

## 5.13 Visual/Aesthetic Resources

This section summarizes the impacts to visual and aesthetic resources due to implementing either the Proposed Program or any of the Alternatives.

Significant visual resources in the state include:

- Scenic highway corridors
- Parks and recreational areas
- Views of coastal bluffs, streams, lakes, estuaries, rivers, water sheds, mountains, and cultural resource sites
- Scenic areas

### 5.13.1 Significance Criteria

According to Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines: the CEQA Environmental Checklist, an aesthetic impact would be considered significant if the Program and Alternatives would:

- a) Have an adverse effect on a scenic vista,
- b) Damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings and historic buildings within a state scenic highway,
- c) Degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings.

### 5.13.2 Determination Threshold

Visual effects from the program would be considered significant if the acreage of treatments causing adverse and long term effects, as determined through the analysis process, exceeds more than 10% of the scenic byways viewshed acreage within that bioregion in any 10-year period.

### 5.13.3 Data and Assumptions

The following items are the most important factors to consider in determining whether a project will have a significant effect on aesthetics

- **The potential for and frequency of viewing by the general public.** The aesthetic effects of a project are more likely to be significant if they are highly visible to large numbers of the public over an extended period of time. Projects occurring within sight of major roads or within the Wildland Urban Interface may impact the aesthetics for large numbers of people. Projects that are adjacent to rural residential properties may impact only small numbers of people but over a longer period of time. Projects in remote portions of the landscape, behind locked gates or obscured by vegetation or ridgelines are less likely to significantly impact aesthetics. Changes to views that are seen by limited numbers of people or for only limited duration may be found to be less than significant.

- **The integrity and uniqueness of the existing aesthetic resource.** The magnitude of change necessary to create a significant impact to aesthetics is greater in a disturbed or non-unique environment than in a pristine or rare environment. In managed wildland environments, vegetation manipulation is not generally presumed to have a significant adverse effect on aesthetics, whereas the same treatment in a state park may be significant. Also, vegetation treatments in the WUI

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where clearing for development is common may represent a relatively minor aesthetic change compared to ongoing changes in the surrounding area.

- **The magnitude of the change.** Projects that are small in size or minimal in their physical changes to the environment are unlikely to cause a significant impact to aesthetics. Aesthetic changes associated with an individual project (~260 acres) may appear significant, but in the context of the entire bioregion may be relatively minor. Treatments, which remove the primary vegetation layer such as mechanical shrub removal or prescribed fire in chaparral, will have a much greater impact than those treatments only affecting the understory. Changes to aesthetics where the change is minor may be found to be less than significant.

Based on these factors, aesthetic effects on a programmatic scale were analyzed by assessing which treatments by themselves have an adverse visual effect and then determining how much of these treatments would occur in the viewshed of scenic highways. Table 2.4 contains data on the total acres by bioregion to be affected by each of the treatments, and Table 4.13.1b contains viewshed acreage by bioregion for currently designated scenic highways. The viewshed analysis assumes a maximum viewing distance of three miles, which is very generous. In order to calculate the potential treatment acreage in the viewshed, it was assumed that treatments are proportionally distributed between the viewshed of scenic byways and the remainder of the landscape in the bioregion.

### ***5.13.4 Direct and Indirect Effects of Implementing the Program/Alternatives***

Potential visual effects are determined by the aesthetics of the landscape after a treatment is completed – i.e. what is the condition and configuration of the remaining natural vegetation. Therefore, dividing the landscape into surface and crown fire regimes, as has been done for other chapters in this EIR, is also useful for the visual effects analysis. Surface fire vegetation types normally have treatments that primarily remove understory vegetation and reduce overall density. Because treatments in these types retain most of the existing overstory canopy and retain the natural character of the vegetation type, visual effects from all treatments in surface fire vegetation types are considered less than significant.

Crown fire vegetation types include grasslands and shrub types. Treatments in these types remove or kill nearly all vegetation leaving a significantly changed landscape (see Table 5.0.3). A shrubland or grassland blackened from prescribed fire or mechanically disturbed by heavy equipment, within the viewshed of a scenic highway, is considered an adverse visual effect. This effect would be short-term (< 2 years) in the grassland but longer-term in the shrubland. It could take up to 10 years for shrub types to visually recover from these treatments. Herbicides would have a similar effect resulting in standing dead vegetation.

