

3.1 AESTHETICS

3.1.1 INTRODUCTION

This section describes existing conditions and potential impacts on aesthetic resources as a result of construction and operation of the project. The analysis concludes that impacts on aesthetic resources will be less than significant; the Applicant-Proposed Measure (APM) described in Section 3.1.4.2 will further reduce the project’s less-than-significant impacts on aesthetic resources. The project’s potential effects on aesthetic resources were evaluated using the significance criteria set forth in Appendix G of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines. The conclusions are summarized in Table 3.1-1 and discussed in more detail in Section 3.1.4.

Table 3.1-1: CEQA Checklist for Aesthetics

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 type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
b) Substantially degrade 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 type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
c) Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings?	<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"/>

3.1.2 REGULATORY BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

3.1.2.1 Regulatory Background

Federal

No federal regulations related to aesthetic or visual resources are applicable to the project.

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 the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) for scenic highway approval, and receives the designation from Caltrans (Caltrans 2009). 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.

A review of the California Scenic Highway Program indicates that the nearest designated state scenic highway located near the project is State Route (SR-)116, which is located approximately 8 miles southwest of the southern end of the project; views toward SR-116 are blocked by intervening topography and vegetation. The eligible portion of SR-116 south of Sebastopol is located approximately 10 miles south of the project location, and while potentially within view of the project, is too distant for project elements to be seen from this portion of SR-116. A segment of SR-12 is an eligible state scenic highway approximately 6 miles south of the project; however, roadway views toward the project are obstructed by infrastructure and topography. As outlined previously, the project is not visible from a designated or eligible state scenic highway.

Local

Because the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) has exclusive jurisdiction over project siting, design, and construction, the project is not subject to local discretionary regulations. This section includes a summary of local standards or ordinances pertaining to visual character of the project area for informational purposes and to assist with the CEQA review process.

The project alignment is located predominantly within unincorporated areas of central Sonoma County. A small part of the project, including four poles, lies within the Town of Windsor. This section reviews the visual resource-related policies and regulations as outlined in the Sonoma County and Town of Windsor general plans.

Sonoma County General Plan

The Sonoma County General Plan Open Space and Resource Conservation Element contains a number of references to scenic resources within the County. In particular, the plan calls for the preservation of the visual qualities within designated Scenic Landscape Units, as well as along roadways identified as Scenic Corridors. An analysis of General Plan Figure OSRC-1, Scenic Resource Areas, shows portions of the project passing through Scenic Landscape Units in the vicinity of the Town of Windsor and City of Healdsburg. In addition, portions of the project cross or are within view of Highway 101, Chalk Hill Road, and Faught Road, all of which have been identified as Scenic Corridors.

The Open Space and Resource Conservation Element includes the following goals and objectives pertaining to visual resources within Scenic Landscape Units:

GOAL OSRC-2 Retain the largely open, scenic character of important Scenic Landscape Units.

Objective OSRC-2.1 Retain a rural, scenic character in Scenic Landscape Units with very low intensities of development. Avoid their inclusion within spheres of influence for public service providers.

Objective OSRC-2.2 Protect the ridges and crests of prominent hills in Scenic Landscape Units from the silhouetting of structures against the skyline.

Objective OSRC-2.3 Protect hills and ridges in Scenic Landscape Units from cuts and fills.

In addition, the following policy prescription relating to Scenic Corridors is included in this General Plan Element:

Policy OSRC-3h Design public works projects to minimize tree damage and removal along Scenic Corridors. Where trees must be removed, design replanting programs so as to accommodate ultimate planned highway improvements. Require revegetation following grading and road cuts.

The Land Use Element of the County’s General Plan—which reinforces policies of the Open Space and Resource Conservation Element and is consistent with the preservation of open space lands—contains a number of general goals, including the following that relate to the preservation of scenic features and biotic resources areas:

GOAL LU-10 The uses and intensities of any land development shall be consistent with preservation of important biotic resource areas and scenic features.

Objective LU-10.1 Accomplish development on lands with important biotic resources and scenic features in a manner which preserves or enhances these features.

Town of Windsor General Plan

A small portion of the project, including four poles in Foothill Regional Park, lies within the Town of Windsor. The Town of Windsor is currently revising its General Plan, and it is anticipated that the Windsor 2040 General Plan will be adopted in 2016. Chapter 6, Environmental Resources, of the draft Town of Windsor General Plan 2015 contains provisions to preserve scenic resources, including the following policy:

I.2 Preserve the significant landforms surrounding the community.

I.2.2 The Town shall distinguish between skyline ridges and secondary or intermediate ridges. Skyline ridges include those which define the horizon. Intermediate ridges are those with visible land behind them which creates a backdrop to the ridge when viewed from within the town limits.

