CHAPTER 15

AESTHETICS

Introduction

Setting

Impacts and Mitigation Measures of the 2015 Plan Alternatives

CHAPTER 15 AESTHETICS

INTRODUCTION

Public acceptance of a project may be strongly influenced by its impacts on aesthetics. CEQA requires that the visual quality in the vicinity of a proposed project be protected or even enhanced in order to offset undesirable aesthetic impacts of the project. A systematic approach to assessing baseline conditions and potential impacts to aesthetics assures the effectiveness of mitigation measures and, consequently, compliance with the objectives of CEQA.

This chapter first defines the visual setting in the vicinity of the recommended project. Next, prominent views of proposed project elements are identified, and potential visual impacts of the recommended project are determined. Finally, appropriate mitigation is proposed in order to avoid significant adverse impacts to the aesthetics in the vicinity of the project. Due to the minor nature of the proposed upgrades at the SWRP (reference Chapters 7 and 8), discussion of the existing conditions at the SWRP is not included in this chapter, and only the potential aesthetical impacts associated with the construction and operation of these upgrades are addressed.

SETTING

Regional Setting

The visual characteristics of Los Angeles County and the SCVJSS service area provide a frame of reference for assessing the visual quality of the recommended project site. The county is characterized by its diverse natural environment, varied landscapes, and a temperate Mediterranean climate that has attracted much development and supports a variety of biological resources. The 4,000 square mile county encompasses a portion of the San Gabriel Mountains, the Santa Monica Mountains, and a coastline spanning about 70 miles from Point Dume to Seal Beach.

The natural landscape features of Los Angeles County are generally subordinate to the county's urban character. Over 9 million people now reside in the county, and an extensive infrastructure of highways, surface streets, and concrete-lined storm channels crisscross the region. Oil refineries, industrial stacks, and high-voltage power lines dot the horizon, while smog, fog, and haze often limit the extent and quality of views of the surrounding mountains.

The projected service area of the SCVJSS comprises much of the Santa Clarita Valley. The valley, which is located in northern Los Angeles County, drains a watershed of approximately 500 square miles. The Santa Clarita Valley is defined by the major ridgelines of the San Gabriel and Santa Susana Mountains to the south, east, and west and by the ridgelines of the Sierra Pelona Mountains to the north. The valley itself is characterized by rolling hills, canyons, the Santa Clara River which transverses the valley from east to west, and the Angeles National Forest to the north and south. The Santa Clara River is the last remaining major, unlined river in the county.

The San Gabriel Mountains buffer the Santa Clarita Valley from the highly urbanized and extensively developed metropolitan communities of the Los Angeles Basin to the south. The Santa Clarita Valley has struggled to maintain a separate, less urban identity from the rest of the county as the valley's population has increased nearly threefold over the past two decades.

Relevant Plans and Policies

County of Los Angeles General Plan

The VWRP is located in the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County, just west of the City of Santa Clarita. Therefore, proposed projects at the VWRP

should abide by the policies of the 1988 *County of Los Angeles General Plan.* The County General Plan is an *advisory document that states policy to guide decision-making for the future of Los Angeles County.* Seventy general policies are included in the County General Plan. The following three policies are most applicable to the expansion of the VWRP in terms of preserving the county's visual resources:

- *Policy 15*: Protect areas that have significant natural resources and scenic values, including significant ecological areas, the coastal zone, and prime agricultural lands.

- *Policy 21*: Stress the development of community parks particularly in areas of the greatest deficiency, and take advantage of opportunities to preserve large natural and scenic areas.

- *Policy 33*: Protect and enhance the visual uniqueness of natural edges and encourage superior design of major entryways.

In addition, the County General Plan includes a list of scenic highways in the Circulation Element. According to the Department of Regional Planning (Koutnik, 1996), the scenic highways in the Santa Clarita Valley are the Golden State Freeway (north of Lake Hughes Road and south of Lyons Avenue), Highway 28 (from the county line to just short of Castaic Creek), and the Old Ridge Road (Angeles National Forest, from the county line to Templan Highway). I-5 is the only listed highway in the vicinity of the VWRP, but the scenic stretches of I-5 are north and south of the VWRP. The following design criteria regarding proposed development within all adopted and proposed scenic corridors are listed in Appendix A of the County General Plan's Land Use Element:

- Structures and landscaping should complement and enhance scenic views.

- If possible, potential unsightly features should be located in areas not visible from the scenic highway. If this is not feasible, they should be screened by landscaping, fencing, or other appropriate means.

The *Santa Clarita Valley Area Plan*, originally adopted in 1984 and updated in 1990, is a component of the County General Plan. The Community Design Element of the *Santa Clarita Valley Area Plan* includes the following policy for maintaining the physical appearance of the valley:

- *Policy 3.5*: Encourage planting of street trees in urban portions of the Santa Clarita Valley.

