

# PROPONENT'S ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT – ZAYO PRINEVILLE-TO-RENO FIBER OPTIC PROJECT

Aesthetics

## 5.0 ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

### 5.1 AESTHETICS

This section describes existing conditions and potential impacts on aesthetic resources as a result of construction and operation of the project. The analysis in Section 5.1.5, Draft Environmental Measures, concludes that with the implementation of APMs, impacts on aesthetic resources would be less than significant. The project's potential effects on aesthetic resources were evaluated using the significance criteria set forth in Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines.

#### 5.1.1 Environmental Setting

##### 5.1.1.1 Landscape Setting

The project would install 193.9 miles of fiber-optic cable underground in California across the eastern portions of Modoc, Lassen, and Sierra Counties. The proposed alignment would mostly be within the existing Caltrans right-of-way of US 395, a major north-south highway that traverses northeastern California and ultimately connects to Oregon and Nevada. The running line generally follows US 395 but also county roads between the communities of Standish and Buntingville in Lassen County, California, where it follows Standish Buntingville Road (Lassen County Road A3) for 7.35 miles and Cummings Road for 1.15 miles before returning to the right-of-way parallel to US 395.

In this part of California, US 395 extends along the Modoc Plateau, a high, flat terrain that is bordered by the eastern slopes of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada Mountain Ranges and the western edge of the Great Basin (USFS 2006). The Modoc Plateau is characterized by arid basins and uplands, forested mountain ranges, alkaline lakes, and streams. These landscape features are visible from the highway throughout much of the project area. The separation of the project area into discrete landscape units is therefore not necessary. Specific landscape features include the forested mountain ranges of the Modoc and Plumas National Forests, Goose Lake, Honey Lake Basin, and the eastern Sierra Valley. Vegetation in the project area is typical of the high-desert landscape and mostly consists of sagebrush steppe, grasslands, and juniper woodlands. Elevations within the project area generally range from 4,000 to 6,000 feet above mean sea level.

The area immediately surrounding US 395 is sparsely populated and contains agricultural lands and open space. There are also existing aboveground transmission and distribution lines that parallel either side of the highway. Development appears sparse throughout most of the project, outside of the comparatively concentrated communities along US 395, including the City of Alturas in Modoc County and the unincorporated communities of Standish and Buntingville in Lassen County. Figure 3-1 shows the location of the proposed alignment and provides the context of the regional and local landscapes.



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### 5.1.1.2 Scenic Resources

The visual resources in the area primarily consist of varying natural landscape features. While not officially designated as a state scenic highway by Caltrans, US 395 provides intermittent views of these features and is identified as a local scenic roadway by Modoc, Lassen, and Sierra Counties. The highway also provides locations to view these features at both designated scenic vista points, such as the one overlooking Goose Lake, and informal overlooks (e.g., pull-outs along US 395). Figures 5.1-1 to 5.1-4 provide representative photographs of the various landscape features and scenic resources that are seen from along US 395.



**Figure 5.1-1: View from Northbound US 395 in Central Lassen County**



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**Figure 5.1-2: View from Northbound US 395 in Northern Lassen County**



**Figure 5.1-3: View from Northbound US 395 in Southeast Lassen County toward Honey Lake**



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**Figure 5.1-4: View from Southbound US 395 in Central Modoc County Near the Modoc National Wildlife Refuge**