3.1.2.2 Methodology

The visual analysis is based on review of technical data, including project maps and drawings provided by PG&E, aerial and ground-level photographs of the project area, local planning documents, and computer-generated visual simulations. Observations were conducted in November 2012 and April 2015 to document existing visual conditions in the project area and to identify potentially affected sensitive viewing locations.

The assessment includes a set of photographs that document representative public views of the project corridor. As part of the PEA aesthetics analysis, visual simulations were prepared to illustrate before and after visual conditions in the project area, as seen from three key viewpoints that show a subset of the representative views where the project would be most visible to the public and/or be seen at close range from key observation points. Described briefly below, the simulation methods employ systematic digital photography, computer modeling, and rendering techniques.

Photographs were taken using a digital single-lens reflex camera with standard 50-millimeter lens equivalent, which represents an approximately 40-degree horizontal view angle. Photography viewpoint locations were documented systematically using photo log sheet notation, Global Positioning System (GPS) recording, and basemap annotation. Digital aerial photographs and project design information supplied by PG&E provided the basis for developing a three-dimensional (3-D) computer model of the new project components (poles and conductors). For each simulation viewpoint, viewer location was input from GPS data, using five feet as the assumed eye level. Computer “wireframe” perspective plots were overlaid on the simulation photographs to verify scale and viewpoint location. Digital visual simulation images were then produced based on computer renderings of the 3-D model, combined with digital versions of the selected site photographs. The simulations are presented in Figures 3.1-3 through 3.1-5; each of these figures consists of two full-page images designated “a” and “b,” with the existing views shown in the “a” figure and the “after” visual simulations in the “b” figure. Discussion of these simulations is included in Section 3.1.4.3.

This visual study employs assessment methods based, in part, on the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration’s (FHWA) and other accepted visual analysis techniques. This study also addresses the CEQA Guidelines for visual impact analysis. The impact analysis describes change to existing visual resources and assesses viewer response to that change. Central to this assessment is an evaluation of representative views from which the project will be visible to the public. The visual impact assessment is based on evaluation of the changes to the existing visual resources that will result from the project. These changes were assessed, in part, by evaluating the after views provided by the computer-generated visual simulations and comparing them to the existing visual environment, in addition to interpreting aerial and ground-level photography and field observations.

3.1.3 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The project involves reconductoring a 9.9-mile-long section of the Fulton-Hopland 60 kV Power Line that extends from Fulton Substation to Fitch Mountain #1 Tap, situated southeast of the City of Healdsburg. Minor changes, including replacement of the existing control building with a larger control structure, will also be made within the existing Fitch Mountain Substation, located approximately 0.6 mile west of Fitch Mountain #1 Tap. For the first 1.8 miles (Fulton-Shiloh segment), where the line exists as an underbuild on the tubular steel poles (TSPs) of the Geysers-Fulton 230 kV Transmission Line, only conductor will be replaced, along with approximately 1.3 miles of conductor for one circuit of the 230 kV line. For the remaining 8.1-mile-long segment (Shiloh-Fitch segment)—which begins at a TSP in the southwest corner of

