

## Chapter 4 Aesthetics

### 4.1 Overview

This chapter describes the existing visual and aesthetic resources within the potentially affected area and pertinent local, state, and federal plans and policies regarding the protection of visual and scenic resources. The potential impacts on scenic resources, public views of scenic vistas, visual character of the potentially affected area, and nighttime views from construction and operation of the Proposed Project are evaluated and mitigation proposed to address the impacts found to be significant.

Aesthetics refers to visual resources and the quality of what can be seen or overall visual perception of the environment, and may include such characteristics as facility scale and mass, design character, and landscaping. Visual impacts are analyzed through an examination of views and/or viewsheds. Views refer to visual access and obstruction of prominent visual features, including both specific visual landmarks and panoramic vistas. Viewsheds refer to the visual qualities of a geographic area. The geographic area is defined by the horizon, topography, and other natural features that give an area visual boundary and context. Viewshed impacts are typically characterized by the loss and/or obstruction of existing scenic vistas or other major views in the area of the site that are available to the general public. Sensitive viewers are individuals or groups who are particularly affected by changes to the aesthetics of the surrounding area. View analysis is based upon relative visibility with regard to viewing location and proposed on-site development.

### 4.2 Regulatory Setting

#### 4.2.1 Federal Laws, Regulations, and Policies

As described in Chapter 2, *Project Description*, and shown in Figure 2-2, the Proposed Project would be located on private property within the administrative boundary of the Cleveland National Forest (CNF). While the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) does not have jurisdiction over private property within the CNF's administrative boundary, this analysis considers the USFS's CNF Land Management Plan due to the Proposed Project's close proximity to national forest lands.

The Proposed Project would be located within the Sweetwater Place area of the CNF. Sweetwater Place encompasses the urban fringe of San Diego, the communities of Alpine, Descanso, Pine Valley, Guatay, Japatul Valley, Carveacre, and the Viejas Indian Reservation, and is characterized by a mix of natural and rural/urban elements (USFS 2005). The desired condition of Sweetwater Place is described as follows (USFS 2005: Part 2, page 63):

Sweetwater Place is maintained as a natural appearing landscape that functions as one of the primary transition zones between the deserts of eastern San Diego County and southern California's coastal communities. The

valued landscape attributes to be preserved or developed over time are the undeveloped character of Forest Service land that remain in this otherwise highly developed rural area; opportunities for unobstructed, panoramic views from the Interstate 8 corridor – especially on the eastern side; the scenic integrity of important local landmarks; and built elements that are unobtrusive and exhibit a consistent architectural theme.

Program emphasis is to “manage development within the Interstate 8 road corridor to conserve panoramic views from the highway.” Applicable goals and design criteria identified in the CNF Land Management Plan are as follows:

- **CNF Strategy, LM 1 – Landscape Aesthetics.** Manage landscapes and built elements in order to achieve scenic integrity objectives.
- **CNF Strategy, LM 2 – Landscape Restoration.** Restore landscapes to reduce visual effects of management activities and nonconforming features.
- **CNF Strategy, LM 3 – Landscape Character.** Maintain the character of National Forest System lands in order to preserve their intact nature, valued attributes, and open space.

## 4.2.2 State Laws, Regulations, and Policies

### California Scenic Highway Program

In 1963, the California State Legislature established the California Scenic Highway Program, a provision of the Streets and Highways Code, to preserve and enhance the natural beauty of California (California Department of Transportation [Caltrans] 2016). The state highway system includes designated scenic highways and those that are eligible for designation as scenic highways.

There are no state-designated scenic highways in the vicinity of the Proposed Project. Interstate 8 (I-8) is an eligible state scenic highway that runs approximately 1.75 miles north of the Proposed Project, and is described in more detail within Section 4.3, “Environmental Setting,” below (Caltrans 2011).

## 4.2.3 Local Laws, Regulations, and Policies

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) has exclusive jurisdiction over the siting and design of electric transmission facilities. Therefore, it is exempt from local land use and zoning regulations. However, CPUC General Order (G.O.) 131-D states that in locating electric transmission facilities, the public utilities shall consult with the local agencies regarding land use matters. CPUC and NextEra Energy Transmission West, LLC (NEET West) have been in contact with applicable local agencies for the Proposed Project, and local laws and regulations are presented here for consideration of potential impacts related to aesthetics.

### *San Diego County General Plan*

The Proposed Project site is located within unincorporated San Diego County and is therefore subject to the County of San Diego General Plan. Chapter 3 of the County’s General Plan, the

Land Use Element, includes a framework that accommodates future development in a manner that ensures long-lasting compatibility with the existing visual character of the community (San Diego County 2011a). Chapter 5 of the County's General Plan, the Conservation and Open Space Element, provides specific guidance for the protection of scenic corridors, geographically extensive scenic viewsheds, and dark skies within the natural environment (San Diego County 2011b). The General Plan contains the following relevant policies to aesthetics and the Proposed Project:

- **Policy LU-2.8 – Mitigation of Development Impacts.** Require measures that minimize significant impacts to surrounding areas from uses or operations that cause excessive noise, vibrations, dust, odor, aesthetic impairment and/or are detrimental to human health and safety.
- **Policy LU 12.4 – Planning for Compatibility.** Plan and site infrastructure for public utilities and public facilities in a manner compatible with community character, minimize visual and environmental impacts, and whenever feasible, locate any facilities and supporting infrastructure outside preserve areas. Require context sensitive Mobility Element road design that is compatible with community character and minimizes visual and environmental impacts; for Mobility Element roads identified in Table M-4, an LOS [level of service] D or better may not be achieved.
- **Policy LU-6.9 – Development Conformance with Topography.** Require development to conform to the natural topography to limit grading; incorporate and not significantly alter the dominant physical characteristics of a site; and to utilize natural drainage and topography in conveying stormwater to the maximum extent practicable.
- **Policy COS-11.1 – Protection of Scenic Resources.** Require the protection of scenic highways corridors, regionally significant scenic vistas, and natural features, including prominent ridgelines, dominant landforms, reservoirs, and scenic landscapes.
- **Policy COS-11.2 – Scenic Resource Connections.** Promote the connection of regionally significant natural features, designated historic landmarks, and points of regional historic, visual, and cultural interest via designated scenic corridors, such as scenic highways and regional trails.
- **Policy COS-11.3 – Development Siting and Design.** Require development within visually sensitive areas to minimize visual impacts and to preserve unique or special visual features, particularly in rural areas, through the following.
  - Creative site planning;
  - Integration of natural features into the project;
  - Appropriate scale, materials, and design to complement the surrounding natural landscape;
  - Minimal disturbance of topography;
  - Clustering of development so as to preserve a balance of open space vistas,

- natural features, and community character; and
- Creation of contiguous open space networks.
- **Policy COS-11.4 – Collaboration with Agencies and Jurisdictions.** Coordinate with adjacent federal and State agencies, local jurisdictions, and tribal governments to protect scenic resources and corridors that extend beyond the County’s land use authority, but are important to the welfare of County residents.
- **Policy COS-11.5 – Collaboration with Private and Public Agencies.** Coordinate with the California Public Utilities Commission, power companies, and other public agencies to avoid siting energy generation, transmission facilities, and other public improvements in locations that impact visually sensitive areas, whenever feasible. Require the design of public improvements within visually sensitive areas to blend into the landscape.
- **Policy COS-11.7 – Underground Utilities.** Require new development to place utilities underground and encourage “undergrounding” in existing development to maintain viewsheds, reduce hazards associated with hanging lines and utility poles, and to keep pace with current and future technologies.
- **Policy COS-12.1 – Hillside and Ridgeline Development Density.** Protect undeveloped ridgelines and steep hillsides by maintaining semi-rural or rural designations on these areas.
- **Policy COS-12.2 – Development Location on Ridges.** Require development to preserve the physical features by being located down and away from ridgelines so that structures are not silhouetted against the sky.
- **Policy COS-13.1 – Restrict Light and Glare.** Restrict outdoor light and glare from development projects in Semi-Rural and Rural Lands and designated rural communities to retain the quality of night skies by minimizing light pollution.

