

5 AESTHETICS AND VISUAL RESOURCES

This chapter provides an evaluation of the potential environmental effects of implementing the proposed 2030 Merced County General Plan (2030 General Plan) on visual resources. As established in the Notice of Preparation (see Appendix A, *Notice of Preparation*), urban development and other activities subject to the updated 2030 General Plan may result in the degradation of the visual environment within Merced County.

The following environmental assessment includes a review of aesthetic and visual resources potentially affected by the implementation of the 2030 General Plan, including a description of the existing visual character of the rural and agricultural landscape, the built environment, scenic vistas, scenic highways, and light and glare. Also assessed are the effects that could result from urban development that would be allowed under the proposed 2030 General Plan.

This analysis also includes a review of applicable regulations, requirements, plans and policies from the following state and County sources:

- California Scenic Highway Program;
- California Outdoor Advertising Act, Business and Professions Code Section 5200
- California Building Code;
- 2000 Merced County General Plan;
- Williamson Act Program;
- Merced County Open Space Action Plan (OSAP);
- Chapter 18.38, Merced County Zoning Code: Landscape Standards;
- Chapter 18.41, Merced County Zoning Code: Performance Standards; and
- Chapter 18.42, Merced County Zoning Code: Sign Regulations.

The existing condition of the visual environment, including agricultural and open space lands, rural landscapes, and foothill, pasture, and grazing areas within the county, was determined by survey and examination of photographic records, and maps of environmental resources, recreation areas, open space, and farmlands. Rules and regulations influencing the visual environment were identified by a review of state regulations and scenic highway programs, and local agency General Plans and design regulations. Potential impacts related to visual quality, compiled and analyzed based on CEQA assessment criteria, were determined by comparing potential urban development that would likely be constructed under total buildout of 2030 General Plan to the existing environment, using design criteria and guidelines adopted by Merced County.

5.1 SETTING

The environmental and regulatory setting of Merced County with respect to visual resources is described in detail in the Scenic Resources section of the General Plan Background Report (Merced County 2007; updated 2012). That document is incorporated by reference into this Draft PEIR pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Section 15150 as though fully set forth herein. The updated Background Report is available for download from the Merced County General Plan website at:

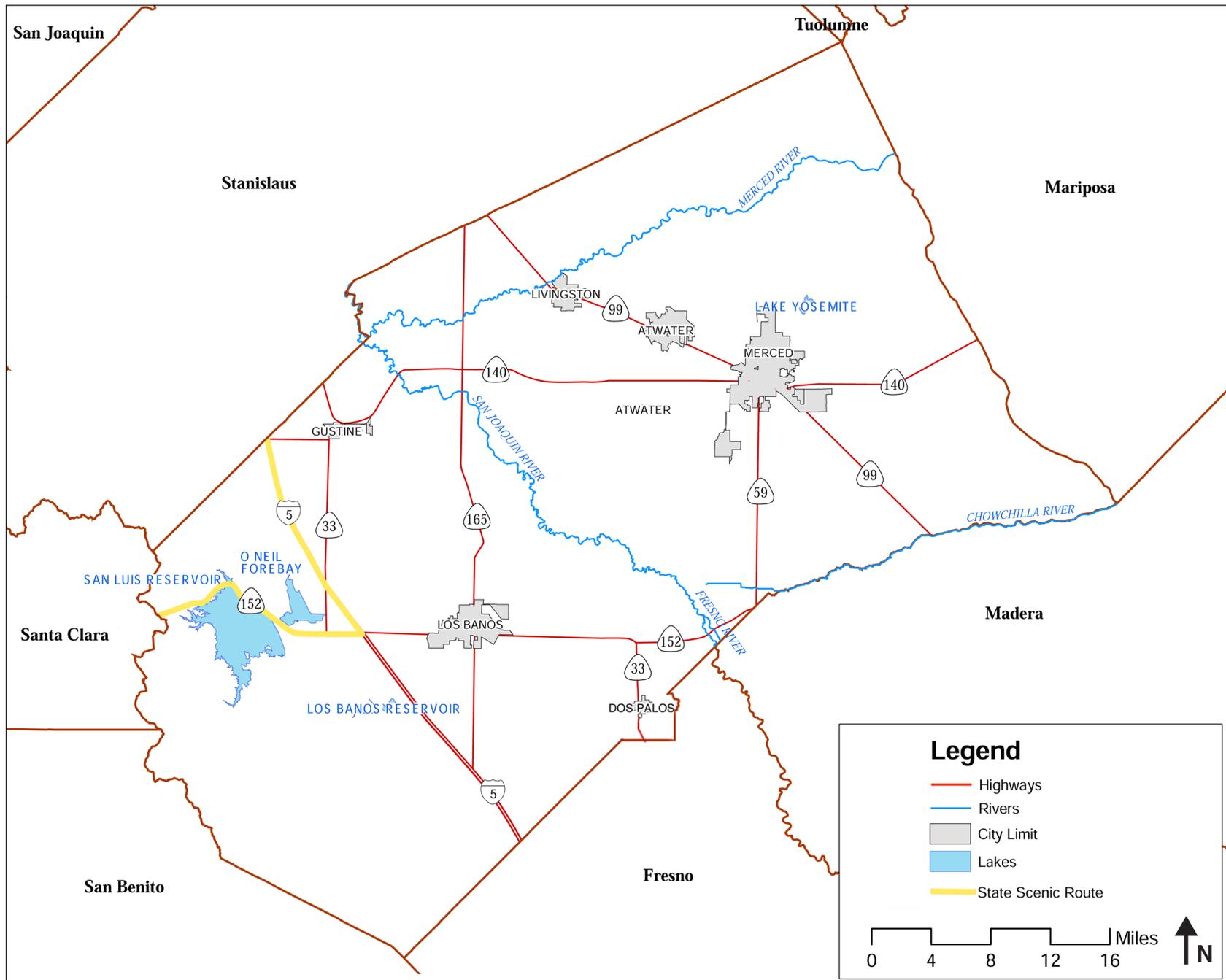
<http://www.co.merced.ca.us/index.aspx?NID=1926>.