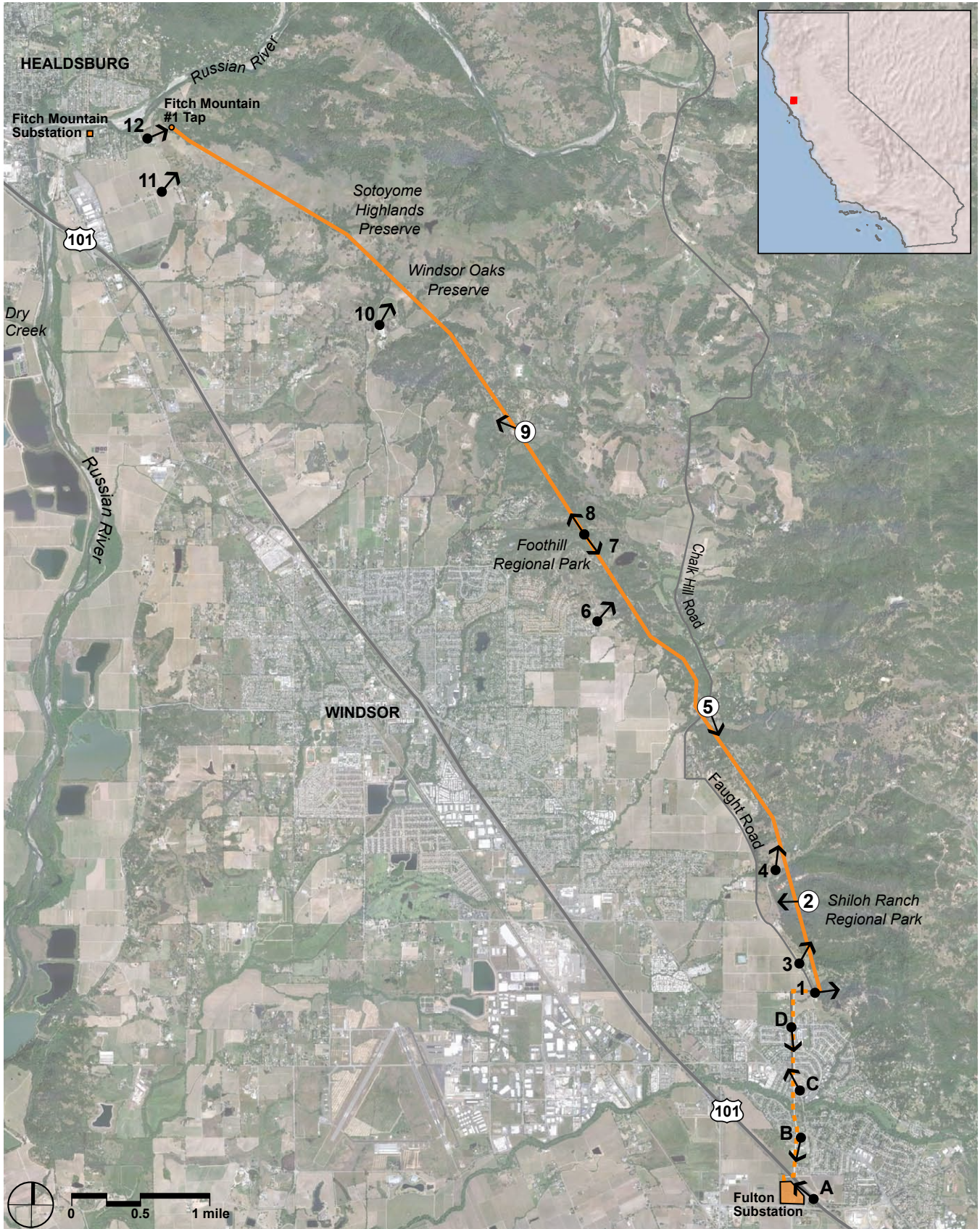
Shiloh Ranch Regional Park where the 60 kV and 230 kV lines diverge—both poles and conductor will be replaced (refer to Figure 3.1-1: Photograph Viewpoint Locations).

The existing Shiloh-Fitch segment is supported by 71 pole structures, the majority of which are wood, ranging in height from approximately 35 to 70 feet, with the distance between poles ranging from approximately 200 feet to 1,600 feet. Although this segment of the power line extends in a relatively straight alignment throughout most of its length, it cannot be seen in its entirety from any one viewing location. From most ground-level locations, only isolated, intermittent views of the poles and/or conductors are generally available due to intervening topography and/or surrounding vegetation that provides screening along much of the route. To maintain system reliability and safety, PG&E routinely trims surrounding vegetation along heavily wooded portions of the route. This operation and maintenance (O&M) practice results in cleared swaths that are discernible from a few isolated vantage points on the ground where multiple pole locations can be seen, as well as in aerial views of the route.

3.1.3.1 Regional and Local Landscape Setting

Figure 3.1-1 includes a map and an annotated aerial photograph that show the project location within a regional and local landscape context. Located in central Sonoma County, the project straddles the northeastern edge of the Santa Rosa Valley within northern California's inner Coast Range. The City of Santa Rosa, the County seat and regional urban center, dominates the southern portion of the valley. At its northern end, the valley is defined by the confluence of Dry Creek and the Russian River, which together with the nearby historic City of Healdsburg, constitutes an important regional tourist destination. The fertile floodplain of the Russian River extends across much of the valley floor and supports a diverse landscape of small- to medium-sized vineyards and ancillary agricultural development. Running the length of the valley, Highway 101 is a major transportation corridor linking urban centers to the south with northern California and the Pacific Northwest. Concentrated areas of commercial and residential development are found along both sides of the highway, most notably around the communities of Fulton, Larkfield-Wikiup, and Windsor, between the cities of Santa Rosa and Healdsburg.

The Shiloh-Fitch segment is considerably less developed than the Fulton-Shiloh segment. The Fulton-Shiloh segment crosses Highway 101 and traverses the community of Larkfield-Wikiup. The Shiloh-Fitch segment traverses rolling foothills at an elevation ranging from 110 to 600 feet, between Shiloh Ranch Regional Park southeast of Windsor and the Fitch Mountain #1 Tap, located on a ridge overlooking the Russian River, east of Healdsburg. The existing power line passes through extensive areas of oak woodland that is punctuated by occasional vineyards and open rangeland, and crosses a limited number of rural roadways. Sparsely inhabited for the most part, the project area is characterized by a scattered mix of rural residences that includes modest single family dwellings and larger estate-style properties, with the largest concentration found in the area east of the Town of Windsor that also includes a small number of suburban houses within view of the power line.