City of Santa Clarita General Plan

While the VWRP is not located within the boundaries of the City of Santa Clarita, the planning area of the 1991 *City of Santa Clarita General Plan* encompasses the VWRP site. The City General Plan includes a Community Design Element, which is intended to *assist in guiding growth of future development in order to achieve the visual integrity of the city and the planning area.* The City General Plan lists eleven goals within the Community Design Element. The following goals are most applicable to the proposed expansion of the VWRP:

- *Goal 6*: Protect and enhance open space areas that provide visual and aesthetic character and identity to the community.

- *Goal 9*: Promote superior landscape design which emphasizes aesthetics, function, and water conservation.

- *Goal 11*: Achieve a coordinated and efficient infrastructure system which is visually unobtrusive while designed to meet the current and future needs of the planning area.

Valencia Water Reclamation Plant

The VWRP, constructed in 1967, is located at 28185 The Old Road, west of I-5 between Valencia and Castaic. The 19-acre VWRP is zoned as heavy agricultural and currently includes wastewater treatment and solids processing facilities. The property immediately surrounding the VWRP is zoned as heavy agricultural and commercial manufacturing to the north; business park to the east; heavy agricultural and unlimited commercial to the south; and heavy agricultural, restricted parking, and commercial recreation to the west. Refer to Chapter 9, Land Use, for additional information on zoning.

The most important visual resources in the vicinity of the VWRP include a conservation easement, granted to the Department of Fish and Game by Districts Nos. 26 and 32 in August 1993 as part of an August 1992 streambed alteration agreement. The conservation easement borders the VWRP site to the west. Adjacent to the conservation easement is the Santa Clara River. A prominent ridgeline meets the horizon to the west well beyond the river.

As proposed, the expansion of the VWRP would take place in two phases: Stage V, a 9 mgd expansion, will be located on the southern portion of the site and Stage VI, a 6 mgd expansion, will be located in the undeveloped, northern portion of the site (see Figure 15-1). The land allocated for the Stage V expansion has previously been cleared, graded, and compacted and lacks any vegetation. The majority of the land allocated for the Stage VI expansion consists of a high terrace above the Santa Clara River floodplain. This area has undergone frequent disturbances in the past and is dominated by ruderal habitat, piles of concrete and rubble, and dirt roads. The remainder of the 6 mgd expansion site is on a low terrace above the active floodplain and consists of non-native grasses, patches of sagebrush scrub, and southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest.

IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES OF THE 2015 PLAN ALTERNATIVES

Methodology of Impact Analysis

The methodology used to determine the aesthetic impacts of the proposed expansion of the VWRP was adopted from the Federal Highway Administration's Office of Environmental Policy. This assessment process is similar to the visual resource management (VRM) systems employed by several major federal agencies (Federal Highway Administration, 1983). This approach consists of six general steps:

- Define the visual environment of the project.
- Identify the key views for visual assessment.
- Analyze existing visual resources and viewer responses.
- Depict the visual appearance of the project alternatives.
- Assess the visual impacts of the project alternatives.
- Determine ways to mitigate adverse visual impacts.

Line of Sight Analysis

A line of sight analysis was performed December 1996 to determine the most prominent views of the recommended project and to assist in the evaluation of any aesthetic impacts. Key views were determined by considering the land use and the topography of the area in the vicinity of the VWRP.

The most visible component of the recommended project will be a series of 30-foot tall light poles.

Accordingly, at an elevation approximating the height of the proposed light poles, a 360 degree series of photographs of the area surrounding the plant were taken from the site. These photographs were then evaluated to determine the locations that had the best vantage points and the greatest number of potential viewers, such as highways and buildings. Finally, several photographs of the project site were taken from these prominent viewing locations. The photographs that most clearly displayed the locations of the recommended project elements were used to determine the potential level of significance and to develop appropriate mitigation.

There are only a limited number of key viewing locations of the VWRP since the plant was built at a low elevation to allow gravity-flow of wastewater to the treatment facilities. Figure 15-2 is an aerial photo of the project site labeled with primary viewing locations. There is no residential development in the vicinity of the plant and the greatest number of potential viewers are those utilizing I-5, The Old Road, Rye Canyon Road, and an exit ramp from I-5 to The Old Road. A bicycle path is proposed along The Old Road, and any views of the plant from the path would be similar to those experienced by motorists driving on The Old Road. An office park is located immediately east of the VWRP, but views of the plant from the office park are screened by an elevated section of I-5. Figures 15-3A through 15-3F are photographs of the plant taken from the primary viewing locations as identified by the line of sight analysis.