Copies of the Background Report may be viewed during standard business hours (8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), Monday through Friday, at the Merced County Planning and Community Development Department, 2222 M Street, Merced, California 95340, and at the Main Branch of the Merced County Library located at 2100 O Street, Merced California 95340.

5.1.1 ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

The Background Report's discussion of the scenic resources setting describes the visual resources within the county, and how these resources are valued for their aesthetic character. The predominant scenic resources within Merced County include natural, rural, and agricultural landscapes, and views of the Coast Range to the west and the Sierra Nevada to the east of the county. Scenic resources discussed in the Background Report include:

- **Landscape Resources.** Landscape resources include rural agricultural landscapes, marshes and wetlands, river corridors, rangelands, and scenic panoramas. Major public viewpoints are available to travelers along Interstate 5, State Route 33, State Route 59, State Route 99, State Route 140, State Route 152, and State Route 165. Figure 5-1 illustrates the county's agricultural lands, protected wildlife refuges, recreation and open space lands, and state-designated scenic highways.
- **Trends in Landscape Conversion.** Urban expansion has resulted in conversion of the county's agricultural and open space lands, which has adversely affected the county's scenic resources. The county's large expanses of prime soils suitable for crop production are often also the easiest soils to develop due to their slope and drainage qualities. As a result, the majority of the existing urban areas are located on prime or statewide important soils. Over time, urbanization on these soils has reduced the availability of productive agricultural land, which, in turn, eliminates the scenic value of the rural agricultural landscape.
- **Federal Lands and Programs.** Federally managed lands within the county provide landscape protection. Three federal wildlife refuges are located in Merced County: the Merced National Wildlife Refuge, the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, and the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge. Additionally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) operates the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area (GWMA), an area in which the USFWS may acquire conservation easements over agricultural lands to ensure the continuation of agricultural practices beneficial to wildlife. These programs protect natural resources and provide recreational opportunities, while incidentally benefiting visual quality.
- **State Lands and Programs.** The State operates and maintains a variety of public lands located in Merced County for the protection of valuable wildlife habitats and water resources. Wildlife habitat and water resources provide aesthetic and passive recreational opportunities for county residents and visitors. State managed lands include the Great Valley Grasslands State Park, the George Hatfield, McConnell, and Los Banos Reservoir State Recreation Areas, and the Los Banos State Wildlife Management Area.
- **Merced County Lands and Programs.** The County manages its open space resources to support its population through the Merced County Open Space Action Plan. The County's Open Space Action Plan is implemented by the Merced County Planning and Community Development Department through use of an Open Space Development Review System (OSDRS). The system provides a process for assessing the appropriateness of proposed developments, including their compatibility with surrounding environmental constraints and resources.



SOURCE: Merced County, 2010

Merced County 2030 General Plan Update

Figure 5-1
Designated State Scenic Highways within Merced County

The County participates in the Williamson Act Program, a farm property tax relief program that enables local governments to enter restrictive use contracts with farmland owners, thereby maintaining the property in agricultural production for a minimum period of nine years. The subsidy is provided through a reduced property tax assessment resulting from valuing contracted land on the income it is capable of producing from agriculture, rather than on its fair market value for other purposes. Cities and counties also acquire open space easements in the county pursuant to the Open Space Easement Act of 1974 (Government Code Section 51070 et seq.) and the Conservation Easement Act (Civil Code Sections 815-816).

- **Private and Non-Governmental Organization Lands and Programs.** There are several private and non-governmental organizations that work to preserve agricultural land in Merced County, including the Central Valley Farmland Trust and the Nature Conservancy. The Central Valley Farmland Trust works with farmers and ranchers to preserve agricultural land in Merced County, as well as in other Central Valley counties. However, the majority of the Trust's land lies within Merced County. Under the program, land is conserved either through donations, agricultural easements, land purchases, or monitoring easements. Similarly, the Nature Conservancy works with the county's ranchers to protect grasslands, concentrating on two principal areas along the Highway 140 corridor that leads to Yosemite National Park near the UC-Merced campus. Private recreation areas, such as golf courses and private duck clubs, also preserve open space lands and scenic resources.

The major findings of the Background Report with respect to aesthetics/scenic resources are set forth below.

- The primary scenic resources within Merced County are the rural and agricultural landscapes of non-urbanized areas of the county, which comprise approximately 95 percent of all county land.
- The unsightliness of certain land uses and activities, such as utility lines, signs, and landfills, degrades the quality and livability of an area, community, or neighborhood. Production activities that result in vegetation clear-cutting can also disrupt the visual quality of the landscape.
- Scenic views of the Coast Range and the Sierra Nevada from the wide valley floor constitute the major long-range scenic vistas in the county. They are visible during favorable weather conditions from most public roadways, including Interstate 5, State Route 33, State Route 59, State Route 99, State Route 140, State Route 152, and State Route 165.
- According to the Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, from 1992 to 2008, Merced County's agricultural lands decreased by approximately 1,251 acres per year.
- Large tracts of federally managed lands within the county provide landscape and natural resource protection, including the Merced National Wildlife Refuge, the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, and the San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge.
- Officially designated state scenic highways within Merced County include State Highway 152 west of Interstate 5, and Interstate 5 from the Stanislaus County line south to Highway 152.
- Views of the night sky are an important part of the natural environment, particularly for rural and agricultural areas in Merced County. Existing sources of nighttime lighting in the county include interior lighting that passes through windows, exterior lighting on residential

and commercial buildings, street lights, traffic headlights, billboard lighting, and other lighting from signage.