In areas where hand treatment or herbivory is proposed, changes in visual quality are assumed to be minimal because this type of treatment would frequently be used to install control lines for prescribed burns, around structures (such as residences), within the WUI, or around other sensitive resources. Herbivory and hand treatments do not result in a fire scarred landscape or ground disturbance from heavy equipment that can be aesthetically unappealing. Therefore, this impact is considered less than significant. Table 5.13.1 summarizes the treatment effects.

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<b>Treatment Type</b>	<b>Effect in Surface/Mixed Fire Regimes</b>	<b>Effect in Crown Fire Regimes</b>	<b>Duration of Adverse Effects</b>
Prescribed Fire	Negligible	Adverse	Short in grasslands, long in shrub types
Mechanical	Negligible	Adverse	Short in grasslands, long in shrub types
Hand Treatments	Negligible	Negligible	
Herbivory	Negligible	Negligible	
Herbicides	Negligible	Adverse	Short in grasslands, long in shrub types

As described in Section 5.6, *Air Quality*, prescribed fire could increase the amount of smoke in and adjacent to the treatment area. Smoke in the area could temporarily limit visibility and could modify views from scenic highways, state parks, and other visually important areas. For all prescribed burns, however, a burn plan will be required that includes a smoke management plan (SMP). The SMP will minimize public exposure to smoke generated by prescribed burns. Because only a small amount of smoke would remain in the treatment area for a short period during and after the prescribed burn, this impact is considered less than significant and no mitigation is required.

Even though in crown fire types the project level effects from prescribed fire, mechanical, and herbicides are adverse, they do not cover enough of the viewshed in each bioregion to be considered significant at the programmatic level. Table 5.13.2 shows the proportion of the scenic highway viewshed affected by adverse treatments for each bioregion.

<b>Bioregion</b>	<b>Total Acres in Program</b>	<b>Total Adverse Treatment Acreage</b>	<b>Acres in Viewshed</b>	<b>Adverse Treatment Acres in Viewshed</b>	<b>Percentage of the Scenic Viewshed Affected</b>
North Coast	8,158,000	4,643	1,526,329	869	0.06%
Modoc	3,616,900	754	478,954	100	0.02%
Sacramento Valley	1,524,300	12,853	29,133	246	0.84%
Sierra	6,605,500	11,957	2,910,060	5,267	0.18%
Bay Area	3,346,500	5,742	770,204	1,321	0.17%
San Joaquin	1,799,800	8,331	126,823	587	0.46%
Central Coast	4,989,200	20,987	784,672	3,301	0.42%
Mojave	3,112,800	94	574,907	17	0.00%
South Coast	2,737,600	11,708	979,842	4,191	0.43%
Colorado Desert	2,067,800	2,783	144,192	194	0.13%

\* all treatment acres are annual

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The Sacramento Valley has the highest percentage of the scenic viewshed affected at 8.4% in ten years. However, the vast majority of these treatments would be in the herbaceous types (see Table 5.5.3.4) where effects are short term rather than the shrub types, meaning that the proportion of the landscape exhibiting adverse visual effects would not accumulate every year.

The rest of the bioregions have too small a proportion of their scenic viewshed treated to cause a significant adverse effect at the programmatic scale either annually or within a decade.

### ***5.13.5 Effects of Alternatives***

None of the Alternatives has substantially more acres treated than the Proposed Program. In fact, the other Alternatives have particularly fewer acres with adverse visual effects. Therefore, the impact from any of the Alternatives would be less than significant.

### ***5.13.6 Determinations Regarding Visual/Aesthetic Resources***

Effects from the Proposed Program and Alternatives to visual resources in the State are considered to be less than significant because there would not be:

- A substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista,
- Significant damage to scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway,
- Degradation to the existing visual character or quality of the program area.

The acreage of treatments causing adverse effects, as determined through the analysis process, does not exceed more than 10% of the scenic byways viewshed acreage within any bioregion in any 10-year period.