3.1 Aesthetics

This section evaluates the potential impacts related to aesthetics and visual resources during construction, invasive plant management, and maintenance of the Project. Construction activities include the earthwork involved in the estuarine restoration and infrastructure improvement portions of the Project. Invasive plant management activities include the removal of dense-flowered cordgrass, (*Spartina densiflora*), European beachgrass (*Ammophila arenaria*), and dwarf eelgrass (*Zostera japonica)* using any one or a combination of the methods described in Section 2.5 (Proposed Invasive Plant Management). Maintenance activities include periodic repairs and improvements to the non-motorized boat put-in, trails, parking lots and road within the Project Area, and also include monitoring activities. The aesthetics study area extends beyond the Project Area boundary and includes views of the Project Area from Table Bluff County Park and Table Bluff Road to the north, and views of the Project Area from Copenhagen Road to the east.

3.1.1 Setting

The following text describes the existing visual character of the aesthetics study area. The descriptions of existing conditions are accompanied by photographs of representative views taken during a site visit on August 27, 2018.

Regional Visual Character

According to Humboldt County's General Plan, scenic beauty is the most notable characteristic of Humboldt County for visitors and one of the most appreciated attributes among residents. Forested hillsides, working agricultural land, river corridors, and the coast are some of the scenic resources that require protection to maintain the county's characteristic scenic beauty and unique sense of place (Humboldt 2017).

Visual Character of the Project Area

Views of the Project Area are of a natural landscape composed of saltmarsh, levees, and various vegetation communities, generally surrounded by water, including McNulty Slough to the east, Hawk Slough to the southeast, and North Bay to the south. Coastal dunes are located along the western edge of the Project Area, abutting the Pacific Ocean. A barn and associated corrals adjacent to the northern boundary of the Project Area are located off of the gravel access road from Table Bluff Road.

The Project Area is visible from Table Bluff Road and Copenhagen Road, and from Table Bluff County Park. The views of the Project Area from Table Bluff Road and Copenhagen Road are generally limited to the foreground and some medium range views where the view point is elevated above the Project Area. Views of the dune restoration area from Table Bluff County Park are limited to the dunes immediately adjacent to the park, which obstruct longer range views of the Project Area and Pacific Ocean.

Visual Character of the Surrounding Area

The dominant visual character of the lands surrounding the Project Area is associated with pasture and agricultural lands interspersed with undeveloped saltmarsh and coastal dunes. Table Bluff County Park is located north of the Project Area and provides limited public amenities, including a paved parking area. Other land uses that contribute to the visual character of the surrounding area include rural residential homes to the north; single-family homes to the east and south; and the Pacific Ocean to the west. The closest residences in the Project vicinity are located northeast of the site along Indianola Reservation Road (near Area D), which was previously part of the Wiyot Tribe's Table Bluff Reservation. The two main roads bordering the Project Area are Table Bluff Road and Copenhagen Road, which primarily provide views of the adjacent homes, pasture and agricultural lands, vegetation, coastal views, and limited views of the Project Area.

Project Area Photographs

Images 3.1-1 through 3.1-8 show various viewpoints from within and adjacent to the Project Area. The photographs were taken on August 27, 2018. The location these images were taken from are indicated on Figure 3.1-1 – Photo Viewpoint Locations.

Image 3.1-1: Gravel access road off Table Bluff Road looking south at the Project Area.

Image 3.1-2: Existing barn and proposed parking lot area from the end of the access road looking west.

Image 3.1-3: Tidal wetlands in Area A looking northwest from the levee between Area A and Area B.

Image 3.1-4: Area B and distant buildings and hills in the background looking southeast.

Image 3.1-5: Area B and long-range view of surrounding land uses looking east.

Image 3.1-6: McNulty Slough from the perimeter levee around Area B, looking southeast.

Image 3.1-7: Long-range view of the Project Area from Table Bluff looking south.

Image 3.1-8: European beachgrass in the proposed dune restoration area, looking south.