- 1 ➔ Photograph Viewpoint Location and Direction
- 2 ➔ Simulation Viewpoint Location and Direction

- Fulton - Fitch Mountain 60 kV Line
- - - Fulton - Fitch Mountain 60 kV Line with 230 kV Reconductoring

Figure 3.1-1

Photograph Viewpoint Locations

PG&E Fulton - Fitch Mountain Reconductoring Project

3.1.3.2 Project Viewshed and Representative Views

A project viewshed is defined as the general area from which a project is visible. For purposes of describing a project's visual setting and assessing potential visual impacts, the viewshed can be broken down into foreground, middleground, and background zones. The foreground is defined as the zone within 0.25 mile to 0.5 mile of the viewer; the middleground is defined as the zone that extends from the foreground to a maximum of 3 to 5 miles of the viewer; and the background zone extends from the middleground to infinity (Smardon 1986 and USDA 1995).

Viewing distance is a key factor that affects the potential degree of project visibility. Visual details generally become apparent to the viewer when they are observed in the foreground, at a distance of 0.25 to 0.5 mile or less. The primary focus of the visual analysis included in this PEA is the foreground viewshed zone, where visual details are most apparent, up to approximately 1 mile from the project area, where change could be noticeable.

3.1.3.3 Representative Views

Figures 3.1-2(a–h): Photographs of the Project and Vicinity present a set of photographs taken from key representative locations within the project viewshed and that convey a general sense of the visual landscape character found in the vicinity (photographs A–D and 1–12). Viewpoint locations and view directions are noted in captions below each photograph. Figure 3.1-1 is an annotated aerial photograph that depicts the project and photograph viewpoint locations.

Photographs A-D depict the existing power line and transmission line from where it leaves Fulton Substation and crosses Highway 101 (photograph A, a view from a northbound lane of the highway) and passes through the residential community of Larkfield-Wikiup east of the highway (photographs B–D). In these views, the project line is seen below, or underbuilt, on existing TSPs that carry a double-circuit 230 kV transmission line. From the east side of the highway to shortly before it enters Shiloh Ranch Regional Park northeast of the substation, numerous TSPs of the existing Geysers-Fulton 230 kV Transmission Line can be seen lining area roadways, passing two schools, recreation fields, and a small park. The existing Fulton-Hopland 60 kV Power Line, which consists of an underbuild along this segment of the project route, is suspended from the lowermost arms of the transmission structures.

In the southwest corner of Shiloh Ranch Regional Park, approximately 0.3 mile northeast of Larkfield-Wikiup, the two lines diverge and the project continues north as a single-circuit 60 kV power line supported mostly by wood poles. The park, consisting of an 860-acre open space along the eastern flank of the Santa Rosa Valley, contains numerous trails traversing densely wooded slopes that include a number of ridgetop views of the valley below and serves as a popular recreation destination for residents of nearby communities. The project route crosses park trails at several locations, and existing poles are visible from limited locations from these trails.



A. Northbound Highway 101 crossing



B. Mark West Elementary School looking south

Refer to Figure 3.1-1 for viewpoint locations.



C. Old Redwood Highway near Wikiup Drive looking north



D. Faught Road near Corbett Circle looking south

Refer to Figure 3.1-1 for viewpoint locations.



1. Shiloh Ranch Regional Park South Ridge Trail looking east



2. Shiloh Ranch Regional Park Ridge Trail looking west*

*Simulation Viewpoint; see Figure 3.1.-3(b) for visual simulation of the project.
Refer to Figure 3.1-1 for viewpoint locations.

Figure 3.1-2(c)
Photographs of the Project and Vicinity
PG&E Fulton - Fitch Mountain Reconductoring Project



3. Faught Road looking northeast



4. Shiloh Ridge Road looking north

Refer to Figure 3.1-1 for viewpoint locations.



5. Chalk Hill Road looking south*



6. Vinecrest Road looking northeast

*Simulation Viewpoint; see Figure 3.1-4(b) for visual simulation of the project.
Refer to Figure 3.1-1 for viewpoint locations.



7. Foothill Regional Park Oakwood Trail looking south



8. Foothill Regional Park Oakwood Trail looking north

Refer to Figure 3.1-1 for viewpoint locations.



9. Brooks Road looking northwest*



10. Windsor Oaks Vineyard (Hillview Road) looking northeast

*Simulation Viewpoint; see Figure 3.1-5(b) for visual simulation of the project. Refer to Figure 3.1-1 for viewpoint locations.

Figure 3.1-2(g)
Photographs of the Project and Vicinity
PG&E Fulton - Fitch Mountain Reconductoring Project



11. Grant Avenue looking northeast



12. Bailhache Road looking east (north end of route)

Refer to Figure 3.1-1 for viewpoint locations.