### ***Alpine Community Plan***

The Alpine Community Plan is a subcomponent of the General Plan. The Alpine Community Plan implements the goals and policies of the County General Plan for the Alpine area. The Alpine Community Plan contains the following relevant policies to aesthetics and the Proposed Project (San Diego County, 2011c):

- **Policy 5.3.** Proposed development within the following scenic view corridors should be done with extreme care to preserve these vistas, i.e., minimize grading, clearing and destruction of natural and topographical features. View corridors are:
  - From Interstate 8 toward El Capitan Reservoir;
  - East and west views of Viejas Mountain from Interstate 8; and
  - From Interstate 8 south along Sweetwater River.



## 4.3 Environmental Setting

The following sections describe the existing conditions in the Proposed Project area as they pertain to aesthetic resources, including descriptions of the following aesthetic elements: the existing visual character; selected key observation points; and the viewer groups and their typical responses and sensitivities. This section is based on information provided in Section 4.1 of the Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity Proponent's Environmental Assessment (NEET West 2015).

### Visual Character and Quality of the Site

Visual character is a descriptive tool rather than an evaluative tool and it is based on defined attributes that are neither good nor bad themselves. The visual character of the region as well as the visual character of the Project vicinity is described further below.

#### *Regional Character*

The Proposed Project is in an unincorporated area of south-central San Diego County, located on private land within the administrative boundary of the CNF. The Proposed Project is located approximately 3.75 miles southeast of the community of Alpine, off of Bell Bluff Truck Trail road, west of Japatul Valley Road and south of I-8. Elevations in the area range from 3,000 to 3,200 feet above mean sea level. The area's topography is undulating with steep hills interspersed with narrow valleys and relatively deep canyons with incised high gradient drainage corridors. The steep hills and distant mountains are closely spaced, creating a multidimensional, primarily natural viewshed. However, in some areas existing utility lines break up that natural viewshed, especially where existing utility development (e.g., substations, water storage towers, communication towers, and associated infrastructure) and roadways exist. The habitat types in the greater Proposed Project vicinity are primarily chaparral scrub, oak woodlands, rocky outcroppings, clearings, and man-made surfaces and structures.

#### *Vicinity Character*

The Proposed Project is located approximately 1.66 miles from the intersection of Bell Bluff Truck Trail and Japatul Valley Road. The immediate area is a mix of coastal chaparral, grassy fields, paved roadways and road shoulders (along Bell Bluff Truck Trail), and the entrance to the existing San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E) Suncrest Substation. Elevation is approximately 3,050 feet above mean sea level. There is currently a single-circuit transmission line entering Suncrest Substation from the south, and a double-circuit transmission line exiting Suncrest Substation to the northwest. The Static VAR compensator (SVC) facility would be located on a site that was used as a laydown yard during the construction of Sunrise Powerlink, also referred to as the Wilson Laydown Area. The underground transmission line would be located underneath Bell Bluff Truck Trail. Bell Bluff Truck Trail runs generally east to west and serves as the access road into Suncrest Substation. Travel along Bell Bluff Truck Trail is restricted by gates to authorized personnel, including SDG&E employees, contractors, and local landowners.

## Light and Glare

Nighttime lighting is necessary to provide and maintain safe, secure, and attractive environments. Light that falls beyond the intended area of illumination is referred to as “light trespass.” The most common cause of light trespass is spillover light, which occurs when a lighting source illuminates surfaces beyond the intended area, such as when building security lighting or parking lot lights shine onto neighboring properties. Spillover light can adversely affect light-sensitive uses, such as residences, at nighttime. Both light intensity and fixtures can affect the amount of any light spillover. Modern, energy-efficient fixtures that face downward, such as shielded light fixtures, are typically less obtrusive than older, upward-facing light fixtures.

Glare is caused by light reflections from pavement, vehicles, and building materials such as reflective glass, polished surfaces, or metallic architectural features. During daylight hours, the amount of glare depends on the intensity and direction of sunlight.

While construction activities would primarily take place during the daytime, environmental factors, such as weather or temperature, may require the scheduling of nighttime activities that necessitate the use of portable temporary lighting during construction of the Proposed Project. Additionally, as described in Chapter 2, *Project Description*, the SVC facility and control building would include permanent remotely-controlled security and safety lighting consistent with National Electric Safety Code requirements and applicable San Diego County outdoor lighting codes. Additional manually-controlled lighting would also be available for use at the SVC facility and control building, when required, to further support safe working conditions. The only other indirect sources of illumination in the vicinity of the Project site include security and safety lighting at the existing SDG&E Suncrest Substation.

## Scenic Vistas

A scenic vista is generally defined as a viewpoint that provides expansive views of a highly valued landscape for the benefit of the general public. The landscape of the San Diego region is rich in natural open space, unique topographic resources, and scenic vistas. These natural features contribute greatly to the overall quality of the existing visual setting experienced by viewers within the County (San Diego County 2011b). While the peninsular ranges of the CNF provide open space and visual relief from the human-made environment, the Proposed Project is not directly located within or visible from any surrounding scenic vistas.

## Scenic Highways and Corridors

There are no state-designated scenic highways in the vicinity of the Proposed Project. The nearest state-designated scenic highway is State Route 78, located approximately 25 miles to the northeast in the Anza Borrego Mountains. Interstate 8 (I-8) is an eligible state scenic highway that runs approximately 1.75 miles north of the Proposed Project.

## Viewer Sensitivity

Viewer sensitivity is another consideration in assessing the effects of visual change. Sensitivity is a function of factors such as the visibility of resources in the landscape, proximity of viewers to the visual resource, elevation of viewers relative to the visual resource, frequency and duration of views, number of viewers, and types and expectations of

individuals and viewer groups. Attachment A<sup>1</sup>, *Viewshed Delineations*, includes depictions at varying mileage buffers that graphically display whether or not the Proposed Project might be “visible” or “not visible” from surrounding locations. Generally, the further the mileage buffer extends away from the Proposed Project, visibility is diminished and the more difficult it would be for a viewer to discern the Proposed Project from the existing landscape. Locations delineated as “visible” do not distinguish between the degree at which the Proposed Project would impose on a viewer, nor does it imply that an unintentional viewer would “notice” the Proposed Project.

Existing views of the Project site were captured from 13 key observation points (KOPs),<sup>2</sup> as shown in Attachment B, *Key Observation Points*. A location map identifying where the KOP photos were taken is also provided in Attachment B. These photographs have been selected as being representative of the types of visual resources that are present in each area. Views of the Project site and vicinity from each of the viewpoints are as follows:

- **KOP 3:** This image was taken looking east from Bell Bluff Truck Trail at the entrance to the Suncrest Substation. This location was selected to generally characterize the existing landscape views along the proposed underground transmission line to the Proposed Project. The Proposed Project transmission line would be buried underground, and therefore potential impacts to viewers would be limited to temporary construction along Bell Bluff Truck Trail. The visible landscape is affected by a road cut for the Suncrest Substation access road and driveway and a water tank, while the surrounding area is undeveloped and natural-looking. Bell Bluff Truck Trail is closed to public use, and therefore, is considered a private view. Background views are partially blocked by nearby hills and large trees (see Figure 4-1).
- **KOP 6:** This image was taken looking east at Bell Bluff Truck Trail and the former Wilson Laydown Yard. This location was selected to generally characterize the existing easterly landscape view of the Proposed Project’s SVC site. The landscape is developed and natural appearing, dominated by Bell Bluff Truck Trail, with a reclaimed California buckwheat scrub meadow in the foreground and undeveloped chaparral covered hills in the background. Some residential structures are visible in the background to the south. Views are open and unobstructed (see Figure 4-2).
- **KOP 7:** This image was taken along Bell Bluff Truck Trail looking southwest at the former Wilson Laydown Yard. This location was selected to illustrate the existing landscape view toward the Proposed Project. The landscape is both developed and natural appearing, dominated by Bell Bluff Truck Trail and showing a reclaimed California buckwheat scrub meadow and undeveloped chaparral covered hills. Views are relatively open with some obstruction by large trees.
- **KOP 8:** This image was taken looking west along Bell Bluff Truck Trail, approximately 0.25 mile northeast of the former Wilson Laydown Yard. This location was selected to generally characterize the existing landscape view toward the Proposed Project’s

<sup>1</sup> To allow for text fluidity and to best facilitate the reader, Attachment A, *Viewshed Delineations*, and Attachment B, *Key Observation Points*, have been included at the end of Chapter 4, *Aesthetics*.