Regulatory Framework

Federal

There are no federal regulations that apply to the proposed Project related to visual resources.

State

California Coastal Act

The California Coastal Act (Coastal Act) was enacted by the State Legislature in 1976 and is the primary law that governs the decisions of the California Coastal Commission. The Coastal Act outlines, among other things, standards for development within the Coastal Zone. The Project Area is located within the Coastal Zone.

Section 30251 (Scenic and Visual Qualities) under Article 6 (Development) of the Coastal Act, states, "the scenic and visual qualities of coastal areas shall be considered and protected as a resource of public importance. Permitted development shall be sited and designed to protect views to and along the ocean and scenic coastal areas, to minimize the alteration of natural land forms, to be visually compatible with the character of surrounding areas, and, where feasible, to restore and enhance visual quality in visually degraded areas."

Regional and Local

Eel River Area Plan

The *Eel River Area Plan* of the *Humboldt County Local Coastal Program* contains policies related to protecting existing visual resources. Views of the Project Area are available from areas adjacent to the Project Area, within the *Eel River Area Plan's* jurisdiction. The following policies related to scenic resources are applicable to the Project:

> *3.4.2 Visual Resource Protection Section 30251*
>
> *The scenic and visual qualities of coastal areas shall be considered and protected as a resource of public importance. Permitted development shall be sited and designed to protect views to and along the ocean and scenic coastal areas, to minimize the alteration of natural landforms, to be visually compatible with the character of surrounding areas, and, where feasible, to restore and enhance visual quality in visually degraded areas. New development in highly scenic areas such as those designated in the California Coastline Preservation and Recreation Plan prepared by the Department of Parks and Recreation and by local government shall be subordinate to the character of its setting.*
>
> *New Development shall: Section 30253*
>
> *(5) Where appropriate, protect special communities and neighborhoods which, because of their unique characteristics, are popular visitor destination points for recreational uses.*
>
> *E. Natural Features*
>
> *Significant natural features within the Eel River Planning Area, and specific protection measures for retention of these resources are as follows:*
>
> *<u>Area</u>*
> *Eel River Delta bottomlands*
>
> *<u>Scenic Protection</u>*
> *Designated Agriculture Exclusive which encourages continuation of current agricultural activities and prohibits conversion to non-resource dependent activities.*

Evaluation Criteria and Significance Thresholds

The Project would cause a significant impact related to aesthetics resources, as defined by the CEQA Guidelines (Appendix G), if it would:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings or if located in an urbanized area, conflict with applicable zoning and other regulations governing scenic quality; or

- Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or night-time views in the area.

Areas of No Project Impact

Construction, invasive plant management and maintenance activities associated with the Project would not result in impacts related to two of the significance criteria identified in Appendix G of the current CEQA Guidelines. Accordingly, the following significance criteria are not discussed further in the impact analysis:

- **Would the Project substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings and historic buildings within a State scenic highway?** There are no designated State scenic highways in the Project Area or vicinity (Caltrans 2018), and the Project would not utilize a State scenic highway for access or otherwise impact a scenic resource associated with a State scenic highway. Therefore, the significance criterion related to substantially damaging scenic resources within a State scenic highway is not applicable to the Project and is not discussed further.
- **Would the Project create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or night-time views in the area?** The Project would not include new lighting or reflective surfaces that would cause glare. No night-time construction work is proposed. Therefore, the Project would not create a new source of light and glare. No impact would occur.

Methodology

The visual impact analysis evaluates the effects the Project would have on the visual character and views of and from the study area. As described above, the aesthetics study area extends beyond the Project Area boundary and includes views of the Project Area from Table Bluff County Park and Table Bluff Road to the north, and views of the Project Area from Copenhagen Road to the east. The analysis is based on field observations, aerial photographs, and reviews of relevant planning documents. The potential for changes to views from visually sensitive public land uses is evaluated based on field observations. The visual impacts are qualitatively evaluated using the thresholds of significance discussed above.

Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Impact AES-1: Would the Project have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?