In a view looking east along Ridge Trail, taken less than 100 yards from the park's southern entrance, photograph 1 shows the existing TSP demarcating the start of the single-circuit segment of the project route amidst the dense vegetation in the foreground, just left of the trail edge. While the color and texture of the existing pole contrasts with the naturalistic, wooded landscape, only the base of the pole is prominently visible from this perspective. From Ridge Trail north of the main park entrance, near the northern boundary of the park, a nearly unobstructed view of an existing wood pole and conductor is available in a clearing near where the line crosses the trail, as seen in photograph 2. Portions of the pole are visible against a backdrop of both vegetation and sky from as far away as 400 feet where the trail emerges from dense woods and descends toward the clearing to the west. As seen from this perspective, the pole and some of the conductors become fully visible approximately 120 feet away. When approaching from the west, these project components are largely screened by vegetation, and are only visible less than 100 feet away.

Because the project alignment crosses hilly, undeveloped land throughout much of its length, existing poles and conductors are generally screened or only partially visible to most roadway and residential viewers. This is particularly the case within the southern portion of the route, where the landscape character includes more varied topography and more densely wooded vegetation pattern. For example, the project alignment runs approximately 0.25 mile to the east and parallel to Faught Road, a Sonoma County Scenic Corridor, skirting vineyards and scattered residences along the eastern edge of the Santa Rosa Valley. Largely screened by mature hillside trees, only intermittent views of the existing power line are available from this road, as shown in photograph 3. In this view, overhead conductors of a distribution line are seen in the foreground and the top of an existing wood pole along the project route is somewhat discernible over the trees above a small vineyard fronting a residence just east of the roadway, while views of the conductors are largely screened by intervening vegetation.

Where the line runs perpendicular to local roadways, as is the case north of Shiloh Ranch Regional Park, short segments of the existing power line are somewhat more noticeable. In an open view along Shiloh Ridge Road, which provides gated access to a number of hillside residences, an existing wood pole and conductors can be seen in a field north of the roadway and potentially within view of an adjacent residence (photograph 4). Approximately 1 mile to the northwest, the line crosses Chalk Hill Road, a well-travelled local roadway between the Town of Windsor and Highway 128 to the north, and a Sonoma County Scenic Corridor. Mature trees line the road edge and surround nearby rural residences. These visual conditions result in enclosed views, and the surrounding landscape is only intermittently discernible to viewers in this area, typically where small vineyards lie adjacent to the roadway, as seen in photograph 5. In this view, a three-pole structure is visible on the ridgetop beyond the vineyard. While the view of the power line from the adjacent residence is largely screened by trees lining the field to the right, a fleeting view of existing poles and conductor that span the roadway to the right of this viewpoint is potentially available to Chalk Hill Road motorists as they approach the clearing from the north.

As the project route passes near the eastern outskirts of the Town of Windsor, intermittent views of existing poles and conductors are available from some residential areas. Photograph 6 is a view from Vinecrest Road, within a subdivision located at the eastern outskirts of the Town of

Windsor. From this location, the topmost portions of two wood poles are slightly discernible on a ridge beyond a varied foreground of residential landscape and a mature vineyard. The photograph illustrates that geometric lines and contrasting colors in the foreground landscape draw attention from the more distant subdued profile of the wooded hillside where the existing power line is visible, but not particularly noticeable.

Approximately 0.5 mile north of this subdivision, the route passes through Foothill Regional Park, a 211-acre County open space that serves as a popular destination for people using the numerous multi-use recreational trails that meander through a landscape composed of mature oaks and undulating terrain that includes multiple small reservoirs. For the most part, the power line, which crosses the park near its eastern perimeter approximately 0.6 mile from the main entrance, is well screened by dense vegetation and topography. Close range views of existing poles and conductors are available where the line crosses the trail, most noticeable near the northern boundary of the park. Multiple poles and conductors, partially silhouetted against the sky, are readily apparent along a cleared corridor within the mature oak canopy that covers the hillside, when looking south from a sharp bend in the Oakwood Trail (photograph 7). Looking north from the same location, a single wood pole with steel arms and top extension can be seen just beyond the park boundary (photograph 8). This perspective toward the existing power line looks downslope, and, unlike the previous view in which the pole in the foreground is fully visible, most of the pole is obscured by overhanging branches lining the path in the foreground view from this trail location.

From Foothill Regional Park, the existing power line passes through undeveloped, dense woodland for approximately 0.75 mile before emerging into more open savanna-like landscape and crossing Brooks Road, one of several sparsely travelled rural roads that serves the widely dispersed residences and farmsteads that characterize the area north of the Town of Windsor and the Highway 101 corridor. Less continuous tree cover and sparse undergrowth result in more open views of the line compared with the project route south of this point. The visual character in this area includes a variety of land uses such as rural residences, open land, and a small quarry. Photograph 9, a view from Brooks Road in this area, shows an unobstructed view of an existing three-pole wood structure with guy wires and overhead conductor situated in a field between two residences located just north of the road.