- Glare within the county is mainly a result of the sun, street lighting, or auto headlights reflecting off large concrete or light-colored surfaces such as parking areas, buildings, or rooftops.
- County policies should enable and expand the economic viability and potential of agricultural and ranch lands as a means of preserving scenic resources.
- The preservation of agricultural and ranch lands will result in the preservation of the county's primary scenic resource lands.
- Special attention can be focused on ensuring that urban development does not significantly reduce visual vistas or glimpses from roadways and developed areas. The major scenic vistas that need to be recognized in County policy are views of both the Coast Range and the Sierra Nevada, and stream corridors of the Merced River, San Joaquin River, and Bear Creek.

5.1.2 REGULATORY SETTING

The Background Report's discussion of aesthetics/scenic resources regulatory setting includes the following state and regional regulations:

STATE

- **California Scenic Highway Program.** The California Scenic Highway Program is administered by Caltrans. The program was designed to protect scenic state highway corridors from changes that would diminish the aesthetic value of the land adjacent to the highways. A California highway may be designated as scenic depending on how much of the natural landscape can be seen by travelers, the scenic quality of the landscape, and the extent to which development intrudes on the traveler's enjoyment of the view. When a city or county nominates an eligible scenic highway for official designation, it must identify and define the scenic corridor of the highway, defined by the motorist's line of vision. The State has established standards for protecting state-designated scenic corridors. These standards include regulation of land use and the intensity of development through detailed site planning, control of outdoor advertising, attention to landscaping, and the design and appearance of structures and equipment. (Caltrans 2012)
- **California Building Code.** The California Building Code (California Code of Regulations, Title 24, Part 2) contains various building standards derived and adapted from the International Building Code, authorized by the California legislature, that address California building issues. They include standards for outdoor lighting intended to improve energy efficiency, minimize light pollution and nighttime glare, and provide design solutions to shield and control outdoor lighting fixtures.
- **Highway Beautification Act.** The Federal Highway Administration has entered into written agreements with California as part of the implementation of the Highway Beautification Act: one dated May 29, 1965, and a subsequent agreement dated February 15, 1968. The agreements generally provide that the State will control the construction of all outdoor advertising signs, displays and devices within 660 feet of the interstate highway right-of-way. The agreements provide that such signs shall be erected only in commercial or industrial zones, and are subject to restrictions.

- **Outdoor Advertising Act.** California regulates outdoor advertising in the Outdoor Advertising Act (Business and Professions Code, Section 5200 et seq.) and the California Code of Regulations, Title 4, Division 6 (Section 2240, et seq.) Caltrans enforces the Act. Caltrans requires applicants for new outdoor lighting to demonstrate that the owner of the parcel consents to the placement sign, that the parcel on which the sign would be located is zoned commercial or industrial, and that local building permits are obtained and complied with. A digital billboard is identified as a “message center” in the statute, which is an advertising display where the message is changed more than once every two minutes, but no more than once every four seconds (Business and Professions Code Section 5216.4), The Act prohibits signage along landscaped freeways (Business and Professions Code Section 5440).
- **California Vehicle Code.** Additional restrictions on outdoor signage are found in the California Vehicle Code. Section 21466.5 prohibits the placement of any light source “...of any color of such brilliance as to impair the vision of drivers upon the highway.” Specific standards for measuring light sources are provided. Caltrans, the California Highway Patrol, or local authorities may enforce the restrictions.

MERCED COUNTY

- **Merced County General Plan.** The County’s 2000 General Plan Land Use Element contains recommended standards for agricultural land use designations regarding population density and building intensity, in addition to percent lot coverage maximums. These standards provide guidelines that promote low-density development in agricultural areas, and preserve the open space agricultural aesthetic.
- **Merced County Open Space Action Plan.** Adopted as part of the County’s 2000 General Plan, the OSAP provides County decision makers with a procedure for determining the true development potential of a piece of land at a given time, based upon an assessment of its open space sensitivity value. Areas that have been delineated in the Planning and Community Development Department’s inventory maps as containing sensitive resources or hazard areas are to be protected, managed, or preserved in a manner that is compatible with the resources or hazards that exist on the site or in the area. Although the OSAP is cited in the 2030 General Plan, the OSAP continues in effect as an adopted County policy implemented through the County’s review of proposed development projects in rural areas.
- **Merced County Urban Centered Concept.** The “Urban Centered Concept” is included as the basic principle of land use policy in the County’s 2000 General Plan. This concept emphasizes the use of established cities and community centers to accomplish urban expansion in an orderly manner, in locations where public services are currently available.
- **Chapter 18.38, Merced County Zoning Code: Landscape Standards.** This section of the County Zoning Code provides standards for the aesthetic enhancement of new development, and modifications to existing development permits, using landscaping. It provides techniques to increase the compatibility between dissimilar uses through the use of landscape buffers and screening.

- **Chapter 18.41, Merced County Zoning Code: Performance Standards.** This section of the Zoning Code provides performance standards to ensure compatibility between land uses by setting specific standards for environmental hazards, including dust, various air pollutants, hazardous materials, lighting, noise, odors, glare, and wastewater. Specifically, it contains exterior lighting standards for properties, and requirements to ensure that lighting related to glare does not spill beyond property boundaries.
- **Chapter 18.42, Merced County Zoning Code: Sign Regulations.** This section of the County Zoning Code provides sign regulations pertaining to road rights-of-way in order to protect highways from visual clutter. Sign regulations enhance the appearance of unincorporated areas through design standards, and also promote compatibility with surrounding structures.