The Golden State Freeway

I-5 is a heavily used, eight-lane freeway that is located just east of the VWRP. The plant is visible to southbound traffic, but the view is mostly obstructed by vegetation and a berm along the shoulder of the freeway. Southbound motorists can potentially observe the undeveloped, north parcel of the plant for a brief moment. The VWRP is more visible to northbound traffic, especially along the elevated portion of the freeway adjacent to the plant. Figure 15-3A is a photograph taken approximately 1,200 feet south of the VWRP's main entrance. The solids processing facilities, a storage yard at the south end of the plant, and light poles are readily visible from this location. The rest of the plant is generally either too low to be seen from the elevated freeway or screened by trees. Six Flags Magic Mountain Amusement Park can be seen in the photo at the extreme left.

The Old Road

The Old Road runs along the eastern boundary of the VWRP between the plant and I-5. Traffic flow on The Old Road is much slower than that on the I-5, so there is a greater opportunity to view the plant. However, traffic volume is much lower on The Old Road. Figure 15-3B is a photograph of the VWRP taken from the northbound lane of The Old Road approximately 700 feet south of the plant's main entrance. Light poles, solids processing facilities, and control buildings are highly visible from this viewing location. The site of the proposed Stage V expansion is mostly screened by existing facilities, and the site of the proposed Stage VI expansion is screened by vegetation. Furthermore, the VWRP is partially screened by a block wall built along the eastern border of the site and trees planted along the length of the block wall.

Figure 15-3C is a photograph of the VWRP taken from the southbound lane of The Old Road about 800 feet north of the plant's main entrance. Utility poles along The Old Road are readily visible to motorists. Light poles, filters, and cylindrical storage tanks at the VWRP can be seen in the background. The foreground consists of the north parcel on which the Stage VI expansion is proposed. No screening currently exists between motorists and the north

parcel. Six Flags Magic Mountain Amusement Park can be seen to the left of the plant in the photograph.

Figure 15-3D is a photograph of the plant taken from in front of a service station along The Old Road just north of the VWRP's main entrance. Utility poles and the north parcel of the plant are readily visible to motorists on The Old Road and patrons of the service station. Mature trees and a block wall adequately screen the existing plant facilities. Several recently planted trees just north of the block wall partially screen a portion of the north parcel.

Rye Canyon Road

Rye Canyon Road intersects The Old Road in front of the VWRP. Consequently, the plant is in direct view of westbound traffic on Rye Canyon Road. Figure 15-3E is a photograph of the VWRP taken from Rye Canyon Road approximately 100 feet east of The Old Road. Visible in the immediate foreground are traffic lights, light poles, and utility poles. Just beyond are the VWRP's solids processing facilities and light poles. Six Flags Magic Mountain Amusement Park can be seen in the background. Much of the plant is effectively screened by a block wall and a row of mature trees. Some younger trees have been recently planted along the block wall. Neither the Stage V expansion site nor the Stage VI expansion site is visible to motorists from this viewing location.

The Golden State Freeway Off-Ramp to The Old Road

Motorists exiting I-5 to The Old Road have an unobstructed view of the north parcel of the VWRP as well as some of the plant's existing facilities, including filters, storage tanks, and light poles. The site proposed for the Stage V expansion is completely screened by the block wall, trees, and plant facilities. Figure 15-3F is a photograph of the plant taken from the right shoulder of the off-ramp approximately 50 feet from The Old Road. Utility poles can be seen in the foreground, and Six Flags Magic Mountain Amusement Park appears prominently in the background.

Criteria for Determining Significance

Criteria for determining the significance of impacts are based on Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines. Guidelines applicable to visual impacts state that a project will normally have a significant effect on the environment if it will conflict with adopted environmental plans and goals of the community where it is located or have a substantial, demonstrable negative aesthetic effect. Visual impacts are considered significant if the project would result in any of the following:

- The project substantially reduces the visual quality of existing views from important viewing locations.
- The project affects a scenic vista or scenic highway.
- The project conflicts with stated goals or policies that address protecting visual quality in adopted general plans of the county or city in which the project is located.

The Recommended Project

VWRP Expansion Construction Impacts

Impact: *Potential for Temporary Reduction in Visual Quality Resulting from Construction at the VWRP.* Construction of new facilities and modification of existing facilities at the VWRP would involve excavating areas within the VWRP; siting equipment and equipment storage and staging areas; storing excavated material and debris; siting temporary construction offices, fences, sanitary facilities, and possibly other appurtenant structures; and removing vegetation.

Wherever feasible, the Districts would require all contractors to locate staging, equipment storage, and construction material storage areas outside visually sensitive areas or to screen these areas using fencing, berms, or planted vegetation. Impacts of construction would terminate following completion of construction, removal of equipment and materials, and cleanup of storage and construction areas. Therefore, this temporary impact is less than significant during the two construction periods for the Stage V and Stage VI expansions.