<sup>2</sup> Seventeen KOPs were originally identified by NEET West; however, as the design and siting of the Proposed Project was refined, thirteen of those KOPs were ultimately selected based on consideration of typical views experienced by travelers and local viewers, and included locations where Proposed Project-related changes would be most visible to the public or be seen by the greatest number of viewers (NEET West 2015).

SVC site. The landscape visible is predominantly undeveloped and natural appearing, with undeveloped chaparral covered hills in the background. Views are relatively open, with some obstruction by large trees (see Figure 4-3).

- **KOP 9:** This image was taken looking west at the southeast corner of the former Wilson Laydown Yard. The photograph generally characterizes the existing landscape views across the Wilson Laydown Area and Proposed Project area. The landscape visible is predominantly natural appearing, with a reclaimed California buckwheat scrub meadow in the middle ground and undeveloped chaparral covered hills in the background. This KOP is adjacent to private land and may be viewed by property owners. While the existing visual quality includes man-made visual contrasts, views are generally open and unobstructed (see Figure 4-4).
- **KOP 10:** This image was taken looking southwest at the eastbound I-8 scenic viewpoint, which is a public view. This location was selected to generally characterize the existing landscape view toward the Proposed Project from I-8. The landscape visible is predominantly undeveloped and natural appearing, with rolling chaparral covered hills and mountaintops. This location provides expansive and panoramic views of the surrounding CNF and Sweetwater River Canyon. Views are generally open with no obstructions. Existing Sunrise Powerlink 230-kilovolt (-kV) transmission line towers are visible along the ridges on the right side of the photograph.
- **KOP 11:** This image was taken looking northeast along Japatul Valley Road, 3 miles south of the Proposed Project. This viewpoint is representative of the existing landscape views available to residences located in the vicinity of the Proposed Project. This view captures a portion of the transition zone between the relatively undeveloped mountain, desert, and wilderness open-spaces of eastern San Diego County, and the urbanized communities of metropolitan San Diego. The existing Suncrest Substation is visible from KOP 11. The landscape visible to the north from Japatul Valley Road is predominantly undeveloped and natural appearing; however, the landscape includes man-made structures and pockets of development. Views can be open and unobstructed.
- **KOP 12:** This image was taken looking north from the nearest private residence, approximately 0.81 mile south of the Proposed Project. Wilson Laydown Yard is visible in the center of the photograph. This view captures the Proposed Project area from a location with high viewer exposure and extended duration of views. KOP 12 contains a middle ground view of Bell Bluff Truck Trail, and offers expansive, background views to the adjacent mountains. Views can be open and unobstructed (see Figure 4-5).
- **KOP 13:** This image was taken looking north along Japatul Lane, approximately 1.52 miles south of the Proposed Project. This view includes the Suncrest Substation and Sunrise Powerlink 230-kV transmission line structures. This viewpoint is representative of the existing landscape views available to users of Japatul Lane and residences located in close proximity to the Proposed Project. This view captures the Proposed Project area from an area with high viewer exposure and extended duration of views. The landscape visible to the north is predominantly undeveloped and

natural appearing, with some man-made structures and pockets of development. Views can be open and unobstructed (see Figure 4-6).

- **KOP 14:** This image was taken View looking north along Japatul Lane towards the Suncrest Substation, approximately 1.16 miles south of the Proposed Project. This viewpoint is representative of the existing landscape views available to residences located in close proximity to the Proposed Project. This view captures the Proposed Project area from an area with high viewer exposure and extended duration of views. The existing Suncrest Substation is highly visible. The landscape is predominantly undeveloped and natural appearing, with man-made structures and pockets of development. Views can be open and unobstructed.
- **KOP 15:** This image was taken looking northwest at the intersection of Vista Esperanza Lane and Japatul Valley Road, approximately 2.15 miles southeast of the Proposed Project. This viewpoint is representative of the existing landscape views available to residences located in close proximity to the Proposed Project, and includes the existing Suncrest Substation and Sunrise Powerlink 230-kV transmission line structures. This view captures a portion of the scenic adjacent mountains; and the transition zone between the relatively undeveloped mountain, desert, and wilderness open spaces of eastern San Diego County and the urbanized communities of metropolitan San Diego. The landscape visible is predominantly undeveloped and natural appearing, with man-made structures and pockets of development. Views can be open and unobstructed.
- **KOP 16:** This image was taken looking west along Japatul Highlands Road, near a private residence, approximately 0.85 mile south of the Proposed Project. This viewpoint is representative of the existing landscape views available to residences located in close proximity to the Proposed Project. The landscape is predominantly undeveloped and natural appearing, with man-made structures and pockets of development. The existing Sunrise Powerlink 230-kV transmission line and the Suncrest Substation is visible in center of the photograph. Views can be open and unobstructed. Overall viewer sensitivity is high.
- **KOP 17:** This image was taken looking west along Avenida De Los Arboles (Bell Bluff Truck Trail), 1.3 miles east of Proposed Project SVC area. This viewpoint is representative of the existing landscape views available to residences located to the east of the Proposed Project. The landscape is predominantly undeveloped and natural appearing, with the reclaimed coastal sage meadow in the middle ground and undeveloped chaparral covered hills in the background. This portion of Bell Bluff Truck Trail is open to the public and the existing visual quality includes man-made visual contrasts, including the existing Sunrise Powerlink 230-kV transmission line structure which connects to the Suncrest Substation.

## Viewer Groups

Viewer groups in the vicinity of the Project site and their sensitivity to visual changes are described below. Viewer groups sensitivity is generally determined based on viewer activity, view duration, viewing distance, adjacent land use, and special management or planning designation. Viewer groups with visual access to the Project site are divided into the

categories of authorized personnel using Bell Bluff Truck Trail, residents and motorists, and recreational visitors.

### ***Authorized Personnel using Bell Bluff Truck Trail***

Authorized personnel, including SDG&E employees, utility contractors, and operator and maintenance workers traveling on Bell Bluff Truck Trail would have views of Proposed Project components (KOP 3, KOP 6, KOP 7, and KOP 8). Viewer concern and visual sensitivity are generally low as Bell Bluff Truck Trail is closed to public use (thus, this is considered a private view) and the existing visual quality includes man-made visual contrasts. In general, industrial viewers tend to be focused on their activity and less on the surrounding visual environment. Some private land owners are authorized to access private properties off Bell Bluff Truck Trail; however, again it is assumed viewer sensitivity is low to moderate as views are generally short term, and the existing right of way includes man-made visual contrasts.

### ***Residents and Motorists***

Local residents and motorists traveling on Japatul Valley Road, Japatul Lane, and I-8 would have views of Proposed Project components (KOPs 9 through 17). In general, as a viewer group, residents have a heightened sensitivity to the surrounding viewshed because they have high frequency and duration of views, as well as an expectation of a consistent setting. Motorists' views would be temporary and they would have limited expectations of the setting. In general, as a viewer group, motorists in this area would have reduced sensitivity to the surrounding viewshed; however, motorists represent the largest potentially affected view groups for the Proposed Project. Viewer sensitivity would vary since there is a mix of undeveloped lands with moderate-to-high visual quality (such as CNF and private residences and estates) and developed lands with relatively low visual quality (such as I-8, Suncrest Substation, and Japatul Road).