5.2 ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The aesthetics and visual resources analysis evaluates whether implementation of the proposed urban development that would occur from total buildout (approximately 14,700 acres out of 1.2358 million acres or 1.2 percent) under the 2030 General Plan project could result in adverse visual effects.

5.2.1 SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

The following criteria have been established to quantify the level of significance of an adverse effect being evaluated pursuant to State CEQA Guidelines Appendix G: Environmental Checklist Form, Section I. Aesthetics. Implementation of the 2030 General Plan would result in a significant aesthetic or visual impact if the Plan would:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista. *(I.a)*
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway. *(I.b)*
- Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of Merced County and its surroundings. *(I.c)*
- Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area. *(I.d)*

5.2.2 ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

The aesthetics and visual resources evaluation includes a review of visual and scenic resources potentially affected by the implementation of the 2030 General Plan project, and the total buildout envisioned under the Plan. The quality of Merced County's visual character is subjective and dependent upon each viewer's preferences, which can vary as individuals respond differently to changes in the visual environment. As a result, the level of the project's visual impacts can be difficult to quantify. Therefore, the evaluation takes a conservative approach, and provides a qualitative discussion of the potential for the 2030 General Plan project to result in urban development that would affect the visual character of the county.

Both natural and man-made landscape features contribute to perceived visual character and the scenic attractiveness of the county's rural and urban landscape. Natural landscape features can include vegetation, foothills, pastures, water resources, landforms, rock outcroppings, and

topography. Man-made landscape features can include recreational amenities, public roadways, sidewalks, street lighting, farmlands, and rural and urban structures. The evaluation describes both the existing natural and man-made landscape features, and how both the overall development and the development at specific locations proposed under the 2030 General Plan can affect the existing features of the natural environment and characteristics of the man-made environment.

The evaluation also determines whether the goals and policies in the 2030 General Plan promote compatibility with the existing environment, and the extent to which they would protect existing scenic landscapes. For the purpose of this evaluation, the aesthetic value of the area is a subjective measure of the visual character and scenic quality analyzed based on CEQA assessment criteria.

5.2.3 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The following discussion examines the potential impacts of the proposed project based on the impact threshold criteria described above.

Impact AES-1: Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway.

Implementation of the proposed 2030 General Plan could lead to urban development and other activities that could damage scenic resources, including trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway. Because the 2030 General Plan contains goals, policies, and implementation programs that would preserve the viewsheds within state scenic highway corridors, and because approved and existing urban communities adjacent to scenic highways contain design guidelines, setback standards, and open space buffers to minimize visual changes, this would be a less-than-significant impact.

According to the California Department of Transportation Map, Merced County has two officially designated state scenic highways: State Highway 152 west of Interstate 5; and Interstate 5 from the Stanislaus County line south to State Highway 152. As shown in Figure 5-1, urban development, specifically residential and commercial urbanization under the 2030 General Plan, could occur along state designated highway segments. Urbanization is likely to occur along State Highway 152, State Highway 33, and Interstate 5 at the Villages of Laguna San Luis and the community of Santa Nella. Urban development would also occur along Interstate 5 at the community of Fox Hills, but the highway is not designated as a state scenic highway in this location. Except as noted above, scenic resources adjacent to the state scenic highways would not be subject to visual impacts related to development anticipated under the 2030 General Plan since no new urban uses are proposed under the Plan at these locations.

Impacts may result in the diminished integrity of views of the nearby Coast Range to the west as experienced by motorists travelling along the state designated highways. Impacts may also affect existing and future residents in the vicinity who may experience a heightened sensitivity to potential visual changes to the existing open grasslands, foothill views of the Diablo Range, and the distinguishing characteristics of the rural scenery.

Since scenic resource protection is a major focus of the 2030 General Plan, the Natural Resources, Recreation and Cultural Resources, and Public Facilities and Services Elements include goals and policies that would preserve scenic views from designated highways. Table 5-1 includes goals and

policies from the 2030 General Plan that communicate the County's intention to protect scenic resources within state scenic highways.

Table 5-1 Merced County 2030 General Plan Goals and Policies Relating to Protection of Scenic Resources within State Scenic Highways		
Goal or Policy	Goal or Policy Text	How the Goal or Policy Avoids or Reduces Impact
Natural Resources Element		
Goal NR-4	Protect scenic resources and vistas.	States the overall goal for the County to protect scenic resources and vistas. Reduces potential impacts by limiting development in locations that would not protect valuable scenic resources.
Policy NR-4.1: Scenic Resources Preservation	Promote the preservation of agricultural land, ranch land, and other open space areas as a means of protecting the county's scenic resources.	Encourages the protection of agricultural, ranch, and open spaces lands since the rural character of these types of land uses define some of the scenic resources within the county. The management and protection of the rural landscape would also protect scenic vistas.
Policy NR-4.2: Special Review Process for Structures Adjacent to Scenic Highways	Coordinate with Caltrans during the review of proposed structures and activities located adjacent to state-designated scenic highways to ensure that scenic vistas and local scenic values are not significantly degraded.	Ensures adequate review occurs between both Caltrans and County staff to minimize impacts to resources within state-designated scenic highway corridors.
Policy NR-4.4: New Roads	Consider the surrounding landscape, topography, and existing scenic values when determining the location and construction of new roads.	Encourages consideration of the impacts of new roadways on scenic resources and the potential of feasible alternatives.
Recreation and Cultural Resources Element		
Goal RCR-1	Preserve, enhance, expand, and manage Merced County's diverse system of regional parks, trails, recreation areas, and natural resources for the enjoyment of present and future residents and park visitors.	The overall goal is to preserve and expand the County's system of regional parks, trails, and recreation areas, which would also preserve the scenic resources within them.
Policy RCR-1.11: Scenic Resource and Public Land Protection	Encourage the use of regional parks and open space areas as a mechanism to preserve the county's natural scenic beauty and protect land for public purposes.	Minimizes impacts to scenic resources by encouraging the use of parks and open space.
Public Facilities and Services Element		
Policy PFS-5.6: Underground Power Transmission	Require power transmission and distribution facilities to be located underground within urban communities and residential centers.	Avoids unsightly scenic impacts related to utility and power transmission lines by requiring all such infrastructure to be located underground.