From this point, the route continues northwest along sparsely wooded ridges and through open grassland, crossing a number of private access roads and scattered vineyards. In this area, the project is largely set back from public view until reaching its terminus above the Russian River southeast of the City of Healdsburg. Photograph 10 shows a view of the project route where it passes just beyond a Windsor Oaks Winery vineyard, approximately 1.5 miles northeast of Highway 101. This area is part of the 711-acre Windsor Oaks, a County agricultural open-space easement consisting of over 100 acres of working vineyards, along with oak woodland, open pasture, ponds, and riparian corridors that is designed to function as a community separator and wildlife preserve. With the exception of the winery tasting room, which affords limited public access to this area, most of the preserve is presently inaccessible to the general public. Photograph 11 shows the project route from Grant Avenue, a local spur road providing access to an extensive area of vineyards within the Russian River floodplain just south of the City of Healdsburg. The light-colored wood poles of the existing power line can be seen against a

background of trees in an area of open pasture along a ridgetop approximately 0.5 mile away. Photograph 12, from Bailhache Avenue, shows the project route near its terminus at Fitch Mountain #1 Tap, where existing poles and conductors are partially visible along the ridge, above the tree line, seen beyond the pasture. Poles and conductor that are part of the Fitch Mountain #1 Tap 60 kV Power Line connecting to Fitch Mountain Substation are visible in the immediate foreground.

3.1.3.4 Potentially Affected Viewers

Accepted visual assessment methods, including those adopted by federal agencies, establish sensitivity levels as a measure of public concern for changes to scenic quality. Viewer sensitivity, typically divided into high, moderate, and low categories, is among the criteria employed for evaluating visual impacts and their degree of significance. Factors considered in assigning a sensitivity level include viewer activity, view duration, viewing distance, adjacent land use, and special management or planning designation. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation *Visual Impact Assessment for Highway Projects*, research on the subject suggests that certain activities tend to heighten viewer awareness of visual and scenic resources, while others tend to be distracting (U.S. Department of Transportation 2015). For example, recreational activities tend to favor attention to scenery, while commuting in heavy traffic tends to be distracting. In general, the degree of visual impact tends to be more substantial where the sensitivity of affected viewers is highest. It should be noted that the existing power and transmission lines are established elements visible within the landscape setting.

Motorists represent the largest of the affected viewer groups. The largest number include motorists traveling on local public roadways that either parallel the project route at relatively close range such as Faught Road, or cross under the project route such as Highway 101, Shiloh Ridge Road, Chalk Hill Road, and Brooks Road. Less numerous are users of private roads providing access to agricultural/industrial operations within the area. Motorists may include both local travelers who are familiar with the visual setting, and regional travelers using the roadways on a less regular basis. Roadway views are typically brief in duration, and in many locations, motorists' views are screened by vegetation and topography. Viewer sensitivity is considered low to moderate.

Recreational users of area amenities comprise another viewer group. These include hikers and equestrians visiting Shiloh Ranch Regional Park and Foothill Regional Park, as well as cyclists on the area roadways in the vicinity of the project. Although the total duration of recreational views tends to be short, for many, the expectation of a naturalistic landscape setting raises the sensitivity to moderate to high.

A third viewer group is composed of local residents, including some inhabitants of Larkfield-Wikiup and a subdivision on the eastern fringe of the Town of Windsor, as well as a limited number of people who occupy rural houses or larger estate-style homes located mainly in the vicinity of the southern portion of the project route. Residential views tend to be long in duration, and the sensitivity of this viewer group is also considered moderate to high.

3.1.4 APPLICANT-PROPOSED MEASURES AND POTENTIAL IMPACTS

The following sections describe significance criteria for aesthetic impacts derived from Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, provide APMs to reduce impacts, and assess potential project-related construction and operational aesthetic impacts.

3.1.4.1 Significance Criteria

According to Section 15002(g) of the CEQA Guidelines, “a significant effect on the environment is defined as a substantial adverse change in the physical conditions which exist in the area affected by the proposed project.” As stated in Section 15064(b) of the CEQA Guidelines, the significance of an activity may vary with the setting. Per Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, the potential significance of project-related impacts on aesthetics was evaluated for each of the criteria listed in Table 3.1-1, as discussed in Section 3.1.4.3.

3.1.4.2 Applicant-Proposed Measures

The following APM will be implemented to further reduce less-than-significant visual impacts associated with the project:

APM AE-1: Construction Cleanup

Construction activities will be kept as clean and inconspicuous as practical. Construction debris will be picked up regularly from construction areas.

3.1.4.3 Potential Impacts

Project impacts related to aesthetics and visual resources were evaluated against the CEQA significance criteria and are discussed below. The impact analysis evaluates potential project impacts during the construction phase as well as permanent project visual impacts.

