

3.10.2 Visual/Scenic Resources

This section describes the existing visual setting of the Hetch Hatchy Communication System Upgrade project site areas, including scenic resources, existing views, and typical viewers; and a discussion and analysis of potential impacts on visual and scenic resources.

3.10.2.1 Affected Environment

This section describes the existing visual setting of the Hetch Hatchy Communication System Upgrade project site areas, existing scenic resources and vistas/important views at each site and typical viewers. The Proposed Action includes the removal of facilities at some sites, and very minor changes to existing facilities at other sites, which would result in negligible visual changes at these sites. Therefore, this discussion and analysis of potential impacts is limited to the sites for which new, potentially visible development is proposed.

In this section, views are occasionally discussed in terms of immediate foreground, foreground, middleground and background, which are distance zones defined by the Forest Service (USDA 1995). Resources or objects in the immediate foreground are visible within 300 feet of the viewer. Foreground views are considered to be those within approximately one half-mile of the viewer; middleground views are views of objects or scenic resources between approximately one half-mile and four miles away from the viewer; background views are views that extend beyond four miles from the viewer, to the horizon.

Oakdale Area Site (Warnerville Switchyard)

The Warnerville Switchyard is located east of the City of Oakdale, near the base of the Sierra Nevada foothills. The general area is developed, as the switchyard is surrounded by farmland, which is primarily used for grazing. A number of residences are located nearby, along Warnerville Road, near the entrance to the switchyard. The land in this area is flat and grassy. Reedy vegetation lines ditches alongside segments of Warnerville Road, but few trees or any other natural forms of substantial height are present in the landscape. As a result, the electrical and communication towers associated with the switchyard define the visual character of the area and are clearly visible in all views from nearby public roads (Figure 3.10.2-1). These roads are where typical viewers in this area – namely residents, farmers, and farm workers – are most likely to be.

The predominant land uses in the surrounding area are residential and industrial agriculture. As such, there are no scenic resources of note at this site, nor are there any views (including vistas) that would be considered to be important.

Moccasin Area Sites

The town of Moccasin is located within the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada foothills, near the intersection of Highways 120 and 49. The three Moccasin Area sites are located at elevations ranging from 1,000 feet to 3,000 feet. The Moccasin Powerhouse is the dominant structure in the town, which consists mainly of the HHW&P facilities, including the powerhouse and offices, and a small network of cottage-lined streets. While the powerhouse in use is more recent, the original powerhouse, built in 1925,

remains prominent in views of the site, due mostly to its location and distinctive architecture. Viewers in this site would be predominantly HHW&P employees and views from this area would be limited, as the town is located at the bottom of a narrow, northwest-trending canyon. Prominent visual features in the area include the original powerhouse. Views to the south include the steep base of Moccasin Peak in the foreground, beyond Moccasin Reservoir. Views to the west extend outward toward the canyons that form part of the northern extent of the Don Pedro Reservoir. Views to the east are of vegetation-covered hills to either side of Moccasin Creek (Figure 3.10.2-2), and views to the north are dominated by the penstocks running down the steep hillside of Priest Grade to the powerhouse.

Sierra Nevada Sites (Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park)

The Sierra Nevada sites include all communication facility sites except those located in the Moccasin and Oakdale Areas and are located at elevations ranging from between 3,000 feet and 5,000 feet. The majority of the project area is characterized in form and color by granite formations typical to the Sierra Nevada. The Tuolumne River traverses the project area in an east-west direction, and the valleys and canyons through which it and its tributaries wind greatly define the visual character of the area; the river's edge is formed at some locations by wooded, gentle slopes and at other locations by sheer rock walls, ranging from dozens to hundreds of feet in height. Boulders line the river bed and shape the skyline, as larger masses of granite jut out from mountain slopes and form the peaks throughout the project area. Views from areas of high elevation reveal a rocky, mountainous terrain, the mass of which is broken up by steep canyons and river valleys.

Such views also reveal the vast extent of the Stanislaus National Forest and Yosemite National Park, though the forestland within the project area is heavily wooded only in certain portions. Trees in the area include primarily conifer (ponderosa pine, Jeffrey pine, incense cedar, and Douglas fir) and occasionally-occurring black oak. Portions of the landscape that appear to be more sparsely vegetated are characterized by scrub, mostly manzanita and deerbrush. Some portions of the landscape include evidence of the fire that passed through the project in recent years. In these areas, most notably Burnout Ridge, a large number of deadened trees set amid thick underbrush are present.