Source: Merced County, 2011; Planning Partners, 2012.

As set forth in Table 5-1, the 2030 General Plan contains many goals and policies that provide a variety of mechanisms to ensure future impacts to visual resources within state scenic highways are avoided. In the Natural Resources Element, Goal NR-4 aims to protect the scenic resources and vistas in the county through the preservation of agricultural, ranch, and open space lands as a means to protect scenic resources. The Recreation and Cultural Resources Element Goal RCR-1

encourages the creation of regional parks and open space areas as a mechanism to preserve the county's natural scenic beauty. Furthermore, in the Public Facilities and Services Element, Goal PFS-5 minimizes scenic impacts by ensuring utilities are placed at suitable locations and would not degrade the scenic integrity of viewsheds. Through the goals and policies outlined in Table 5-1, fewer development impacts would affect state scenic highways because the County would thoroughly evaluate specific development project proposals during the environmental and site review process and several policies would be in place to ensure future impacts to visual resources within scenic corridors are avoided.

Under the 2030 General Plan, residential development would occur within designated state scenic roadway segments in the following locations:

- adjacent to the Villages of Laguna San Luis, west of Interstate 5, and north and south of State Highway 152; and
- near the community of Santa Nella, west and east of Interstate 5.

While most of the development in these designated communities would occur adjacent to state designated scenic highway corridors, each of these urban areas have a Community Plan that outlines general design criteria, building setback standards, open space buffers, and landscaping improvements intended to lessen impacts to scenic resources visible along the state scenic highways. Although the design guidelines are general in scope and do not prescribe strict design concepts or architectural styles, they do seek to retain the existing visual rural character of the area. The guidelines also establish vegetative screening requirements to maintain scenic views and block unsightly views for travelers along both Interstate 5 and State Highway 152. Additionally, proposed development within new urban communities and elsewhere within the county would also be subject to standard design review by the County, thereby lessening visual impacts. Finally, less than two percent (1.2%) of all existing agricultural and rural land in the entire county is proposed to be developed through the buildout of the 2030 General Plan.

As a result, while some of the proposed urban uses designated for most of these communities would occur near designated scenic roadway corridors, they would not result in an abrupt edge along the periphery of Urban Community boundaries. Instead, the periphery of each Urban Community would maintain a gradual transition between urban and rural uses. For example, the designation of open space buffers and the installation of landscape screening treatments would enhance and create a better transition between different uses. Thus, urban uses would be required to blend with the surrounding open space and agricultural landscape.

Construction of urban uses within approved communities adjacent to designated scenic highways could also result in temporary changes in visual conditions. Temporary changes may be due to construction activities, which can involve large types of equipment, storage and staging areas, and short-term grading and paving activities that can generate dust and fumes. Such activities would worsen the visibility of views experienced by travelling motorists, and heighten the sensitivity of nearby residents. However, the construction associated with new development and single-family residences is generally a short-term visual impact. Further, the long-term permanent development that results from the buildout of designated communities would be properly screened through landscaping treatments and improvements outlined in the various Community Plan policies. Similarly, long-term permanent development due to scattered single-family residential development would be properly screened through vegetation and landscaping measures pursuant to County

Zoning Code standards (Chapter 18.38 and 18.41), and also any design review conditions prior to approval of a subdivision map or a building permit.

Therefore, with the implementation of the 2030 General Plan policies and specific design criteria, setback standards, buffering techniques, and landscaping improvements associated with the above-mentioned Community Plans, as well as the County Zoning Code requirements, the effects of proposed urbanization on scenic resources within state designated highways would be less than significant.

Significance of Impact: Less than significant.

Mitigation Measure: None required.

Impact AES-2: Substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of scenic resources or vistas.

Implementation of the proposed 2030 General Plan would lead to urban development and other activities that could substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of the scenic resources or vistas within Merced County. Because the 2030 General Plan would set a framework of goals and policies that aims to balance agricultural and open space preservation with new development, and ensure that new development preserves and protects the aesthetic rural character of Merced County, and because the 2030 General Plan proposes that less than two percent of the existing rural and agricultural land be developed through buildout, this would be a less-than-significant impact.

The existing visual character of Merced County is influenced by the quality of both its natural and man-made features. These features are visible as important scenic resources and vistas, or viewsheds. Important scenic resources within Merced County include natural, rural, and agricultural landscapes, and views of the Coast Range to the west and the Sierra Nevada to the east of the county. Implementation of the 2030 General Plan would allow for urban growth and development in the county's incorporated cities and unincorporated fringe areas, established and designated Urban Communities, and New Urban Communities. The land uses and policies proposed under the 2030 General Plan could influence the future visual character and aesthetic quality of the new and expanding communities in the county. For example, urban development on existing undeveloped land, whether it is agricultural, ranch, pasture, or grazing lands, could result in a change to the visual character from new and expanding communities. Similarly, existing land use goals, policies, and design guidelines outlined in adopted Community Plans and standards outlined in the County Zoning Code would shape the visual character of designated and existing Urban Community areas.