### 5.1.1.3 Viewers and Viewer Sensitivity

Accepted visual assessment methods, including those adopted by the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), establish sensitivity levels as a measure of public concern for changes to scenic quality. Viewer sensitivity, one of the criteria for evaluating visual impact significance, can be divided into high, moderate, and low categories. Factors considered in assigning a sensitivity level include viewer activity, view duration, viewing distance, adjacent land use, and special management or planning designation. Research suggests that certain activities tend to heighten viewer awareness of visual and scenic resources, while others tend to be distracting (FHWA 2015). Because most of the project would be underground, no formal viewshed analysis was completed for this project. Aboveground structures, where present, would generally be aligned with US 395. Three ILAs are currently planned to occupy properties in Herlong (0.78 acre), Spanish Springs (0.12 acre), and Alturas (0.25 acre), California. Each ILA would consist of a prefabricated concrete or steel regeneration hut erected on a concrete pad with a surrounding perimeter fence around the hut. The regeneration hut structure would be setback from the fence line, would be approximately 420 square feet (0.01 acre) and would be approximately 11 feet in height. In addition, proposed line markers would be about 4 feet tall (refer to Figures 5.1-5 and 5.1-6 to see the typical appearance of these structures). Therefore, the project's area of potential visibility, or its viewshed, is considered to be the US 395 corridor. No mapping of the potential viewshed is warranted.

Viewer groups in the project area include highway travelers and residential neighbors. Highway travelers, the largest viewer group, include people traveling on US 395 and county roadways, including Standish Buntingville Road (Lassen County Road A3) and Cummings Road. Highway travelers have views from



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the highway and include both local and regional travelers. Local travelers are familiar with the visual setting, whereas regional travelers are less familiar as they do not use the roadway on a regular basis. Views from US 395 consist of the varied landscape features that characterize this region, such as the arid basins and uplands, forested mountain ranges, alkaline lakes, and streams. Views of these landscape features are brief, as drivers are travelling at high speeds. Drivers are also generally more focused on the road compared to passengers, who are more likely to view the surrounding landscape. Therefore, their sensitivity to visual change is considered low to moderate.

There are several residences located along US 395 and several established communities, including the City of Alturas in Modoc County and the unincorporated communities of Standish and Buntingville in Lassen County. Views of US 395 from residential areas vary throughout the project area. In more rural areas, views consist of the agricultural lands and open space areas that are adjacent to US 395. In more developed areas, US 395 passes through commercial, residential, and industrial areas. Views of US 395 from residential areas may be of long duration. Therefore, their sensitivity to visual change is considered moderate to high.

### 5.1.2 Regulatory Setting

#### 5.1.2.1 Federal

There are no applicable federal regulations or policies related to aesthetics.

#### 5.1.2.2 State

##### California Scenic Highway Program

California's Scenic Highway Program, a provision of the Streets and Highways Code, was established by the Legislature in 1963 to preserve and enhance the natural beauty of California. The State Scenic Highway Program includes highways that are either eligible for designation as scenic highways or have been designated as such. The status of a state scenic highway changes from eligible to officially designated when the local jurisdiction adopts a scenic corridor protection program, applies to Caltrans for scenic highway approval, and receives the designation from Caltrans. A city or county may propose to add routes with outstanding scenic elements to the list of eligible highways; however, state legislation is required for a highway to be officially designated.

According to the Caltrans list of eligible and officially designated state scenic highways, US 395 is not designated a state scenic highway or an eligible state scenic highway in Modoc, Lassen, or Sierra Counties (Caltrans 2020).

#### 5.1.2.3 Local

CPUC has exclusive discretionary authority over this project's siting, design, and construction. However, a summary of local standards or ordinances that describe the visual character of the project area is provided for informational purposes and to assist with the CEQA review process.



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#### Modoc County General Plan

The Modoc County 1988 General Plan does not contain any goals or policies related to aesthetics and scenic resources. There are no officially designated state scenic highways in Modoc County (Caltrans 2020). However, the Modoc County General Plan recognizes that every highway in the county, including US 395, is a scenic highway as they are located in highly scenic areas (Modoc County 1988, as amended). Additionally, Highway 139, about 18 miles west of the project, is an eligible state scenic highway (Caltrans 2020).

