline are exposed when the New Bullards Bar Reservoir water surface level drops. Visual contrast of Project facilities can be compared to the above visual character.

The Project reservoir and impoundments provide an additional scenic asset to the landscape. The public takes advantage of these assets by hiking, biking, fishing, boating, camping, and picnicking on or nearby these reservoirs. Most of the recreation focus is on New Bullards Bar Reservoir because public access is encouraged through trails, boat ramps, campgrounds, and a marina. In contrast, Log Cabin Diversion Dam and Our House Diversion Dam impoundments do not provide recreation facilities. Overall, the dams, recreation facilities, and other Project facilities tend to blend into the landscape from most viewpoints. However, New Bullards Bar Dam, Emerald Cove Marina, and the moored boats including houseboats exhibit strong visual contrast due to light colors, uniform textures, and geometric shapes seen in the foreground and near middle ground from Marysville Road, Sunset Vista Point, Dam Overlook, Cottage Creek Boat Launch, Emerald Cove Marina, and boats on the southern part of the reservoir.

3.3.9.2 Environmental Effects

YCWA assessed three dams, one marina, two boat ramps with parking areas, and several campgrounds associated with the Project. This assessment is documented in detail in *Technical Memorandum 10-1 Visual Quality on Federal Land* (YCWA 2012). All of the facilities on or near federal land met the PNF and TNF land management visual direction from background and most from middle ground. At less than 1-mi, Dark Day Boat Launch started to show contrast with the surrounding landscape and exhibited strong visual contrast in the foreground (1/2 mile and less) viewed from boats on New Bullards Bar Reservoir. This was the same case for the house boat rentals, Emerald Cove Marina, New Bullards Bar Dam, and Cottage Creek Boat Launch all seen from boats; and from Marysville Road and Sunset Vista Point. The moored rental houseboats and marina exhibited strong visual contrast due to light and reflective colors of the house boats and the boxy and angular shapes of the house boats and docks associated with the Marina. Cottage Creek Boat Launch and New Bullards Bar Dam exhibited strong visual contrast due to the straight lines, geometric shapes, and large uniform smooth texture shapes introduced into the landscape. In these cases of strong visual contrast, the facilities do not meet TNF and PNF VQO's. In addition, the draw down of New Bullards Bar Reservoir over the summer season results in strong visual contrast as more and more bright red/orange and white soils are exposed to the public. Due to strong visual contrast the draw down does not meet TNF and PNF VQO's. However, the drawdown is recognized as a feature of the reservoir that cannot be mitigated.

As described above, under environmental effects, some of the existing Project facilities on or near NFS land managed by the PNF and TNF do not meet the LRMP visual quality objectives in foreground or middle ground. YCWA's proposed Project includes four conditions related to aesthetic resources. Each condition is discussed below, including how the condition would protect or enhance visual resources. Implementation of these conditions would help to assure that the effects of the proposed Project on aesthetic resources would be less than significant.

The first condition, *Consult with the Forest Service Annually Regarding Project Effects on NFS Land* (GEN1), would: 1) assure that YCWA's planned activities are efficiently coordinated to the extent possible with Forest Service activities, including those related to visual quality; 2) make the Forest Service aware of YCWA's planned O&M activities on NFS land; and 3) make YCWA aware of all pertinent Forest Service orders, rules, and policies that might affect the planned activities. YCWA's planned mitigation measures and Project O&M activities for the calendar year are determined by meeting with the Forest Service and other agencies in the first quarter of each year. An annual meeting early in the year is appropriate since YCWA normally develops an annual maintenance plan early in each calendar year. YCWA would file documentation of the meeting with FERC, including recommendations by the Forest Service, if requested by FERC. The condition does not imply that YCWA may not proceed with planned Project O&M activities until YCWA has reviewed the planned O&M activity with the Forest Service, or relieve YCWA from obtaining all necessary approvals and permits for the planned maintenance work.

The second condition, *Consult with the Forest Service Regarding New Ground Disturbing Activities on NFS Land* (GEN2), pertains to new ground disturbing activities. If during the term of the new license, YCWA proposes ground disturbing activities not addressed by the relicensing NEPA process; such activities have the potential to adversely affect special-status species and other resources including visual resources on NFS land. This condition would assure that reasonable protection, mitigation, and enhancement measures are developed to address the potential effects of the new ground disturbing activities. Specifically, prior to performing the new ground disturbing activity, YCWA would consult with the Forest Service, as appropriate, to: 1) discuss potential effects; 2) determine if additional information is needed to assess effects; 3) gather additional information, if needed; and 4) upon Forest Service's request, as appropriate, enter into an agreement to fund a reasonable portion of Forest Service's staff, as appropriate, to perform staff activities related to the proposed ground disturbing activity. This condition provides for the timely review of new ground disturbing activities.

The third condition, *Consult with the Forest Service Regarding New Facilities on NFS Land* (GEN3), also pertains to activities not addressed in FERC's NEPA review. If, during the term of the new license, YCWA proposes new Project facilities that were not addressed in FERC's NEPA process, prior to construction YCWA would develop a visual resource protection plan to address potential visual impacts from new Project facilities, if visual impacts are identified.

The fourth condition, *Implement Visual Resource Management Plan* (VR1), would implement visual mitigation measures needed to reduce the visual contrast of facilities on NFS land or adjacent to NFS lands. The mitigation proposed is to paint the white fuel storage tanks associated with Emerald Cove Marina a grey/green or dark brown or screen the tanks with a wooden fence. An additional painting mitigation is to paint the flood gate controls and housings for New Bullards Bar Dam a grey/green that matches existing structures already painted a grey/green. The third mitigation measure is to provide visual enhancement at Sunset Vista Point through vegetation removal to maintain the view of the reservoir from the picnic facilities at the Vista Point.

3.3.9.3 Proposed Conditions

3.3.9.3.1 YCWA's Proposed Conditions

As described above, YCWA's proposed Project includes four conditions related to the protection of aesthetic resources:

- Proposed Condition GEN1: Consult with the Forest Service Annually Regarding Project Effects on NFS Land
- Proposed Condition GEN2: Consult with the Forest Service Regarding New Ground Disturbing Activities on NFS Land
- Proposed Condition GEN3: Consult with the Forest Service Regarding New Facilities on NFS Land
- Proposed Condition VR1: Implement Visual Resource Management Plan on NFS land

Refer to Appendix E2 for the full text of the proposed condition. Management plans are included in Appendix E3.

3.3.9.3.2 Measures Recommended by Agencies or Other Relicensing Participants

At the time YCWA filed its DLA, no agencies or other Relicensing Participants had filed with FERC any recommended measures related to aesthetic resources.

3.3.9.4 Unavoidable Adverse Impacts

Some Project facilities on NFS lands managed by the Plumas and Tahoe National Forests do not meet Forest LRMP direction for visual quality. However, these inconsistencies between the Project and the LRMP's occur primarily in foreground and near middle ground views from New Bullards Bar Reservoir or from close by roads and trails. The unavoidable adverse impacts are considered minor due to the localized nature of the impacts and the nature of the inconsistencies. In addition, the inconsistencies are considered minor because the public using the areas are generally accustomed to these features and understand the function and purpose of such facilities, which are found throughout the Sierra Nevada. Also, the facilities pre-date the LRMP and, in many cases, the steep terrain precludes other functional options where facilities might fit in the landscape with less visual impact. Implementation of the proposed conditions will mitigate some of the Project's visual impacts in the years ahead.

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