While the frameworks of the 2030 General Plan and the various Community Plans focus on policies at different levels, with broader policies outlined in the General Plan and more specific policies outlined in the Community Plans, both share the common goal to improve the visual character and quality of the county. For example, the County can accomplish improvements to its overall visual character through the implementation of broad goals and policies in the 2030 General Plan designed to improve the existing scenic resources in the unincorporated county. In the same way, the adoption of design criteria in the Community Plans can enhance the aesthetic appeal of designated

Community Plan areas. Through the implementation of both frameworks, the County is establishing its commitment to improve its overall visual character.

However, new and approved development consistent with the proposed 2030 General Plan could also alter the visual character and quality of the county through changes in the types of new housing, commercial centers, or non-residential uses that might be proposed. This would occur primarily due to changes to prominent scenic resources in the unincorporated areas. For example, open grasslands and other vegetation may be removed to accommodate grading and infrastructure development for new urban development and roadways. The natural topography may also be modified due to grading for building pads, driveways, and roadways. Also, rock outcroppings and other natural features may become obscured or removed. Such effects are expected to occur within communities designated for growth that may not have been built out, but such effects also may occur in scattered locations in rural areas of the county.

Potential changes in the visual environment may also entail changes in the form, scale, dominance, and appearance of new development. These changes in the visual environment would be affected by how the 2030 General Plan land use designations, goals, policies, and implementation programs would protect existing dominant natural and man-made features in the county. Changes would also be affected by how the 2030 General Plan influences the dominance, scale, diversity, contrast, and continuity of future man-made features that would define the county’s future visual character.

As mixed-use developments become more prevalent, their urban designs may incorporate tall buildings and higher densities not common to areas known for their rural character. As a result, the contrast between mixed urban uses and agricultural, open space, and rural uses would be more noticeable to existing residents, and more likely to interfere with existing views. New development would be associated with buildout in existing Urban Communities, development that occurs along the fringes of existing communities, within and outside the six cities’ Spheres of Influence (SOI) within Merced County, and potential development in new urban communities. Commercial development is also likely to occur at key highway interchanges in designated Highway Interchange Centers.

During the public outreach for the 2030 General Plan, the community identified the importance of agricultural and open space resources, and placed a high aesthetic value on the contribution of these land uses to the rural character of the county. Table 5-2 includes selected goals and policies from the 2030 General Plan Land Use and Natural Resources Elements that communicate the County’s intention to maintain a balance between urban development and protection of its visual character.

Table 5-2 Merced County 2030 General Plan Goals and Policies Relating to Protection of the Visual Character of the County		
Goal or Policy	Goal or Policy Text	How the Goal or Policy Avoids or Reduces Impact
Land Use Element		
Goal LU-1	Create a countywide land use pattern that enhances the integrity of both urban and rural areas by focusing urban growth towards existing or suitably located new communities.	Goal balances the needs of urban population growth and housing needs with the preservation of sensitive land uses, such as agriculture and open space lands.

Table 5-2 Merced County 2030 General Plan Goals and Policies Relating to Protection of the Visual Character of the County

Goal or Policy	Goal or Policy Text	How the Goal or Policy Avoids or Reduces Impact
Policy LU-1.1: Countywide Development	Direct urban development to areas within adopted urban boundaries of cities, Urban Communities, and Highway Interchange Centers in order to preserve productive agriculture, limit urban sprawl, and protect natural resources.	Focuses urbanization to appropriate locations within the county that can easily accommodate residential and commercial uses with existing infrastructure, and limit impacts on natural resources and agricultural land.
Policy LU-1.12: Hillside Development Standards	Prepare and adopt hillside development standards and illustrated design guidelines addressing viewshed protection for all hillside development.	Requires the development of measures to protect valuable scenic resources and viewsheds along hillsides and ridgelines.
Goal LU-2	Preserve, promote, and expand the agricultural industry in Merced County.	Protects agriculture and related land uses within the county through the “Agricultural” land use designation.
Policy LU-2.1: Agricultural Designation	Apply the Agricultural land use designation as the primary designation in the county to support productive agricultural lands and promote the agricultural industry.	Protects the majority of the agriculture and related land uses within the county through the “Agricultural” land use designation.
Policy LU-2.2: Foothill Pasture Designation	Apply the Foothill Pasture land use designation on agricultural and open space lands located on the eastern and western edges of the county which are recognized for their value as grazing, cropland, and open space.	Protects the foothill, grazing, and pasture lands within the county through the “Agricultural” and “Foothill Pasture” land use designations.
Goal LU-5.A	Preserve and enhance the character of Merced County by focusing future unincorporated development towards Urban Communities.	Directs growth to Urban Communities rather than unincorporated rural areas outside designated Community Plans, Specific Urban Development Plans, or cities.
Goal LU-5.B	Preserve and enhance the design, heritage, historic character, and quality of life of Urban Communities in Merced County.	Supports the design and rural character of the county to be considered during the design and development of Urban Communities in the county to maintain the existing visual character.
Policy LU5.B.1: Community Plan Design Guidelines	Develop, maintain, and implement urban design guidelines and uniform policies in new or updated Community Plans that emphasize the individual character of each community.	Requires and provides specific design guidelines and policies for Community Plans to ensure the policies are uniform, but also that they integrate individual character to maintain the integrity of the county’s visual environment.