### ***Recreational Visitors***

Recreational visitors of natural areas typically have a heightened sensitivity to their surroundings and have an expectation of a consistent setting. Recreational visitors occupying some areas of the Pine Creek Wilderness Area, primarily on peaks with limited access, and visitors hiking to the pinnacle of Bell Bluff, a summit hike accessed from the California Riding and Hiking Trail, have minimal visibility of Proposed Project components. The Proposed Project would not be visible within canyons or along primary trails within the Pine Creek Wilderness Area or the designated California Riding and Hiking Trail. Additionally, the distance is 4 or more miles between these areas of visibility and the Proposed Project. Views of the Proposed Project from each of these recreation areas would not impact skylines, as the topography, vegetation, and distance creates background screening. For additional details surrounding recreational resources within the Proposed Project area, see Chapter 18, *Recreation*.

## **4.4 Impact Analysis**

### **4.4.1 Methodology**

The visual impact analysis evaluates the visual changes that would occur from implementing the Proposed Project using the standards of quality, consistency, and symmetry typically used

for a visual assessment. This assessment is based on a review of maps, site photographs, aerial photographs, Proposed Project-specific technical drawings and visual simulations (which provide a “before” and “after” development illustrating the potential changes that would occur with the implementation of the Proposed Project, see Figures 4-2 through 4-6) provided by NEET West (NEET West 2015). This assessment also focuses on those KOPs discussed above in Section 4.3, “Environmental Setting” (see Attachment B). Analysis of the impacts on existing visual resources from implementing the Proposed Project is based on evaluation of the extent and implications of the visual changes, considering the following factors:

- Specific changes in the visual composition, character, and specifically valued qualities of the affected environment;
- Visual context of the affected environment;
- Extent to which the affected environment contains places or features that have been designated in plans and policies for protection or special consideration; and
- Number of viewers, their activities, and the extent to which these activities are related to the aesthetic qualities affected by actions that would be taken under the Proposed Project.

Visual impacts were compared against the thresholds of significance discussed below. Because NEET West intends to underground the proposed transmission line, the impact analysis below primarily focuses on aboveground Proposed Project components having the largest potential to change the existing visual resources, including construction of the Proposed Project and permanent aboveground Proposed Project components: the SVC and the riser pole structure connecting the underground transmission line to the existing Suncrest Substation. An assessment of visual quality is subjective, and reasonable disagreement can occur as to whether alterations in the visual character of the potentially affected area would be adverse or beneficial.

#### 4.4.2 Criteria for Determining Significance

Based on Appendix G of the State CEQA Guidelines and professional expertise, it was determined that the Proposed Project would result in a significant impact on aesthetics if it would:

- A. Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista;
- B. Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway;
- C. Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings; or
- D. Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area.

### 4.4.3 Environmental Impacts

#### **Impact AES-1: Adverse Effects on Scenic Vistas or Scenic Highways from Project Construction and Operation (No Impact)**

The Proposed Project, including both the SVC site and underground transmission alignment, would not be located within any scenic vistas or cross any designated State scenic highways. The nearest State scenic-highway is State Route 78, located approximately 25 miles to the northeast in the Anza Borrego Mountains. The Proposed Project would be marginally visible (e.g., the tops of the lightning masts within the SVC) from I-8 for less than 0.25 mile (KOP 10). While I-8 is eligible for State scenic highway designation, it is unlikely that motorists traveling the speed limit (65 miles per hour [mph]) would notice the Proposed Project through this stretch of highway (estimated to last approximately 16 seconds or less while traveling 65 mph). The Proposed Project would also not be substantially visible from the I-8 scenic view corridor along Sweetwater River or visible from the community of Alpine. Therefore, the Proposed Project would have no impact on scenic vistas or scenic highways.

#### **Impact AES-2: Adverse Effects on the Visual Character or Quality of the Site and its Surroundings from Project Construction (Less than Significant)**

During the Proposed Project's construction period (approximately 9 months), construction activities, including vegetation removal and the staging of construction materials, equipment, and vehicles would be moderately visible along Bell Bluff Truck Trail (KOPs 3, 6, 7, and 8) to authorized personnel. Visual impacts resulting from construction would be short-term and temporary, and authorized personnel are assumed to have low to moderate levels of viewer sensitivity based on their short-term exposure to the Project, and their assumed level of awareness of facility infrastructure.

Construction-related visual impacts at KOPs 9 through 17, which represent public views, may result from the presence of equipment, materials, and work crews at the SVC site and along the underground transmission line. Residential viewers located along Bell Bluff Truck Trail and Japatul Vista Lane would experience longer duration views and would be more sensitive to visual changes associated with the Proposed Project's construction activities, such as vegetation clearing and construction staging areas. Although construction activities would have a moderate visual impact within the Project area, these impacts would be temporary and limited to the construction period. Temporary disturbance areas would be restored to preconstruction conditions and re-vegetated. Temporary visual impacts from Proposed Project construction activities would be less than significant.

#### **Impact AES-3: Long-term Adverse Effects on the Visual Character or Quality of the Site and its Surroundings during Operation (Less than Significant with Mitigation)**

Construction of the Proposed Project would result in above-ground permanent physical changes to the viewshed, including views of the riser pole and the SVC. Private views (i.e., KOP 3, 6, 7, and 8), open to authorized personnel and a small group of landowners with access to the Bell Bluff Truck Trail, would change moderately or even substantially, depending on the viewers' distance from the SVC site and/or the riser pole. However, as previously stated, viewer concern and visual sensitivity are generally low as Bell Bluff Truck Trail is closed to



1 public use and the existing visual quality includes man-made visual contrasts. As shown in  
2 Figure 4-1, the landscape character along Bell Bluff Truck Trail would not change as a result  
3 of the Proposed Project, as the 1-mile-long transmission line would be located underground.

4 Public views (i.e., KOPs 9 through 17), generally the views of local residents and commuter  
5 traffic along Japatul Valley Road, Japatul Lane, and I-8, would change moderately; however,  
6 due to the topography and distance from the Proposed Project components, mountains would  
7 screen most of these views, and generally Proposed Project components would not dominate  
8 the viewshed. KOPs 12 through 17 would have views of the Proposed Project permanent  
9 aboveground facilities. The SVC, as viewed from KOP 12, would create a visual contrast to the  
10 existing landscape and is in an area with high viewer concern and high visual sensitivity (see  
11 Figure 4-5). Expansive ranch-style residences have been built to face the hills surrounding  
12 the Proposed Project. Though the Proposed Project would be visible to a few residences and  
13 would be a contrast to the existing landscape, the range of view for the Proposed Project  
14 would not be significantly noticeable among the adjacent natural landscape features and total  
15 field of view. A few residences in Japatul Valley, as represented by KOPs 13 through 16 (see  
16 Figure 4-6), would have views of the Proposed Project. While residential viewer concerns are  
17 typically moderate-to-high, due to the topography and distance, mountains would screen  
18 most of these views, with in some cases (KOPs 13 and 15) only the tip of the riser pole within  
19 viewshed. Overall visual changes for residences in Japatul Valley would be moderate to low,  
20 as at the distance for these views Proposed Project components would not dominate the  
21 viewshed. Similarly, KOP 17 is a public view looking west from a residential area on Avenida  
22 De Los Arboles (Bell Bluff Truck Trail). At KOP 17, the Proposed Project would modify  
23 existing background views; however, overall visual change from KOP 17 would not create a  
24 substantial visual contrast or dominant the existing viewshed.

25 Figures 4-2, 4-3, 4-4, 4-5 and 4-6 depict existing and simulated views from KOPs 6, 8, 9, 12,  
26 and 13, respectively. The KOPs selected for these simulations are intended to present a  
27 reasonable range of those existing landscape settings where the most sensitive viewers are  
28 located, as well as to provide an illustration of how the completed Project might look from  
29 specific key viewing locations. Note that the visual simulations are based on conceptual site  
30 plans and building structure locations may change and do not show details such as  
31 architectural finishes.