A scenic vista can generally be defined as a view that has remarkable scenery or a broad or outstanding view of the natural landscape. The Humboldt County General Plan identifies scenic vistas from State Route 101, and from beaches, state parks, and coastal access points.

The Project Area is a generally undeveloped portion of land composed of saltmarsh, tidal wetlands, levees, and dunes that abut the Pacific Ocean. Distance views from Table Bluff are considered Coastal Zone Scenic Views and have the potential to be affected by the Project. The scenic viewpoint from Table Bluff offers long-range views of the Project Area, where the viewer can observe the various vegetated and

non-vegetated areas, saltmarsh and tidal wetland areas, and levees (Image 3.1-7). Additionally, the Table Bluff County Park has public beach access that abuts the northern edge of the dune restoration portion of the Project Area where European beachgrass management would occur. Views south of this public beach access have the potential to be affected by Project activities.

Estuarine restoration Project activities would be visible from the Table Bluff viewpoint. Views of equipment used to construct the estuarine restoration component of the Project would be visible for up to two construction seasons, and large areas of existing vegetation would be temporarily disturbed to remove and lower levees, excavate tidal channels, and install habitat features. It is anticipated the area restored to tidal inundation would recruit native saltmarsh vegetation to the site within one year, at which point the vegetated and aquatic characteristics of the estuarine restoration area would be comparable to existing conditions. Given the temporary nature of construction activities and the fact that the site would revegetate relatively quickly to comparable conditions, construction of the estuarine restoration portion of the Project would have a less-than-significant impact on scenic vistas.

Once the estuarine restoration portion of the Project is completed, the Project Area would include new recreational amenities including improved parking areas, creation of a formal trail system, and a new non-motorized boat put-in. These recreational components would not be readily visible from the identified scenic viewpoint from Table Bluff given their limited size and height. Accordingly, the addition of permanent recreational components to the Project Area would have a less-than-significant impact on scenic vistas.

Invasive plant management would focus on control and removal of dense-flowered cordgrass from tidal areas and European beachgrass from the dunes. By design, removal of these plant species would change the aesthetic of the Project Area from one dominated by a single species to one that supports a diversity of native plants. Removal of European beachgrass from the dunes would also, over time, change the shape of the foredune in the Project Area to one more typical of native coastal dune mat community (hummocky, semi-stable, and botanically diverse). It is anticipated that treatment areas may take 1-2 growing seasons to revegetate (and may be bare, charred, or otherwise disturbed in the interim). Although the proposed vegetation management activities would change the aesthetics of the area (both in the short- and long-term), they would not represent an adverse effect on a scenic vista. In fact, for many viewers, the restoration of the Project Area to one dominated by native species would enhance the visual quality of the area. Maintenance activities would be infrequent and temporary and would not impact scenic vistas. The Project would have a less-than-significant impact on scenic vistas.

Mitigation Measures: No mitigation is necessary.

Level of Significance: Less than significant.

Impact AES-2: In a non-urbanized area, would the Project substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of public views of the site and its surroundings? (Public views are those that are experienced from a publically accessible vantage point).

The existing visual character of the Project Area is discussed in Section 3.1.1. The Project Area is located on the coast, within a rural setting, with various saltmarsh and tidal wetland areas, levees, and the open expanse of undeveloped landscape just east of the Pacific Ocean. As discussed under Impact AES-1 above, aesthetic impacts that may potentially occur during construction of the estuarine restoration portion of the Project would be temporary and only visible from limited locations (e.g., Table Bluff). Other views available from publicly traversed areas would be limited due to the topography of the surrounding environment and the proximity of the publicly accessible roadways to the Project Area. Once constructed, recreational amenities, including the improved parking, road, and trail facilities, would not substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site as they would be limited in scope and generally low profile. Recreational use of the Project Area would be comparable to existing conditions (bird watching, hunting, and hiking), and would not substantially change views of or from the Project Area. Finally, the characteristics of the estuarine restoration area would be comparable to existing conditions after saltmarsh vegetation re-establishes, although fewer levees and built infrastructure would be present. Given the temporary nature of construction activities, the fact that the site would revegetate relatively quickly to comparable conditions, and the non-intrusive nature of the public access amenities, construction of the estuarine restoration portion of the Project would not substantially degrade the short-term visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings. Therefore, the Project would have a less-than-significant impact on the short-term visual quality of the site.