Table 5-2 Merced County 2030 General Plan Goals and Policies Relating to Protection of the Visual Character of the County		
Goal or Policy	Goal or Policy Text	How the Goal or Policy Avoids or Reduces Impact
Policy LU-5.B.3: Distinctive Neighborhoods	Encourage the development of diverse and distinctive communities and neighborhoods that build on the patterns of the natural landscape and existing development, and are responsive to their location and context.	Support design guidelines and land use patterns for New Communities that are integrated into the natural landscape to minimize impacts to adjacent rural landscapes, such as agricultural and open space lands.
Goal LU-6	Provide dedicated commercial areas that serve the needs of the traveling public while balancing countywide circulation and other County needs.	Designate areas for commercial uses to minimize the development of such uses on more sensitive lands, better suited for agriculture.
Policy LU-6.7: Design Guidelines	Prepare and adopt design guidelines for all Highway Interchange Centers which will include landscaping, signage, height, and bulk requirements.	Ensures that new highway service centers contain landscaping and other features that help blend their infrastructure into the surrounding environment to minimize visual impacts.
Goal LU-7	Ensure that development in county/city fringe areas is well planned and adequately serviced by necessary public facilities and infrastructure.	Minimizes visual character impacts by ensuring developments are well-planned and adequately serviced.
Policy LU-7.3: City Sphere of Influence Expansions	Support city sphere of influence expansion proposals when the city has demonstrated there is an actual need for additional land to accommodate planned growth, and documented a good faith effort to implement an infill development program(s) to minimize the conversion of productive agricultural land.	Ensures coordination with the county's six incorporated cities by supporting growth within their SOI rather than within unincorporated county lands where productive agricultural lands may be impacted.
Natural Resources Element		
Goal NR-4	Protect scenic resources and vistas.	States the overall goal for the County to protect scenic resources and vistas. Reduces potential impacts by limiting development in locations that would adversely affect valuable scenic resources.
Policy NR-4.1 Scenic Resources Preservation	Promote the preservation of agricultural land, ranch land, and other open space areas as a means of protecting the County's scenic resources.	Encourages the protection of agricultural, ranch, and open spaces lands since the rural character of these types of land uses define some of the scenic resources within the county. The management and protection of the rural landscape would also protect scenic vistas.

Table 5-2 Merced County 2030 General Plan Goals and Policies Relating to Protection of the Visual Character of the County

Goal or Policy	Goal or Policy Text	How the Goal or Policy Avoids or Reduces Impact
Policy NR-4.2 Special Review Process for Structures Adjacent to Scenic Highways	Coordinate with Caltrans during the review of proposed structures and activities located adjacent to state-designated scenic highways, to ensure that scenic vistas and local scenic values are not significantly degraded.	Ensures adequate review occurs between both Caltrans and County staff to minimize impacts to resources within state-designated scenic highway corridors.
Policy NR-4.3: Building Design	Require that siting and design of buildings protect, improve, and enhance the scenic quality of the built and natural environments, and take full advantage of scenic resources through site orientation, building setbacks, preservation of viewsheds, height limits, and the use of appropriate construction materials and exterior modulation.	Similar to an architectural review process, this policy takes into consideration several site and building design features that help enhance the scenic character of the surrounding environment.
Policy NR-4.4 New Roads	Consider the surrounding landscape, topography, and existing scenic values when determining the location and construction of new roads.	Encourages consideration of the impacts of new roadways on scenic resources and the potential of feasible alternatives.

Source: Merced County, 2011; Planning Partners, 2012.

Summarily, as set forth in Table 5-2, implementation of the 2030 General Plan would reduce potential adverse effects to visual character by enacting the following goals and their supporting policies. The Land Use Element contains a variety of goals and policies that seek to direct growth into already urbanized areas by focusing growth towards cities, existing urban communities, and suitable and well-located new urban communities. For example, several policies under Goal LU-1 seek to enhance the integrity of both urban and rural areas by focusing urban growth towards existing or suitably located new communities. Similarly, Goal LU-2 seeks to preserve the agricultural industry in Merced County through several supporting policies designed to maintain agricultural land, which in turn also maintains the rural aesthetic character of the county. Goal LU-5.A and supporting policies seek to enhance the character of Merced County by focusing future unincorporated development towards Urban Communities and away from productive agricultural lands, thereby protecting existing scenic agricultural and open space resources. These policies require that Community Plans contain design guidelines that support Goal LU-5.B to address community character and design within Urban Communities. The 2030 General Plan also contains design standards for Highway Interchange Centers as described in Goal LU-6 and Policy LU-6.7. Finally, Goal LU-7 ensures that development in county/city fringe areas is well planned.

The 2030 General Plan Natural Resource Element contains similar protective policies that would prevent impacts to the visual character and quality of Merced County's natural and man-made features. For example, Goal NR-4 states the County's overall intention to protect scenic resources and vistas. Such policies demonstrate that the County has taken a proactive approach to improving its visual character.

While many policies in the proposed 2030 General Plan are intended to preserve agricultural and open spaces, and the scenic resources within them, urban development pursuant to the 2030 General Plan could result in visual effects. Future urban development could permit the loss of existing agricultural, ranch, farmland, and open space lands that are recognized for their scenic value. Within designated urban areas, development as part of the 2030 General Plan would be subject to existing design guidelines. The existing land use goals, policies, and design guidelines outlined in adopted Community Plans and standards outlined in the County Zoning Code would shape the visual character of designated and existing Urban Community areas. Further, the 2030 General Plan policies would ensure that development plans in existing urban communities are uniform, but also integrate the natural context of the scenic landscape and the distinctiveness of neighborhoods into Community Plans. The preservation of both these natural and man-made features would contribute to the scenic quality of the county, which would minimize impacts to the county's visual character. In addition, development of existing communities would be considered an expansion within an existing urbanized area, and would not result in a significant change in the overall visual character.