*Key Observation Point 6, Existing Conditions*



*Key Observation Point 6, Simulated View*





*Key Observation Point 8, Existing Conditions*



*Key Observation Point 8, Simulated View*





*Key Observation Point 9, Existing Conditions*



*Key Observation Point 9, Simulated View*

**Figure 4-4**  
**Key Observation Point 9, Existing Conditions and Simulated View**  
**Suncrest Dynamic Reactive Power Support Project**





*Key Observation Point 12, Existing Conditions*

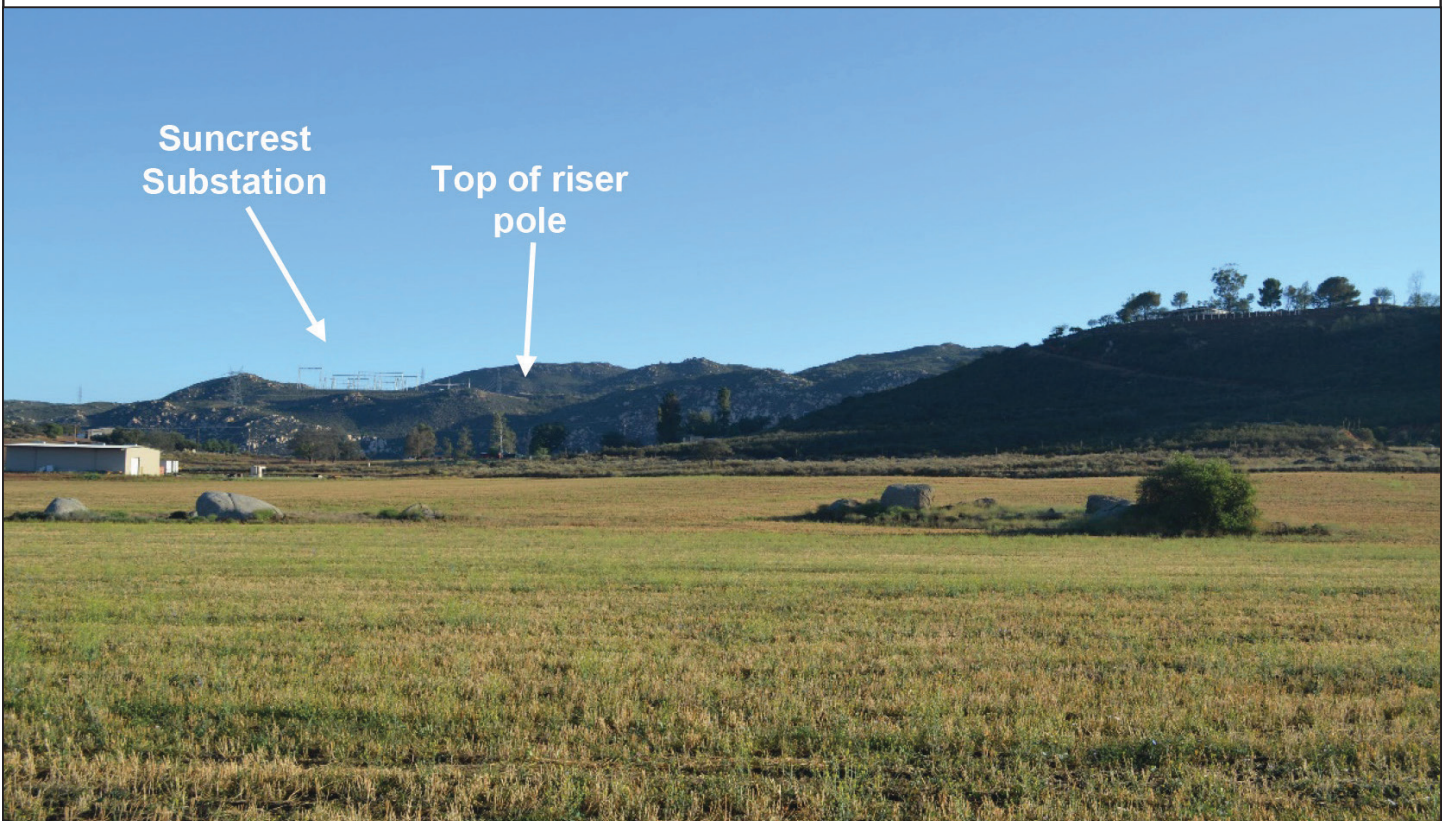


*Key Observation Point 12, Simulated View*





*Key Observation Point 13, Existing Conditions*



*Key Observation Point 13, Simulated View*

**Figure 4-6**

**Key Observation Point 13, Existing Conditions and Simulated View**

**Suncrest Dynamic Reactive Power Support Project**

- 1       ▪ **KOP 6 (see Figure 4-2):** This image was taken looking east from Bell Bluff Truck Trail  
2       towards the area proposed for the SVC location. As depicted in the existing conditions  
3       of Figure 4-2, the landscape character is predominantly natural in appearance with a  
4       reclaimed California buckwheat scrub meadow, chaparral covered hills, and Bell Bluff  
5       Truck Trail. The visual quality is moderate, with a landscape view of undisturbed  
6       slopes and a reclaimed meadow. As evident in the simulated view, the visual change  
7       of the Proposed Project will contrast substantially with the landscape foreground,  
8       middleground, and background views. The Proposed Project's overall visual change  
9       from KOP 6 will create high visual contrast and will dominate the view. Bell Bluff  
10      Truck Trail is closed to public use (thus, this is considered a private view) and the  
11      existing visual quality includes man-made visual contrasts.
- 12      ▪ **KOP 8 (see Figure 4-3):** This image was taken looking west from Bell Bluff Truck  
13      Trail towards the area proposed for the SVC location. As depicted in the existing  
14      conditions of Figure 4-3, the landscape character is predominantly natural in  
15      appearance with coastal sage- and chaparral-covered hills. The simulated view from  
16      this vantage point depicts changes to the foreground and middleground views, where  
17      the proposed SVC would be located. Background views are largely consistent with  
18      existing conditions. The visual quality is low-to-moderate, with a landscape view of  
19      relatively undisturbed slopes. Furthermore, as previously indicated, Bell Bluff Truck  
20      Trail is closed to public use (thus, this is considered a private view) and the existing  
21      visual quality includes man-made visual contrasts.
- 22      ▪ **KOP 9 (see Figure 4-4):** This image was taken looking west from a private viewpoint,  
23      and depicts the area proposed for the SVC location. As depicted in Figure 4-4, the  
24      existing landscape character is predominantly natural in appearance, with reclaimed  
25      California buckwheat scrub meadow and chaparral covered hills; and distant views  
26      of Bell Bluff Truck Trail. The visual quality is low-to-moderate, with a landscape view  
27      of undisturbed slopes and a reclaimed meadow. Construction of the SVC would make  
28      significant changes to the foreground and middleground of the existing viewpoint.  
29      Background views are relatively consistent to existing views.
- 30      ▪ **KOP 12 (see Figure 4-5):** This image was taken looking north from a residential area  
31      on Japatul Vista Lane. As depicted in the existing conditions of Figure 4-5, the  
32      landscape character is natural and developed with rocky ridges and coastal sage  
33      meadows. The viewpoint is representative of the nearest private residence. The SVC,  
34      as simulated in Figure 4-5, would create a visual contrast to the existing landscape,  
35      and since it is an area with high viewer concern and high visual sensitivity, the  
36      presence of the SVC would change the current view and result in changes to the visual  
37      quality. Views of the SVC would be limited to the middleground; foreground and  
38      background views would go unchanged. The height of the SVC's tallest structures, the  
39      lightning masts, are within the background of the existing mountains; therefore, there  
40      would be no changes to the existing skyline.
- 41      ▪ **KOP 13 (see Figure 4-6):** This image was taken looking north from a residential area  
42      on Japatul Lane. As depicted in the existing conditions of Figure 4-6, the landscape  
43      character is developed, with agricultural fields interspersed with structures in the  
44      foreground, and natural in appearance with chaparral-covered hills and rocky ridges  
45      in the middleground and background. The visual quality is moderate, with a  
46      landscape view of mountain slopes, agricultural fields, structures, vegetation edges,



and the Suncrest Substation. Viewer concern is moderate-to-high. Few residences in Japatul Valley would have a view of the Proposed Project. Due to topography, only the tip of the riser pole would be visible from KOP 13, and the mountains would screen any view of the SVC. Background views of distant hills and mountaintops would screen the tip of the riser pole, preventing any impacts to the existing skyline.