#### Lassen County General Plan

There are no officially designated or eligible State scenic highways in Lassen County (Caltrans 2020, Lassen County 2000). However, the Lassen County 2000 General Plan recognizes all state highways, including US 395, as scenic corridors. The Lassen County General Plan defines scenic corridors as areas bordering major highways which have significant or sensitive scenic values due to the existence of significant scenic features and the level of public exposure to those areas (Lassen County 2000).

The Natural Resources Element of the 2000 Lassen County General Plan includes the following goals and policies related to scenic resources:

**Goal N-23:** Scenic resources of high quality which will continue to be enjoyed by residents and visitors and which will continue to be an asset to the reputation and economic resources of Lassen County.

**NR78 Policy:** The County has identified areas of scenic importance and sensitivity along state highways and major County roads and has designated those areas as "Scenic Corridors". (Refer to the General Plan land use map and related designations in various area plans, which may also be regarded as "scenic highway corridors".) The County will develop and enforce policies and regulations to protect areas designated as scenic corridors from unjustified levels of visual deterioration.

**NR79 Policy:** The County shall continue to use "Design Review Combining Districts" to review the visual impacts of development in designated areas to minimize significant adverse impacts.

**NR80 Policy:** In the course of adopting policies pertaining to scenic resources in other general plan elements and area plans, the County may consider additional and more particular policies and measures to protect scenic resources and prevent or reduce the adverse visual impacts of development in visually sensitive areas.

**Goal N-24:** Protection of the scenic qualities of the county's night sky.

**NR81 Policy:** The County shall maintain and enforce policies, development standards and mitigation measures to control lighting generated by development and to minimize the unnecessary adverse impacts of such lighting in the vicinity of the development and on the general scenic qualities of the night sky in the area.



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**NR82 Policy:** The County will encourage projects within Lassen County but outside the County's jurisdictional authority to include provisions to minimize the adverse intrusion of lighting on the surrounding area and the night sky in general.

### Sierra County General Plan

The scenic quality of Sierra County is defined by its natural scenery as well as its historic communities (Sierra County 2012). Important scenic features in Sierra County include the Sierra Crest, lakes and reservoirs, Sierra Valley, Sierra Buttes, mountain meadows, rivers and streams, the Lakes Basin area, and historic communities (Sierra County 2012). The Sierra County General Plan also recognizes views from the county's more heavily travelled routes, as well as those that pass through recreational areas or visually unique or highly scenic areas, are of particular importance to protect. A portion of Highway 49 from the Yuba County line to the Yuba Pass Summit about 20 miles west of the project is the only officially designated state scenic highway in Sierra County (Caltrans 2020).

The Visual Resources Element of the Sierra County 2012 General Plan contains the following goals and policies related to visual resources:

**Goal 1:** Protect and preserve important scenic resources in the County.

**Goal 2:** Protect visually sensitive areas by promoting and providing for aesthetic design in new development which reflects the customs and culture of the County.

**Policy 1:** Protect the visual quality of the County's scenic corridors (local and State).

**Policy 2:** Limit encroachments onto scenic highways to maintain safety and quality of driving and viewing experience through scenic corridors.

**Policy 4:** Seek official State Scenic Highway Status for all State highways and I-80 in the County (except in community areas).

**Policy 5:** Consider scenic values as a component of roadway construction, reconstruction, and maintenance on State and County highways and roads, with or without Scenic designation status.

**Policy 6:** Strive for a built environment that reflects the County's rural and historic qualities.

**Policy 7:** Protect the visual integrity of the County's living historic communities.

**Policy 8:** Protect important scenic resources.

### 5.1.3 Impact Questions

The visual analysis is based on review of technical data, including project maps and drawings, aerial imagery of the project area, and local planning documents. The impact analysis is based, in part, on methods adopted by FHWA's guidance and other accepted visual analysis techniques. In determining the extent and implications of the visual changes that would attend construction and operation of the project, consideration was given to the existing visual quality of the affected environment, specific changes in the