The operation and maintenance activities required for the reconductored power and transmission lines will not increase from those currently required for the existing system; thus, no operation-related impacts will occur. Therefore, the impact analysis is focused only on construction activities that are required to install the new conductor, replace poles, and perform minor substation modifications, including establishing associated required access and work areas, as described in Chapter 2.0, Project Description. Because reconductoring the initial 1.8-mile-long segment of the project does not involve replacing poles, and the appearance of the new conductors will be substantially the same as existing conductors to be replaced, and thus, will not entail a noticeable visual change, this analysis is focused on evaluating potential impacts along the project route where existing poles will be replaced. Moreover, because the locations of the new structures will not substantially change from the locations of the existing structures being replaced, the evaluation of potential permanent visual impacts is focused primarily on analysis of the difference in form and height between existing and proposed structures.

a) Would the project have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista? *No Impact*

CEQA requires the project be evaluated as to whether its implementation has a substantial, adverse effect on a scenic vista. For purposes of this evaluation, a scenic vista is defined as a distant public view along or through an opening or corridor that is recognized and valued for its

scenic quality. There are no designated scenic vistas within the project viewshed; therefore, there will be no impact from the project on a scenic vista.

b) Would the project substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway? *No Impact*

As documented in Section 3.1.2, there are no designated state scenic highways within view of the project; therefore, the project will not substantially damage scenic resources within a state scenic highway and no impact will occur.

c) Would the project substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings? *Less-than-Significant Impact*

Temporary Construction-Related Impacts

The project will not substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings. Construction-related visual impacts will result from the temporary presence of workers, construction equipment, vehicles, and aircraft (helicopters) along the project route. Because much of the project is either located in areas largely inaccessible to the public or is screened from public view by vegetation and/or the effect of topography, views of project-related construction activities will be minimal. Although these effects will be relatively short term, they will be most noticeable to a limited number of residential viewers who live in close proximity to the project alignment. Construction activity may also be noticeable from recreational trails in portions of Shiloh Ranch Regional Park and Foothill Regional Park. Temporary activity at some staging areas where material stockpiling and possible helicopter landing will occur will potentially be visible to the public for the duration of the project, especially at staging areas in the Fulton-Shiloh segment of the project, which will be noticeable to motorists along River Road, Highway 101, and several residences along Lavell Road. However, because these temporary sites are situated within a disturbed urban setting in full view of Fulton Substation, and will be only be briefly noticeable to motorists along Highway 101 at typical roadway speeds, the visual change would not be particularly noticeable. In addition, the staging area located along Shiloh Ridge Road—along the Shiloh-Fitch project segment—is potentially within view of one residence, as well as a limited number of motorists along this private roadway. Construction activities are anticipated to occur over a 1-year period; however, most activities (e.g., pole replacement and reconductoring) are not expected to last more than a few days at any one location along the project route. It should be noted that the project is located in a general area where mechanized agricultural production activities occur that typically employ the use of trucks and other equipment that is not unlike project-related construction equipment.

Access to project work areas will be on existing public and private roads, in addition to overland travel. In some cases, this will require minor grading and temporary paving with geotextiles and gravel, along with some vegetation pruning and removal to create staging areas and facilitate access to pole locations, as described in Chapter 2.0, Project Description. Due to the limited number of affected viewers within close proximity to construction activity, and the relatively short duration of work at any one location, temporary construction-related visual effects will be less than significant. Implementation of APM AE-1 will further minimize these less-than-significant impacts.

Permanent Visual Impacts

Modifications will be made to existing substation facilities at Fitch Mountain Substation to connect the reconducted lines into the existing system. These substation modifications will occur within the existing fence line, and will include minor changes to existing equipment as well as replacing the existing control building, which is approximately 8 feet by 8 feet and 8 feet tall, with a somewhat larger structure that is approximately 12 feet by 40 feet and 15 feet tall. Because the substation is surrounded on three sides by dense tall trees, the changes generally will not be visible from public viewpoints. The modifications at the existing substation could potentially be seen from two or three nearby residences; however, any visible change will be a minor, incremental effect.

The Shiloh-Fitch segment of the project involves replacing 71 existing pole structures—including five multiple-pole structures—ranging from approximately 35 to 70 feet in height, with LDS poles and a limited number of TSPs at canyon edges/long spans and dead ends where a stronger structure is required. Replacement structures will be approximately 5 to 30 feet taller than the existing structures. In addition, existing conductors will be replaced with new conductors. The project route follows the alignment of the existing power line, and replacement structures will be installed within approximately 35 feet (typically within 12 feet) of the existing pole locations and in line with the existing alignment.

Views of the reconducted lines will be, for the most part, intermittent and partially screened. The majority of the route (i.e., approximately 60 percent) crosses a combination of private agricultural land, rangeland, and dense woodland, where its visibility to the public will be limited due to factors related to topographic and vegetation screening, as well as distance from areas normally accessible to the public. Where project components will be seen, other utility structures—including existing overhead distribution and communication lines, and agricultural infrastructure such as water storage reservoirs, tanks, and pumps—are established landscape features.