Construction equipment would also be used in the Project Area for invasive plant management. The invasive plant treatment that would be visible to the public would mainly occur within Areas A and D, which would be focused on dense-flowered cordgrass management. Invasive plant management within the dune restoration area would also occur and be focused on European beachgrass, although views of beachgrass treatment areas would be limited due to the existing dunes obstructing views from Table Bluff County Park. The treatment of the invasive plants would be intermittent, conducted on an annual or as needed basis, and as funding allows.

As described under Impact AES-1, by design, invasive plant management activities would change the aesthetic of both the tidal and dune restoration areas from a viewshed dominated by a single invasive species, to one dominated by a diversity of native plant species. Removal of European beachgrass from the dunes would also change the height and shape of the foredune in the Project Area to one more typical of a native coastal dune mat community (flatter, less densely vegetated). It is anticipated treatment areas may take 1-2 growing seasons to revegetate (and may be bare, charred, or otherwise disturbed in the interim). However, these temporary and long-term changes in the aesthetics of the Project Area would not substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings. In fact, for many viewers, the restoration of the Project Area to one

dominated by native species would enhance the visual quality of the area. The Project would have a less-than-significant impact during the invasive plant management phase. Maintenance activities would have no effect on aesthetics.

Mitigation Measures: No mitigation is necessary.

Level of Significance: Less than significant.

Cumulative Impacts

Impact AES-C-1: Would the Project contribute to a cumulatively significant impact to visual resources?

As discussed in Section 3.1.3, the Project would not result in impacts relative to a state scenic highway or a new source of light or glare. Therefore, implementation of the Project would not contribute to cumulative impacts on these resources.

The Project would have less-than-significant impacts relative to scenic vistas (Impact AES-1), and degradation of visual character or quality (Impact AES-2). Similar to the Project, implementation of cumulative projects identified in Table 3.0-1 (Projects Considered for Cumulative Impacts), such as the Russ Property Levee Stabilization project and Cannibal Island Restoration Study Area, would result in other restoration focused projects in the area. Such projects typically result in comparable aesthetic qualities. Construction and maintenance of cumulative restoration projects may occur at the same time as the Project. However, cumulative impacts would be less than significant because construction and maintenance activities would be temporary and the distance between the Project Area and the identified cumulative projects would limit the potential for cumulative impacts in the study area.