**Mitigation Measure AES-1** would reduce potential impacts related to visual quality and character with adequate design and utilization of select building materials. Visual impacts from the Proposed Project would be less than significant with the proposed mitigation.

**Mitigation Measure AES-1: Use Design and Architectural Features on Project Structures to Complement the Surrounding Visual Landscape.**

NEET West or their contractor(s) shall implement the following measures to the extent feasible:

- Material and paint colors should be selected that are compatible with the existing colors of the surrounding area (i.e., dull grey, light brown, or dull green) in order to minimize visual contrast.
- Natural materials should be selected that blend with the natural surroundings and avoid the use of large expanses of reflective glazing, aluminum panels, and other materials not normally found in the environment.
- Dulled metal finish transmission structures and non-specular conductors (within the SVC and for the overhead span to interconnect into SDG&E's Suncrest Substation) shall be used for the Proposed Project.
- Non-specular conductors shall be treated to reduce reflectivity and have a smooth matte gray finish that blends unobtrusively with the environment.

**Impact AES-4: New Source of Light and Glare (Less than Significant with Mitigation)**

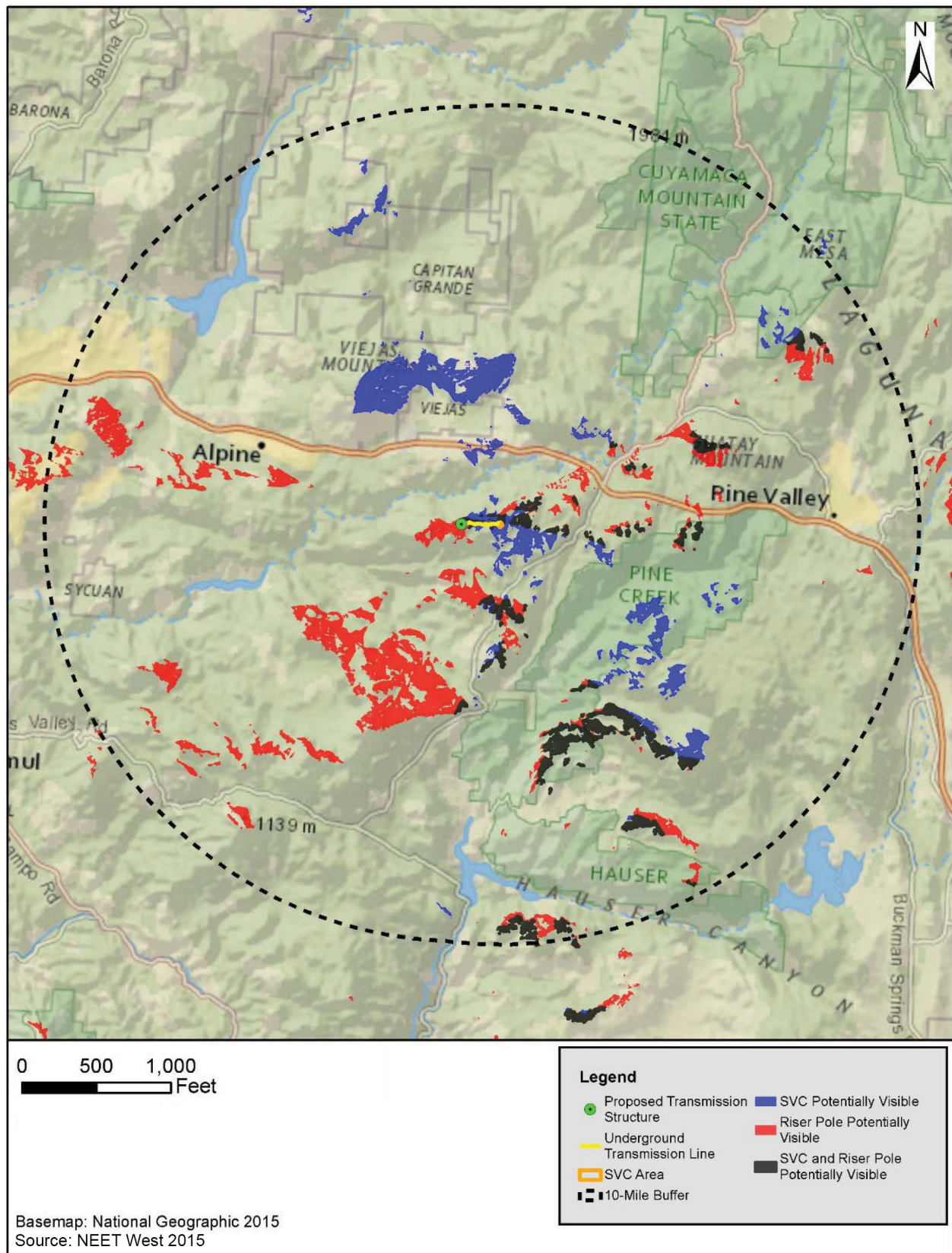
As described above in Section 4.3, *Environmental Setting*, construction and operation of the Proposed Project would include the use of nighttime security and safety lighting; including the use of temporary portable lighting for infrequent nighttime construction work, and permanent lighting sources at the SVC. Construction would primarily take place during the daytime; however, when nighttime construction is required, the scope of construction activities would be limited and would be temporary and short term. Permanent energy efficient lighting at the SVC would be shielded and downward facing to reduce impact on nighttime views. The SVC would generally not be visible to the public since the Proposed Project area is topographically screened. Authorized personnel on Bell Bluff Truck Trail may experience minimal glare from the Proposed Project; however, SDG&E employees and contractors or landowners traveling down Bell Bluff Truck Trail would be travelling at limited speeds and would experience the glare short term. Construction work is limited in duration and industrial workers' sensitivity to light is considered low, as described above in Section 4.3, *Environmental Setting, Viewer Groups*. With implementation of **Mitigation Measure AES-2**, lighting would be selectively placed and shielded to minimize the visual effects of the temporary and permanent presence of Project lighting; therefore, visual impacts from the Proposed Project would be less than significant with mitigation.