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visual character and quality of the affected environment, the extent to which the affected environment contains places or features that provide unique visual experiences or that have been designated in plans and policies for protection or special consideration, and the sensitivity of viewers and their activities and the extent to which these activities are related to the aesthetic qualities affected by the project. The project would mostly be undergrounded within the existing roadway right-of-way and once operational would not be visible to viewers; therefore, visual simulations of the project were not prepared. However, the project would include aboveground structures, such as ILAs and line markers. Representative photographs of these features have been included to support the impact analysis findings. The project’s potential effects on aesthetic resources were evaluated using the significance criteria set forth in Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines. The conclusions are discussed in more detail in Section 5.1.5, Draft Environmental Measures.

Would the project:	Potentially Significant Impact	Less-than-Significant Impact with Mitigation Incorporated	Less-than-Significant Impact	No Impact
a) Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) In non-urbanized areas, 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 publicly accessible vantage point). If the project is in an urbanized area, would the project conflict with applicable zoning and other regulations governing scenic quality?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Create a new source of substantial light or glare, which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**5.1.4 Impact Analysis**

**a) Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?**

**Less Than Significant Impact.** There is one officially designated scenic vista point, the Goose Lake scenic vista point, which is a designated pull-off area located within the project area, on the west side of US 395 in Modoc County. From this vista point, views of Goose Lake are oriented to the west and directed away from the project construction activities which would occur within the existing Caltrans right-of-way on the east side of US 395. Therefore, temporary construction activities would not obstruct views of Goose Lake from this designated scenic vista.

Once construction is completed, the project mostly would be underground and would not be visible to highway travelers or from the Goose Lake scenic vista. The project would include certain other above- and belowground equipment, such as the three ILAs, line markers, and vaults (see Figures 5.1-5 and Figure 5.1-6 for examples of these features). As shown on Figure 3-1, the three ILAs are mainly proposed





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in developed commercial and residential areas, and not located near the Goose Lake scenic vista. The line markers would be about 4 feet tall, placed mostly within the existing roadway right-of-way on the east side of the highway at roughly 500-foot intervals, and would be visible to highway travelers but for a short duration only. Therefore, the line markers would not obstruct views of Goose Lake or other surrounding landscape features that are visible from US 395. The project would not have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista, and impacts would be less than significant.

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#### **b) Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway?**

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**Less Than Significant Impact.** US 395 is not an officially designated state scenic highway, nor is it an eligible state scenic highway (Caltrans 2020). However, it is considered a local scenic highway by Modoc, Lassen, and Sierra Counties. The proposed running line and aboveground ancillary equipment would mostly be installed within the existing roadway right-of-way of US 395 or immediately adjacent within in developed commercial or residential areas. These areas do not contain scenic resources, such as rock outcroppings or historic buildings. In areas within the right-of-way that contain vegetation that could cause a fire hazard for parked vehicles or equipment, the vegetation may be mown or grubbed prior to conduit installation. No grading, tree removal or trimming, or extensive vegetation removal is anticipated to be required for the project. Once construction of the project is completed, the disturbed areas would be restored to pre-project conditions. As described in Section 5.4. Biological Resources, the applicant would revegetate areas in accordance with the revegetation and restoration plan. Therefore, the project would not substantially damage scenic resources within a state scenic highway, and impacts would be less than significant.

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#### **c) In non-urbanized areas, 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 publicly accessible vantage point). If the project is in an urbanized area, would the project conflict with applicable zoning and other regulations governing scenic quality?**

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**Less Than Significant Impact.** During construction, the presence of construction equipment, materials, and vehicles in staging areas and material storage yards would be temporarily visible to highway travelers and residents located along US 395 and in the communities of Standish and Buntingville in Lassen County, and the City of Alturas. Construction activities would occur mostly within the existing roadway right-of-way and are expected to only last for a few days at each location. As required by APM AES-1, the applicant would maintain the project site and staging areas in a clean and orderly state. Additionally, the proposed construction staging areas would be located away from public views where possible. Upon completion of construction, the project site and staging areas would be returned to pre-project conditions. Therefore, temporary construction activities would not substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the project area, and impacts would be less than significant.

