

SECTION 3.12: VISUAL RESOURCES

This section discusses the potential effects that the alternatives considered in Chapter 2 would have on the visual resources in the DMC Unit. Information in this section is summarized from the Draft CVPIA PEIS, Visual Resources, Technical Appendix, Volume 6 (Reclamation 1997e).

AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The San Joaquin River Region is lowland with predominantly flat and gently sloping terrain bordered by hills and low mountains. The valley is semi-arid to arid, and there are few natural lakes or perennial streams. The San Joaquin River is the principal water feature. A number of wetlands used as wildlife refuges are also located in the region. The valley area is developed predominantly for agricultural uses. It is sparsely to moderately populated, having one large urban area (metropolitan Fresno) and scattered small communities. The northern area of the region near the city of Tracy is developing rapidly.

There are CVP facilities within and in the vicinity of the DMC Unit that are visual resources. They include the San Luis Reservoir and O'Neill Forebay within the Los Banos Creek State Recreation Area. The landscape in this area is considered common scenic to minimal scenic quality. Recreational sites are discussed in further detail in Section 3.11, Recreational Resources.

The area surrounding the DMC Unit is predominantly of minimal scenic quality, with some areas of common scenic quality (U.S. Forest Service 1976). Interstate 5 provides panoramic view opportunities in some of the DMC Unit, some segments of which are designated scenic highways. Views of the Delta-Mendota Canal and California Aqueduct are the basis for the designation of Interstate 5 as a scenic highway. Similarly, views of San Luis Reservoir are important reasons for State Route 152 being designated a scenic highway.

Wildlife refuges in the region near the DMC Unit project area are considered to have landscape variety that ranges from common scenic to distinctive scenic quality (U.S. Forest Service 1976). These areas provide visual contrast with surrounding agricultural lands primarily because of their vegetation and water. The scenic quality is enhanced seasonally by the large numbers and variety of waterfowl and seasonal wildflower displays, which attract substantial visitation, thereby increasing the viewer sensitivity of the area. The CVP, through its wildlife refuges, creates visual benefits.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A visual resource impact would be considered adverse if it interfered with existing scenic views, blocked visibility, or produced light and glare inconsistent with existing areas. Impacts in the DMC Unit project area depend on (1) changes in cropping patterns, which may result in increased fallowed land and the associated modified agricultural viewshed, and (2) releases from storage reservoirs, which may result in a “bathtub ring” effect caused by the appearance of unvegetated soil at the shoreline between the water surface and the high water line.

NO-ACTION ALTERNATIVE

Under the No-Action Alternative, irrigated acreage would be reduced by only a small amount (see Section 3.2, Agriculture). The visual character of lands irrigated in the past for agricultural purposes would not be substantially altered. Because of the combined use of surface and groundwater, the general cultivated and fallowed acreage patterns would be similar to historical patterns, and agricultural viewsheds would not substantially change. Neither scenic views nor visibility would be adversely impacted. Therefore, the No-Action Alternative would not adversely impact visual resources.

If San Luis Reservoir is operated to increase end-of-month storage in September, the occurrence of the present “bathtub ring” effect would be beneficially reduced as compared to the Affected Environment, particularly during the summer months when the reservoir experiences substantial use.

ALTERNATIVE 1

Similar to the discussion above for the No-Action Alternative, Alternative 1 would not result in adverse impacts on visual resources. General cultivated and fallowed acreage patterns would be similar to historical patterns, and agricultural viewsheds would not change. Neither scenic views nor visibility would be adversely impacted.

ALTERNATIVE 2

Similar to the discussion above for the No-Action Alternative, Alternative 2 would not result in adverse impacts on visual resources. General cultivated and fallowed acreage patterns would be similar to historical patterns, and agricultural viewsheds would not change. Neither scenic views nor visibility would be adversely impacted.

CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Long-term contract renewals, when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, would not affect visual resources in the DMC Unit. Long-term

contract renewals will obligate delivery of the same quantities of water to the same lands, without additional facility modifications or construction that could affect viewsheds in the study area. Other reasonably foreseeable future actions that could affect water surface elevations, the visual quality of current rural and agricultural viewsheds, the conversion of lands to other developed uses, and other independent CVP operational and land use decisions will occur to the same degree regardless of long-term contract renewals, and, therefore, the action of renewing long-term contracts would not cumulatively add to these impacts arising independently.