1                   **Mitigation Measure AES-2: Light and Glare Reduction.**

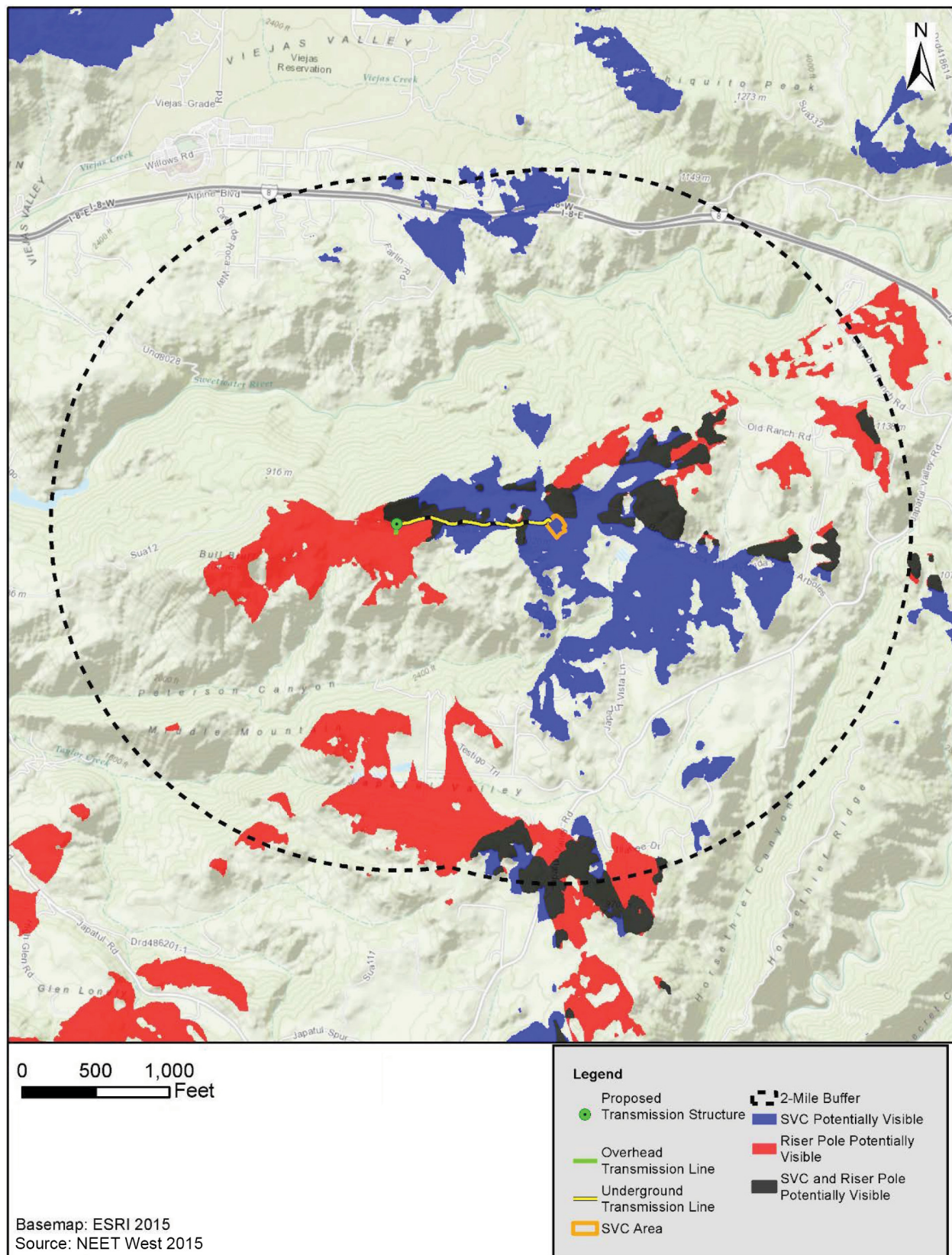
2                   Temporary construction and permanent SVC lighting shall be the lowest illumination  
3                   allowed for human safety and security, selectively placed, shielded and downward  
4                   facing to minimize nighttime glare.