Like views of the existing lines, close-range views of the project will be limited to relatively few locations where the line crosses public open space or comes in close proximity or crosses local roadways. Figure 3.1-3(a): Existing View – Shiloh Ranch Regional Park Ridge Trail shows an existing wood pole in a small clearing, where the line crosses a pedestrian trail within Shiloh Ranch Regional Park. The Figure 3.1-3(b): Visual Simulation – Shiloh Ranch Regional Park Ridge Trail simulation depicts an LDS replacement pole. A comparison of the existing view and visual simulation indicates the form and color of the new pole is similar to the existing pole. Although the replacement pole is somewhat taller, the increased height is less noticeable because the location of the new pole has shifted somewhat further to the south from the trail edge compared to the existing pole location. Overall, the visual change is minor and incremental, and will not be particularly noticeable to viewers within the park, including people using the recreational trail.



Existing View from Shiloh Ranch Regional Park Ridge Trail looking west (VP 2)

Figure 3.1-3(a)
Existing View - Shiloh Ranch Park Ridge Trail
PG&E Fulton - Fitch Mountain Reconductoring Project



Visual Simulation of Proposed Project

Figure 3.1-3(b)
Visual Simulation - Shiloh Ranch Park Ridge Trail
PG&E Fulton - Fitch Mountain Reconductoring Project

Figure 3.1-4(a): Existing View – Chalk Hill Road is an existing view of the project route taken approximately 250 feet from where the line crosses Chalk Hill Road, a county-designated Scenic Corridor within a County-designated scenic landscape area. Three existing side-by-side poles are silhouetted against the sky on a ridgetop overlooking the road from a distance of approximately 0.25 mile. The Figure 3.1-4(b): Visual Simulation – Chalk Hill Road simulation shows a somewhat taller, single TSP replacement structure in a location near where the existing wood poles have been removed. Despite the new pole being taller, the reduced number of poles seen along the ridgeline has the effect of decreasing the level of visual clutter seen from the roadway. In comparison with the more complex form of the three pole structure, the replacement pole blends more effectively with the surrounding forested landscape in this visually sensitive location.

Figure 3.1-5(a): Existing View – Brooks Road shows an open view of a similar three-pole configuration where the line crosses Brooks Road. Several nearby rural residences are located within approximately 200 feet, and other utility structures such as distribution and communication lines as well as utility poles, chain-link and metal mesh fencing can also be seen. As noted in Section 3.1.3.3, less than 0.25 mile away from this viewpoint location, a small quarry is visible from the roadway. In the Figure 3.1-5(b): Visual Simulation – Brooks Road simulation, a somewhat taller TSP has replaced two of the three existing wood poles. The remaining pole, which supports a local distribution line and transformer connecting to the adjacent residence, has been reduced in height by nearly one-third. The taller new pole could be potentially more noticeable to nearby residents as well as passing motorists; however, when compared with the existing three-pole configuration that includes numerous guy wires, the new single TSP includes a more consolidated overhead conductor arrangement and absence of guy wires, which contribute to its more streamlined visual profile. A comparison of the existing view and visual simulation demonstrates that the project represents a reduction in visual clutter over existing conditions and an incremental visual change that would not substantially alter the existing character or composition of the surrounding landscape.

Overall, the changes brought about by the project will not substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the site and its surroundings. The form of the new poles is similar to the existing wood poles; while the material has changed from wood to steel, the matte brown, self-weathering surface of the replacement poles is comparable in appearance to the color and texture of the existing poles at typical viewing distances. Where visible, the increased height of the new replacement poles will be an incremental change that will not affect the character or quality of views experienced by the public, including from public roadways in the project area. Additionally, because the project involves replacing conductors and structures for an existing utility line and will not substantially change the area's scenic features, including ridgelines, it does not conflict with public policies outlined in Section 3.1.2.1, Regulatory Background. Therefore, the visual impact will be less than significant.

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Existing View from Chalk Hill Road looking south (VP 5)



Visual Simulation of Proposed Project



Existing View from Brooks Road looking northwest (VP 9)

Figure 3.1-5(a)
Existing View - Brooks Road
PG&E Fulton - Fitch Mountain Reconductoring Project



Visual Simulation of Proposed Project

Figure 3.1-5(b)
Visual Simulation - Brooks Road
PG&E Fulton - Fitch Mountain Reconductoring Project

d) Would the project create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area? *Less-than-Significant Impact*

Glare

Replacement poles will be made from self-weathering steel which results in a dark brown matte surface that is a non-reflective material that blends with the surrounding landscape in most locations. Replacement conductor for the power and transmission lines will be non-specular, thus minimizing potential reflectivity and potential visibility in the landscape. Therefore, there will be no impact.

Nighttime Lighting

Nighttime construction is not anticipated unless certain short-term construction procedures are required that cannot be interrupted because of safety considerations or to take advantage of line clearances during off-peak hours. Because residences are scattered within the project area, and some agricultural operations periodically take place at night, short-term construction-related sources of nighttime lighting will not be particularly noticeable, and thus, will be less than significant.

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