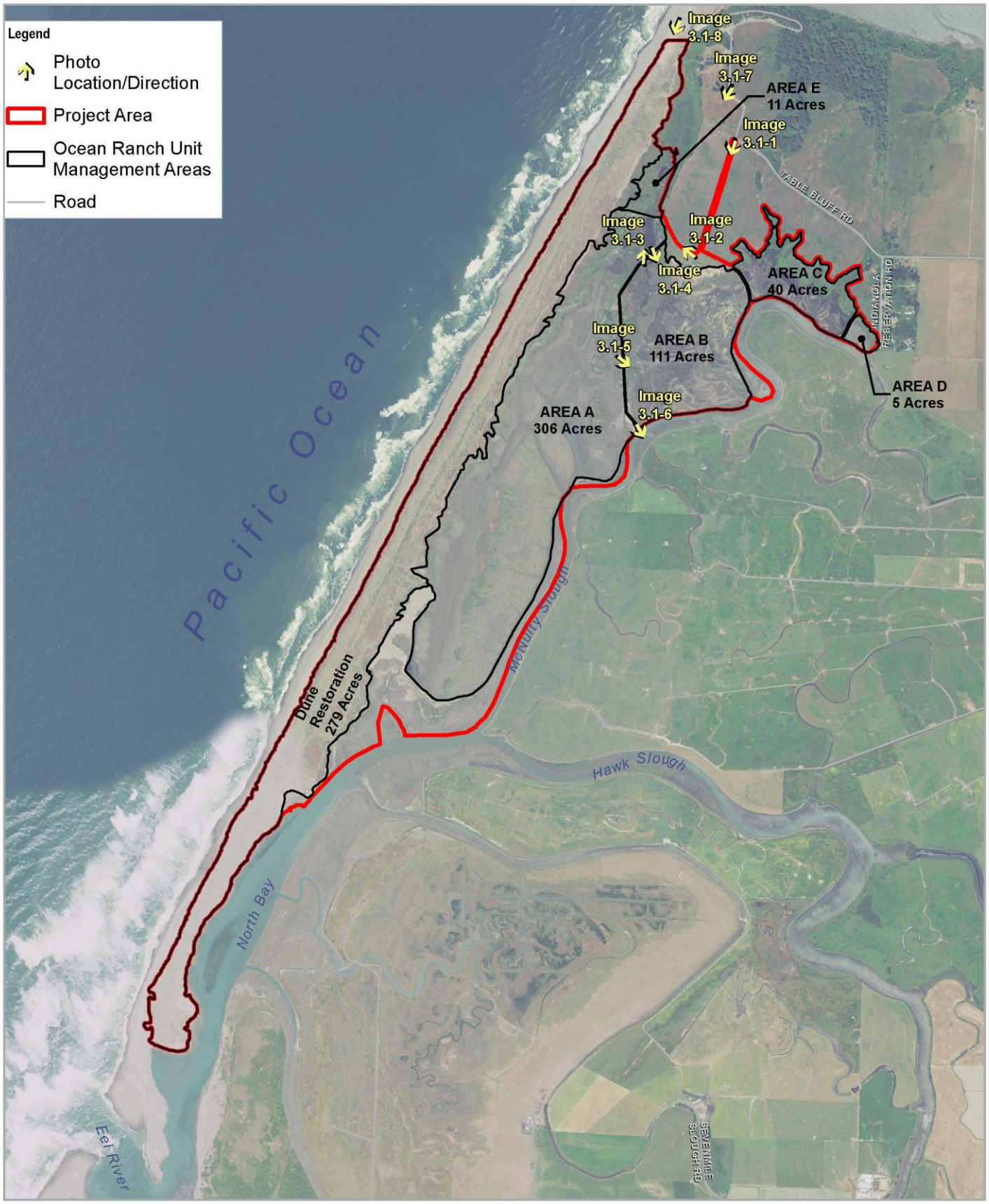
Mitigation Measures: No mitigation is necessary.

Level of Significance: Less than significant.

References

California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). 2018. California Scenic Highway Program, accessed website on September 5, 2018 at: http://www.dot.ca.gov/hq/LandArch/16_livability/scenic_highways/

Humboldt County. 2017. Humboldt County General Plan. Available at: https://humboldtgov.org/205/General-Plan



Paper Size ANSI A

0 0.1 0.2 0.3 0.4

Miles

Map Projection: Lambert Conformal Conic
Horizontal Datum: North American 1983
Grid: NAD 1983 StatePlane California I FIPS 0401 Feet

N

GHD

California Department of Fish and Wildlife
Ocean Ranch Restoration Project

Project No. **11152100**
Revision No. **-**
Date **6/16/2020**

Photo Viewpoint Locations

FIGURE 3.1-1

N:\US\Eureka\Projects\111\11152100 – DU Ocean Ranch Estuary CEQA\08-GIS\Maps\Deliverables\EIR\Ch3-1\11152100_03-01-01_PhotoLocations_RevA.mxd
Print date: 16 Jun 2020 - 12:37

Data source: Photo Locations, GHD, 8/27/2018; DU Ocean Ranch Unit Management Areas, GHD, 10/17/2018; Project Boundary, GHD, 10/17/2018; Humboldt County roads, 2008; NAIP orthoimagery 2016; .
Created by: jclark2