Mitigation: No mitigation is required.

VWRP Expansion Operations Impacts

Impact: *Potential for Reduction in Visual Quality Resulting from Introduction of New Elements at the VWRP.* The proposed project includes the construction of new facilities and the modification of existing facilities at the VWRP. New facilities and facilities that will be modified are identified in Figure 15-1. Many of the new facilities would be visible from prominent viewing locations, including I-5, The Old Road, and Rye Canyon Road. Some new structures would contrast in form, line, color, or texture with their immediate surroundings. However, due to the existence of a service station, traffic control signals, utility poles, power lines, existing VWRP facilities, and the Six Flags Magic Mountain Amusement Park, the visual quality of the area in the immediate vicinity of the plant has already been diminished.

Nevertheless, this impact is considered significant because the quality of existing views from prominent viewing locations would be further reduced by the introduction of new elements that contrast with the VWRP's surroundings, which include the southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest along the western boundary of the plant and the undeveloped ridgeline to the west.

Mitigation Measure 15-1: *Partially Screen New Elements from Public View Where Feasible.* New elements of the recommended project will be partially screened from views from public travel routes. Screening may be accomplished by using vegetation, berms, fencing, or other acceptable techniques and combinations of techniques that would effectively screen at least 30 percent of views of the new elements within 10 years of completion of construction of the new facilities.

Screening would be used along the north and east boundaries of the undeveloped, north parcel to block views of the proposed 6 mgd expansion on the north parcel. Screening would also be used on the south end of the plant, which is currently used as an equipment storage area. Screening would consist mostly of trees that, at maturity, would reach sufficient heights to provide effective screening. Figure 15-4 is a schematic showing existing and proposed screening. This mitigation measure would reduce this impact to a less than significant level.

Impact: *Potential for Reduction in Visual Quality Resulting from Increased Light and Glare at the VWRP.* The recommended project includes the construction of new facilities and the modification of existing facilities at the VWRP. As a result, some areas and facilities would receive new lighting. Increased lighting at the VWRP may reduce visual quality by increasing light and glare that would be visible to vehicles traveling along I-5, The Old Road, and Rye Canyon Road.

However, light and glare would be controlled by using a minimal amount of light sources and operating the lighting for the least time necessary for operations, safety, and security. In addition, light fixtures would be located and oriented to minimize their visibility from sensitive viewing locations, such as vehicles on nearby roadways.

Light fixtures would be utilized that orient light only on areas where it is needed and that effectively shield stray light from other areas offsite. Therefore, this impact is considered less than significant.

Mitigation: No mitigation is required.

SWRP and VWRP Upgrade Construction Impacts

Impact: *Potential for Temporary Reduction in Visual Quality Resulting from Construction at the SWRP and VWRP.* Due to the minor nature of the proposed upgrades at the SWRP and VWRP, the construction-related visual impacts will be minimal and will have a less than significant impact on the overall aesthetics in the vicinities of the WRPs.

Mitigation: No mitigation is required.

SWRP and VWRP Upgrade Operations Impacts

Impact: *Potential for Reduction in Visual Quality Resulting from Introduction of New Elements at the SWRP and VWRP.* The proposed upgrades at the SWRP and VWRP are minor in nature and are mostly restricted to modifications of existing facilities. However, pumping facilities, piping, and chemical storage tanks may be required as part of the proposed upgrades at the SWRP and VWRP. Such facilities would be minor in size compared to the existing facilities at the WRPs and would be adequately screened from potential views by existing walls and vegetation. Therefore, this impact is less than significant.

Mitigation: No mitigation is required.

Impact: *Potential for Reduction in Visual Quality Resulting from Increased Light and Glare at the SWRP and VWRP.* The proposed upgrades at the SWRP and VWRP are minor in nature and would not require increased lighting. Therefore, this impact is less than significant.

Mitigation: No mitigation is required.

Biosolids Disposal and Reuse Impacts

Impact: *Potential for Reduction in Visual Quality Resulting from Biosolids Disposal and Reuse.* Implementation of the recommended project would involve continued land application and, possibly, landfilling activities. These activities could result in degradation of visual quality from the creation of new sites. However, the Districts will only use sites that are properly permitted and have thoroughly addressed all site-specific impacts, including visual impacts, through the preparation of site-specific environmental documents or compliance with federal, state, or local land use regulations. Consequently, this is a less than significant impact.

Mitigation: No mitigation is required.

No Project Alternative

Under the No Project Alternative, no new facilities would be constructed, and there would be no significant changes to current treatment plant operations. Therefore, there are no significant visual impacts associated with the No Project Alternative.