## **Attachment A**

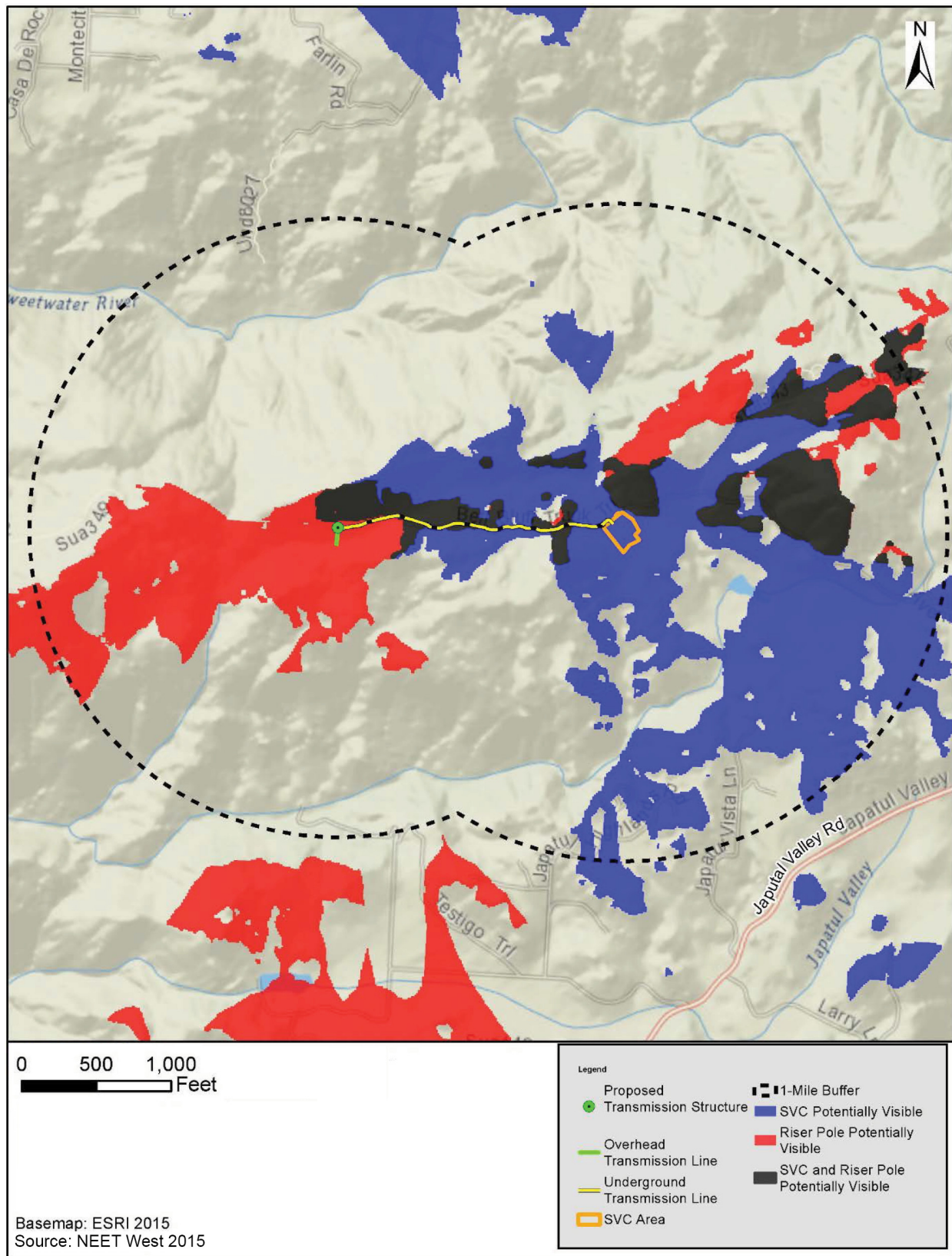
# **Viewshed Delineations**

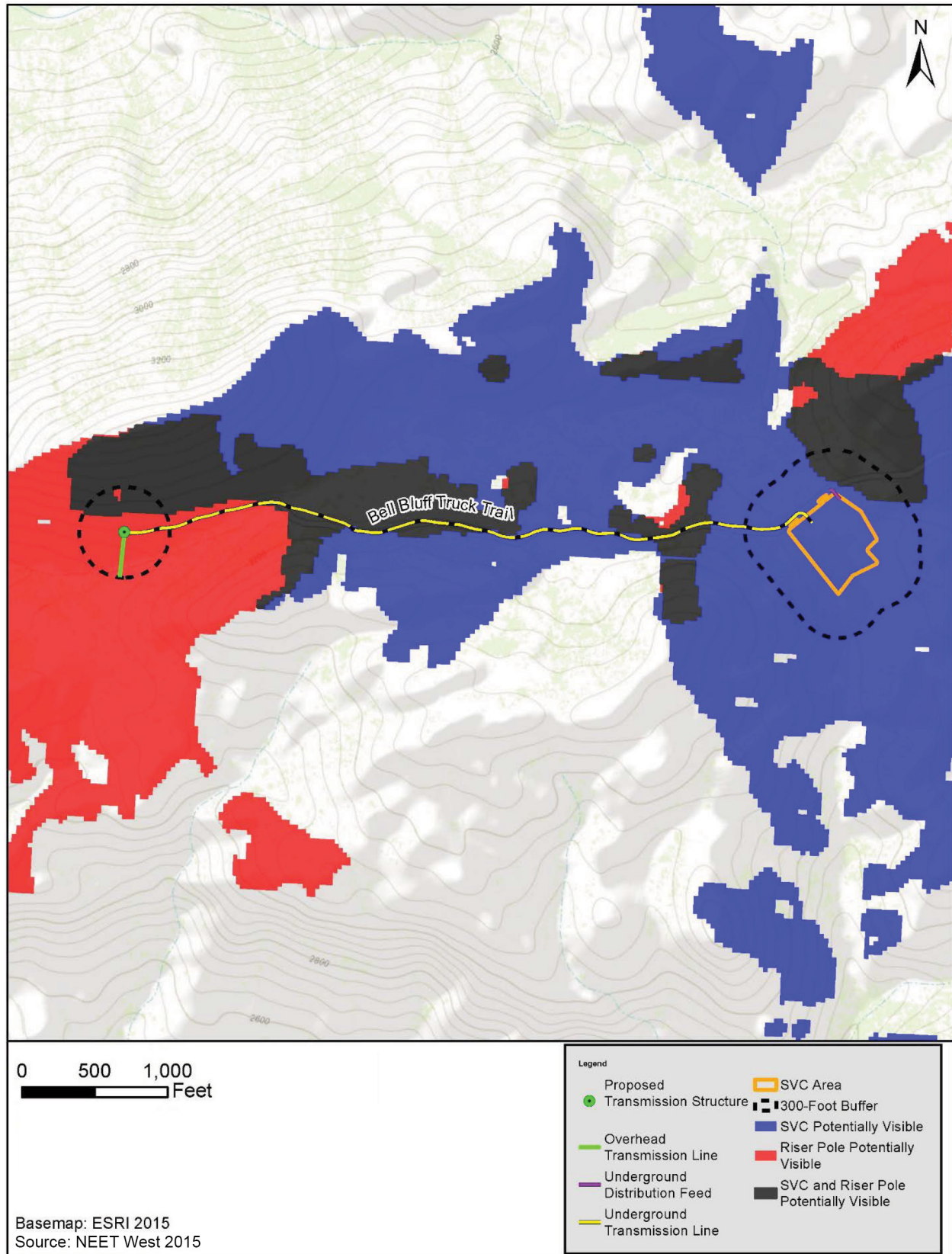
**Viewshed Delineation (10 miles)**



**Viewshed Delineation (2 miles)**



**Viewshed Delineation (1 mile)**

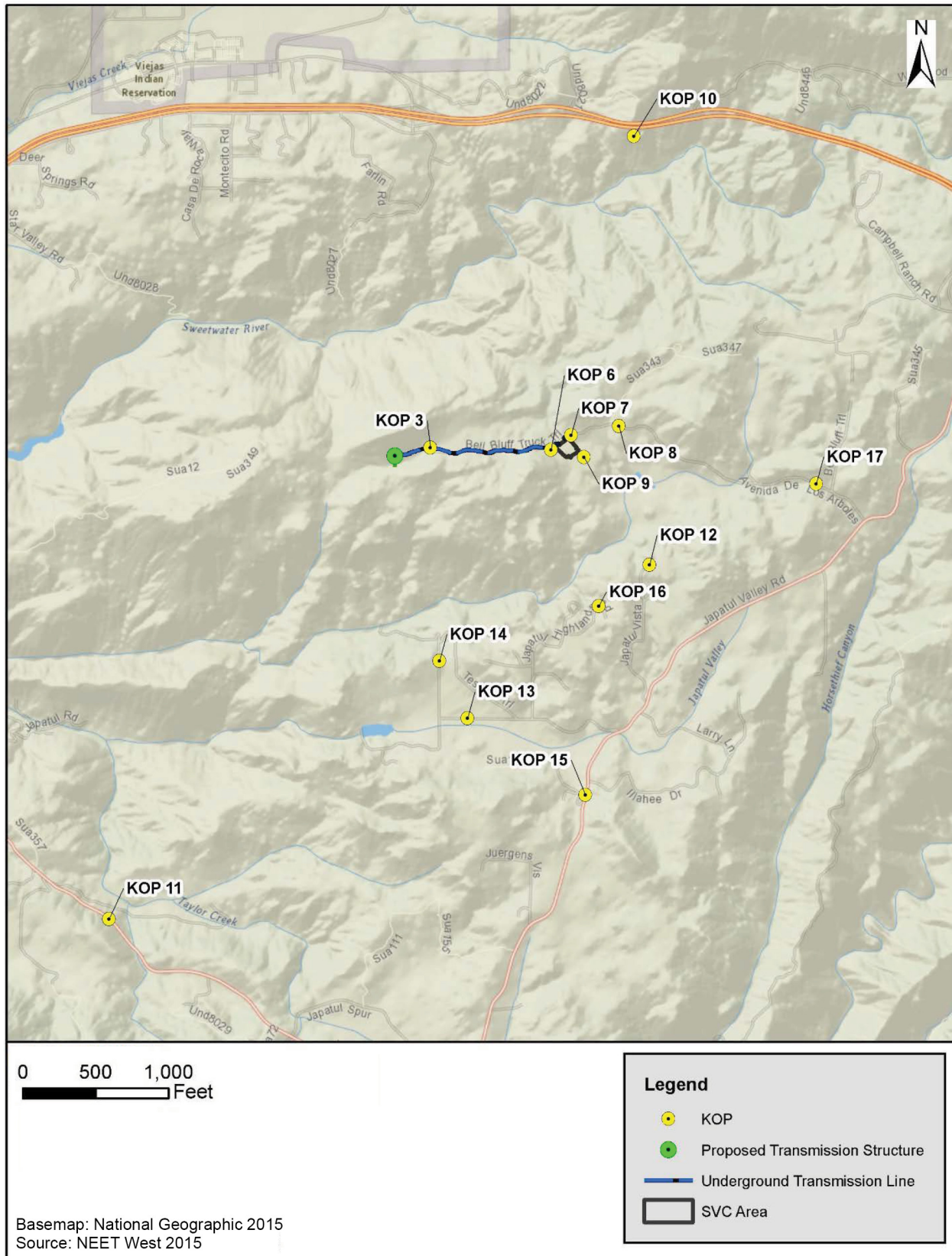
**Viewshed Delineation (300 feet)**

## **Attachment B**

# **Key Observation Points**



## Regional Landscape Context and KOPs





**KOP 3.** View looking east from Bell Bluff Truck Trail at the entrance to the Suncrest Substation.



**KOP 6.** View looking east at Bell Bluff Truck Trail and the Wilson Laydown Yard.

*Source: NEET West 2015*





**KOP 7.** View along Bell Bluff Truck Trail looking southwest at the Wilson Laydown Yard.



**KOP 8.** View looking west along Bell Bluff Truck Trail, 0.25 miles northeast of the Wilson Laydown Yard.

*Source: NEET West 2015*



**KOP 9.** View looking west at the southeast corner of the Wilson Laydown Yard.



**KOP 10.** View looking southwest at the eastbound I-8 scenic viewpoint; Sunrise Powerlink 230 kV transmission line towers are visible along the ridges on the right side of photograph.

*Source: NEET West 2015*





**KOP 11.** View looking northeast along Japatul Valley Road, 3 miles south of Proposed Project; existing Suncrest Substation is visible along the ridgeline on the left of the photograph.



**KOP 12.** View looking north from the nearest residence's western property line to the Proposed Project; Wilson Laydown Yard is visible in center of photograph.

*Source: NEET West 2015*



**KOP 13.** View looking north along Japatul Lane, showing the Suncrest Substation and Sunrise Powerlink 230 kV transmission line structures.



**KOP 14.** View looking north along Japatul Lane towards the Suncrest Substation.

*Source: NEET West 2015*





**KOP 15.** View looking northwest at the intersection of Vista Esperanza Lane and Japatul Valley Road, showing the existing Suncrest Substation and Sunrise Powerlink 230 kV transmission line structures.



**KOP 16.** View looking west along Japatul Highlands Road; existing Sunrise Powerlink 230 kV transmission line and the Suncrest Substation visible in center of photograph.

*Source: NEET West 2015*



**KOP 17.** View looking west along Avenida de los Arboles (Bell Bluff Truck Trail), 1.3 miles east of Proposed Project SVC area; existing Sunrise Powerlink 230 kV transmission line structure which connects to the Suncrest Substation is visible on the right of photograph.

*Source: NEET West 2015*