Some of the county's rural agricultural land could be exposed to rural development due to minor subdivision activity that could result in the construction of ranchettes at scattered locations and along the fringes of large agricultural lands. However, this type of scattered development is a common sight in rural areas of Merced County, and the visual effects of scattered are reasonable and expected in the context of the Agricultural land use designation. This development would appear similar to existing facilities in the project area, and would be considered common and appropriate to the region by most viewers. While scattered development in undesignated areas is likely to lack specific Community Plan guidelines and design criteria, the design requirements for single-family residences and other isolated structures are determined by the Merced County Title 18 Zoning Code Landscape Standards (Chapter 18.38.040 General Regulations and Standards). These standards would minimize visual impacts.

Because one of the purposes of the 2030 General Plan is to accommodate future growth, the Plan establishes Policy LU-1.5, which recognizes the right to propose new communities. As a result, while the majority of growth would be directed towards incorporated cities and existing designated and approved Urban Communities, it is expected that some urban development would occur outside existing designated communities that could alter existing agricultural lands and open spaces.

Although new development could alter the visual character of the county, the proposed area of new development is approximately 14,700 acres or less than two percent of the county's rural and agricultural land. Furthermore, the implementation of the 2030 General Plan policies to balance agricultural and open space preservation with new development and ensure that new development preserves and protects the aesthetic rural character of Merced County with specific design criteria, the effects of proposed urbanization on the visual character of the county would be less than significant.

Significance of Impact: Less than significant.

Mitigation Measure: None required.

Impact AES-3: Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the county.

Implementation of the proposed 2030 General Plan would lead to urban development and other activities that could create new sources of substantial light or glare, which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the county. Even though the urban expansion contemplated by the 2030 General Plan is limited to approximately 14,000 acres, and the 2030 General Plan contains a specific policy and a detailed Zoning Code requirement designed to reduce the creation of new sources of light and glare. However, new development, particularly within rural areas could still increase the amount of light and glare that spills onto nearby sensitive land uses. Thus, this would be a potentially significant impact.

The development proposed under the 2030 General Plan could increase the amount of light and glare through the installation of exterior lighting within areas proposed for new residential and commercial development. Existing sources of light and glare primarily occur within the county's six incorporated cities, their spheres of influence, and designated Urban Communities. It is expected that the new sources of light and glare would be associated with the buildout of the land uses designated in the 2030 General Plan Land Use Diagram, many of which would continue to occur in existing urbanized areas, such as cities and designated Urban Communities. However, some new development would result in scattered growth that would increase the amount of light and glare that occurs outside urban boundary areas. Because the majority of the county consists primarily of agricultural uses or areas that currently have no light or minimal amounts of light and glare, it is expected that new sources of light and glare at such locations could negatively affect these rural uses and could contribute to new substantial sources of light pollution.

Table 5-3 includes the 2030 General Plan Natural Resource Element goal and policy designed specifically to reduce the creation of any new sources of light or glare, which could impact nighttime views in the county.

Table 5-3 Merced County 2030 General Plan Goals and Policies Relating to Reduction of Light Pollution		
Goal or Policy	Goal or Policy Text	How the Goal or Policy Avoids or Reduces Impact
Natural Resources Element		
Goal NR-4	Protect scenic resources and vistas.	States the overall goal for the County to protect scenic resources and vistas. Reduces potential impacts by limiting development in locations that would not protect valuable scenic resources.
Policy NR-4.5: Light Pollution Reduction	Require good lighting practices, such as the use of specific light fixtures that reduce light pollution, minimize light impacts, and preserve views of the night sky.	Specific lighting practices would minimize the effects of light pollution related to urban development.

Source: Merced County, 2011; Planning Partners, 2012.

As set forth in Table 5-3, Natural Resources Element Goal NR-4, Policy NR-4.5 requires good lighting practice, such as the use of specific light fixtures that reduce light pollution, minimize light impacts, and preserve views of the night sky. As discussed in Section 5.1.2 above, the California Building Code also regulates lighting intensity, efficiency, and shielding. It requires that lighting

fixtures be designed to minimize light pollution and glare. Further, Title 18 of the County Code (Chapter 18.41 Performance Standards, Section 060 Lighting) requires all exterior lighting to be designed and maintained so that glare and reflections are contained within the boundaries of the parcel. The code also requires that light fixtures be hooded and directed downward and away from adjoining properties and public rights-of-way. However, new development impacts still have the potential to substantially increase the amount of nighttime light and glare in the county, permanently obscuring nighttime views of the sky. Light and glare are also likely to have a greater effect on sensitive uses, such as rural residential and agricultural uses, recreation and open space areas, wildlife refuges. Therefore, while both the County Zoning Code Performance Standards and the California Building Code requirements would limit light trespass and reduce light pollution, in combination with the 2030 General Plan Policy NR-4.5, new development particularly within rural areas could still increase the amount of light and glare that spills onto nearby sensitive land uses, resulting in a potentially significant impact.

Significance of Impact: Potentially significant.

Mitigation Measure AES-3:

Amend Policy NR-4.5: Light Pollution Reduction, as follows:

The County shall develop and implement a lighting ordinance to require good lighting practices, such as the use of specific light fixtures that reduce light pollution, minimize light impacts, and preserve views of the night sky. The ordinance shall contain standards to avoid light trespass, particularly from developed uses, to sensitive wildlife corridors and refuges.

Environmental Effects of Measure: Because this mitigation measure would apply only to new development, there would be no additional impacts beyond those identified in Chapters 5 through 22 of this Draft PEIR.

Level of Significance After Mitigation: Less than significant.

Because implementation of Mitigation Measure AES-3 would establish a policy measure and implementation program to reduce the potential for nighttime light pollution related to spillover light and glare, especially with respect to sensitive uses and activities, this impact would be less than significant.