In general, most of the project area is natural in appearance. Man-made features in the landscape surrounding the project sites are predominantly those associated with Forest and Park management, recreation, and the existing HHW&P facilities, themselves, which consist of concentrated areas developed for energy and water utilities, along with associated infrastructure corridors (e.g., power poles/lines and penstocks).

Proposed Actions at the some or all of the sites within the following Stanislaus National Forest areas are evaluated in this section: Cherry Lake, Early Intake and Tuolumne River Area, and Burnout Ridge. The action proposed for the Duckwall Mountain area is the removal of HHW&P equipment, antennas, and antenna feed systems, which would not constitute substantial changes in the visual environment; as such, actions in that area are not analyzed in this section.



North-facing view of Warnerville Switchyard from Warnerville Road
Figure 3.10.2-1



Southeast-facing view of Moccasin Powerhouse
Figure 3.10.2-2

Proposed Actions at some or all of the sites within the following Yosemite National Park areas are also evaluated: Lake Eleanor and Poopenaut Pass. All project-related actions at the O'Shaughnessy Dam sites would occur within existing developed areas and most would consist of installations within the Dam, within existing buildings, or mounted on the exterior of existing buildings, including the O'Shaughnessy Stream Gauge structure. The exterior wall-mounted cabinets would be installed at the O'Shaughnessy Watershed Keeper's Office/Residence (Cottage 4) and O'Shaughnessy Bunkhouse. Because these actions would not be highly visible or constitute substantial changes in the visual environment, actions at the O'Shaughnessy Dam areas are not discussed further in this section.

Cherry Lake is located approximately three miles north of Burnout Ridge and approximately eight miles west of Hetch Hetchy, within the Stanislaus National Forest. It is accessed from Cherry Lake Road, a paved road that intersects just west of Cherry Lake with National Forest Route 14, a paved road that leads west to Sonora. The largest lake in the Stanislaus National Forest, Cherry Lake presents a number of recreational uses, such as hiking, swimming, fishing, camping, boating, water skiing and jet skiing. Such recreationists are the primary viewers in this area, along with the residents and employees stationed at the nearby Cherry Lake cottages, warehouse and Watershed Keeper's offices. Important existing views are of the lake, a scenic resource and a dominant feature in the visual landscape, as well as the land surrounding the lake, which is thickly forested with predominantly pine and cedar to the east, north and west, where the hilly terrain slopes down to the lake's rocky shoreline (Figure 3.10.2-3). The southern edge of the lake is formed by the Cherry Valley Dam, a large earthen dam. The land to the immediate south of the lake on the opposite side of the dam is rocky and more sparsely forested than other parts of the site (Figure 3.10.2-4). It drops steeply in elevation down to Cherry Creek, which continues at the foot of the dam from a spillway. Despite the man-made nature of the lake itself, the landscape to its west, north and most of its east is natural in character. The eastern portion of the lake includes a foot trail, and the single-structure Cherry Pump Station. The southern portion of the lake is defined more by built features, such as the dam, boat ramp, bridge over the spillway and electrical distribution lines. A dirt road (Road NF-1N14) passes along the top of the dam, providing access to the eastern side of the lake and continuing on to Lake Eleanor. Burnout Ridge is visible in background views to the south from the Cherry Lake Dam.

The Intake Radio Site is located along a ridge within the Stanislaus National Forest that overlooks the Tuolumne River Valley to the north and east, providing expansive views of the ridgelines on either side of the river. Views to the south and west are obscured by terrain and vegetation. The site itself is rugged; intermittent conifer trees are underlain by a rocky, grassy terrain, in which manzanita and deerbrush scrub are frequently visible in the area. Despite its natural setting and relatively remote location (west of the intersection of Cherry Lake Road and O'Shaughnessy Dam Road, and accessed only by a dirt road), Intake Radio Site has the characteristics of a developed landscape and contains no scenic resources of note. A steel transmission tower is located in the center of the site, and the adjoining transmission lines bisect the site, running in an east/west direction. A smaller communication pole, located near a small maintenance building, places additional transmission wires into immediate foreground views that already contain a number of overhead wires (Figure 3.10.2-5). However, views of this site from the surrounding area are limited. The access route is not a through road and very few people would be likely to travel along it. Other views of the general area are from O'Shaughnessy Dam Road.