Once construction is completed, the project would be mostly underground and would not be visible to highway travelers or residents located along the running line. The project would remove some vegetation to reduce fire hazards and prepare for conduit installation. However, no grading, tree removal or trimming, or extensive vegetation removal is anticipated to be required. As described in Section 5.4. Biological



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Resources, the applicant would revegetate areas in accordance with the revegetation and restoration plan..

The project would include other above- and belowground equipment, such as three ILAs, vaults, and line markers. As shown in Figure 5.1-5, the ILAs would consist of a prefabricated metal and concrete regeneration “hut” constructed on a concrete pad. Figure 3-1 shows the proposed locations of the individual ILAs in the communities of Herlong, Alturas, and Spanish Springs. The ILAs proposed in Herlong and Alturas would be located in developed commercial and residential areas, and appear similar in size to existing development. The ILA proposed in Spanish Springs would be located in an undeveloped area, but setback about 200 feet from the highway and only visible to vehicles for a short duration while driving along US 395.



**Figure 5.1-5: Example of a Typical Regeneration Hut**

The proposed vaults and line markers would be constructed of fiberglass and placed mostly within the existing Caltrans right-of-way. The vaults would be approximately 36 inches by 48 inches and would not be visible to highway travelers as they would be installed flush to the ground. Figure 5.1-6 provides an example of a typical line marker that would be placed along US 395 as part of the project. The line markers would be about 4 feet tall and would be visible to highway travelers. Views of linear features are not uncommon in this area. The ILAs and line markers would also be finished with earth-toned paints as required by APM AES-2. The use of earth-toned paints, materials, and finishes would reduce visibility of the ILAs and line markers along the highway and reduce visual contrast with the surrounding landscape. Therefore, the project would not substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of public views of the site and its surroundings. Impacts would be less than significant.



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**Figure 5.1-6: Example of a Typical Line Marker**

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**d) Create a new source of substantial light or glare, which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?**

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**Less Than Significant Impact.** During construction, light and glare may be produced from construction vehicles, construction materials, site construction trailers, and other temporary construction elements placed within the existing right-of-way. However, the presence of construction equipment and materials would be temporary as construction activities would move along the highway corridor and would last for a few days at each location. No nighttime construction work would occur. Construction crews would typically work up to 5 days per week from 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM. The overall project construction phase is expected to take approximately 6 months. Once construction of the project is completed, all construction equipment, vehicles, and materials would be removed. Therefore, due to their temporary nature, construction activities would not create substantial light or glare, and impacts would be less than significant.

The project would add exterior security lighting on the three ILA buildings. This lighting would be similar to that of surrounding properties. All lighting would be low wattage, shielded, and directed downward to reduce light spillover onto nearby properties and residential areas. The proposed ILA buildings would be constructed from metal and concrete. The line markers would be made of fiberglass and would stand about 4 feet tall. All aboveground equipment would be painted and finished earth-toned in color as required by APM AES-2 to reduce the potential for glare. Otherwise, the project would be underground and would not be visible to highway travelers or residents located along the running line. As such, the project would not create a new source of substantial light or glare, and impacts would be less than significant.



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### 5.1.5 Draft Environmental Measures

#### Applicant Proposed Measures

**APM AES-1: Staging Area Maintenance.** All project sites will be maintained in a clean and orderly state. Where commercially feasible and physically possible, construction staging areas will be located away from public view where possible. Upon completion of project construction, project staging and temporary work areas will be returned to pre-project conditions, normal wear and tear accepted.

**APM AES-2: Aboveground Ancillary Equipment.** All aboveground ancillary equipment, including the ILA huts and line markers shall use paints, materials, and finishes that are earth-toned in color.

