

4.0 Introduction to the Analysis

This chapter of the Final Environmental Impact Report (FEIR) describes the environmental resources and potential environmental impacts of the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and alternatives. Sections 4.1 through 4.20 each address a different topical resource topic, in accordance with Appendix G of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines. Each section describes the existing setting and background information for that resource topic to help the reader understand the conditions that could be affected by the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, or alternatives. In addition, each section includes a discussion of the criteria used in determining the significance levels of the environmental impacts. Finally, each section recommends mitigation measures to reduce, where possible, the adverse effects of any identified significant impacts.

4.0.1 Significance of Environmental Impacts

According to CEQA, an environmental impact report (EIR) should define the threshold of significance and explain the criteria used to determine whether an impact is above or below that threshold. Significance criteria are identified for each environmental resource topic to determine whether implementation of the project would result in a significant environmental impact when evaluated against the baseline conditions, as described in the environmental setting. The significance criteria vary depending on the environmental resource topic. In general, effects can be either significant (above threshold) or less than significant (below threshold). In some cases, a significant impact will be identified as significant and unavoidable if no feasible mitigation measure(s) is/are available to reduce the impact to a less-than-significant level. If a project is subsequently adopted despite identified significant impacts that would result from the project, CEQA requires the lead agency to prepare and adopt a statement of overriding considerations describing the social, economic, and other reasons for moving forward with the project despite its significant impact(s).

As noted above, the specific significance criteria used to evaluate impacts in this FEIR are described in each topical resource section (4.1 through 4.20). These significance criteria follow those provided in Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines.

4.0.2 Impact Terminology and Use of Language in CEQA

This FEIR uses the following terminology to describe environmental effects of the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and alternatives (with the exception of Alternatives BS-2 and BS-3; see discussion under Section 4.0.4 below):

- A finding of *no impact* is made when the analysis concludes that the Proposed Project or alternatives would not affect the particular environmental resource or issue.

- An impact is considered *less than significant* if the analysis concludes that there would be no substantial adverse change in the environment and that no mitigation is needed.
- An impact is considered *significant* if the analysis concludes that there could be a substantial adverse effect on the environment.
- An impact is considered *less than significant with mitigation* if the analysis concludes that there would be no substantial adverse change in the environment with the inclusion of the mitigation measures described.
- An impact is considered *significant and unavoidable* if the analysis concludes that there could be a substantial adverse effect on the environment and no feasible mitigation measures are available to reduce the impact to a less than significant level.
- An impact is considered *beneficial* if the analysis concludes that there would be a positive change in the environment.
- *Mitigation* refers to specific measures or activities adopted to avoid, minimize, rectify, reduce, eliminate, or compensate for significant impacts.

A cumulative impact can result when a change in the environment results from the incremental impact of a project when added to other related past, present, or reasonably foreseeable future projects. Significant cumulative impacts may result from individually minor but collectively significant projects. The cumulative impacts analysis in this FEIR (see Chapter 6, *Other Statutory Considerations and Cumulative Impacts*) focuses on whether the incremental contribution of the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and alternatives to other significant cumulative impacts caused by past, present, or probable future projects is cumulatively considerable (i.e., significant).

Because the term “significant” has a specific usage in evaluating impacts under CEQA, it is used only to describe the significance of impacts and is not used in other contexts within this document. Synonyms such as “substantial” have been used when not discussing the significance of an environmental impact.

4.0.3 Baseline Conditions

Under CEQA Guidelines (Section 15125), an EIR must describe the physical environmental conditions in the vicinity of the project. The environmental setting will normally constitute the “baseline” physical conditions and serves as a gauge to assess changes that will occur as a result of a proposed project. This EIR uses the existing physical conditions in and around the vicinity of the Proposed Project as those conditions exist at the time the notice of preparation (NOP) was published on July 30, 2018 (subsequently revised and recirculated on August 1, 2018) as baseline conditions. These environmental conditions are described throughout this FEIR within the “Environmental Setting” section included in each topical resource section in this chapter.

4.0.4 Analysis of Alternatives

Alternatives are analyzed throughout Chapter 4 in each topical resource section. Alternatives are analyzed at a lesser level of detail than the Proposed Project, but at a level that is sufficient

to determine and disclose any significant environmental impacts associated with the alternatives (except for Alternatives BS-2 and BS-3) and prescribe mitigation to reduce significant impacts. Because the specific characteristics of Alternatives BS-2 and BS-3 are unknown, these alternatives are evaluated for illustrative purposes in the FEIR. Consistent with CEQA Guidelines section 15145, no significance conclusions are provided for the Alternative BS-2 and BS-3 impact discussions. As described in Chapter 3, *Alternatives Description*, many alternatives could be paired with one another to create a complete alternative (e.g., power line route alternative plus substation siting alternative) or to address both project objectives. Refer to Table 3-22 in Chapter 3 for a matrix showing the potential alternative combinations.

In Sections 4.1 through 4.20, alternatives are analyzed individually while acknowledging that some alternatives comprise only one aspect of the project or accomplish only one of the project objectives. Chapter 5, *Alternatives Analysis Summary and Comparison of Alternatives*, provides a comprehensive discussion of the alternatives/alternative combinations in comparison to the Proposed Project and provides an environmental ranking for each possible alternative combination and the Proposed Project.

4.0.5 Availability of Information

The FEIR relies on information from the Proponents' Environmental Assessment (PEA) (May 2017 version) submitted by Horizon West Transmission (HWT) and Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E), including technical reports and supporting documents provided in the appendices to the PEA. The FEIR also relies on information provided by HWT and PG&E through responses to deficiency letters and data requests issued by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) Energy Division. Where applicable, the analysis in this FEIR cites to the PEA, applicable PEA appendices, and specific deficiency letters or data requests and provides reference information in Chapter 8, *References*. All of this information is also available through the Project website:

www.cpuc.ca.gov/environment/info/horizonh2o/estrella/index.html

Other information sources relied on for the FEIR analysis are listed in Chapter 8, *References*, and links to online material are provided where available.

4.0.6 Local Laws, Regulations, Policies, and Plans

The CPUC has sole and exclusive jurisdiction over the siting and design of the Proposed Project and alternatives, because it authorizes the construction, operation, and maintenance of investor-owned public utility facilities. CPUC General Order No. 131-D explains that local land use and zoning regulations and discretionary permitting would not apply to the Proposed Project or alternatives (i.e., these features would not require any land use approval that would involve a discretionary decision to be made by a local agency such as a planning commission, city council, or county board of supervisors). As such, the local policies and ordinances that would otherwise be relevant to the Project and alternatives are described in Appendix A for informational purposes only. General Order No. 131-D, Section XIV.B, does require that in locating a project "the public utility shall consult with local agencies regarding land use matters."

Where applicable, the impact analyses within the topical resource sections in Chapter 4 describe relevant portions of local laws, regulations, policies, or plans as they pertain to the impacts of the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and/or alternatives. Refer to Appendix A for the more detailed summary of potentially relevant local laws, regulations, policies, and plans.