View of Cherry Lake from shore
Figure 3.10.2-3



South-facing view from Cherry Lake Dam
Figure 3.10.2-4

Burnout Ridge is located within the Stanislaus National Forest. It is southwest of Cherry Lake and Lake Eleanor and is accessed from Cherry Lake Road by a dirt logging road. At approximately 5,500 feet in elevation, it is among the highest sites in the project area and is approximately 4,000 feet higher than Cherry Creek, which runs along its eastern base. Views from this site are expansive, particularly those to the north, where a number of trees appear to have been burned in a recent fire. From this viewpoint, unobstructed background views of Cherry Lake are available, along with the mountains and ridgeline beyond the reservoir (Figure 3.10.2-6). Views to the east, south and west are at least partially blocked by the thick distribution of conifer trees and chaparral, as well as the rocky terrain, which is slightly higher in the southern and eastern portions of the site. Foreground and middleground views include evidence of clear-cut logging; however, no other evidence of human activity, aside from the access road, is present in immediate foreground and foreground views, and there are currently no structures at this site. The prominence of Burnout Ridge allows it to be clearly visible as a land mass from distant locations, including points along O'Shaughnessy Dam Road, Cherry Lake Road, and Cottonwood Road, each of which is a paved, relatively well-traveled road.

Lake Eleanor is located to the east of Cherry Lake, just inside the Yosemite National Park. The landscape is similar to Cherry Lake in that water is the dominant visual feature in views of the area, and forested land slopes down to a rocky shoreline on all sides of the lake except for the southern edge, which is dammed (Figure 3.10.2-7). Here, however, instead of a steep decline in elevation on the southern side of the dam, a tributary of the Tuolumne River descends gradually away from the project site, through a streambed characterized by naturally-occurring granite blocks, as well as smaller boulders and conifer vegetation (Figure 3.10.2-8). The lake and these large rocks are scenic resources particular to this site within the larger project area. Hiking and fishing are recreation activities most likely to take place in this area. Typical viewers include such recreationists, as well as persons stationed at the Lake Eleanor Ranger Station, located on the southeastern shore of the lake. Road NF-1N14 terminates at the ranger station. Aside from the Lake Eleanor dam, man-made features, particularly communication infrastructure, are present in views of the western shoreline (the Lake Eleanor – Cherry Lake Tunnel communication cabinet) and along the top of the dam (the Lake Eleanor Dam Level Gauge, located near the dam's midway point). No significant views to points outside of the project site are available.

The Poopenaut Pass site is located along O'Shaughnessy Dam Road, approximately four miles southwest of Hetch Hetchy, within Yosemite National Park. At an elevation of approximately 5,000 feet, the general area affords views along the Poopenaut Valley in the foreground and middleground, and the Hetch Hetchy valley in the background, with both the reservoir and the dam visible (Figure 3.10.2-9). Poopenaut Pass is visually characterized by the series of large, granite outcroppings that give the area its form and make it visible in middle- and background views from other locations in the project area (Figure 3.10.2-10). Mature conifer trees are the dominant vegetation within the immediate area, and they are plentiful enough so as to obstruct views from certain parts of the site. Manzanita and other chaparral are also present throughout the site. Scenic resources are mainly those that make up the natural appearance of the site: the rugged, rocky terrain appears undisturbed, with the exception of O'Shaughnessy Dam Road and a short, unmanaged trail from a turnout along the road to an unmaintained gathering spot (the "saddle"). Typical viewers in the area are people on their way to or from Hetch Hetchy and include those who might stop to take in the view from the saddle area, a vista point where prominent views of both the project site in the immediate foreground and Hetch Hetchy in the background are available.



Northeast-facing view from Intake Radio Site
Figure 3.10.2-5



North-facing view of Cherry Lake from Burnout Ridge
Figure 3.10.2-6



North-facing view of Lake Eleanor from Lake Eleanor Dam
Figure 3.10.2-7



South-facing view from Lake Eleanor Dam
Figure 3.10.2-8



Northwest-facing view of Hetch Hetchy from Poopenaut Pass
Figure 3.10.2-9



Examples of typical terrain at Poopenaut Pass
Figure 3.10.2-10