CHAPTER 2.0 – SIGNIFICANT ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS OF THE PROPOSED PROJECT

This chapter of the EIR provides a detailed discussion of those subject areas for which Project implementation would result in either: (1) significant impacts that cannot be avoided and/or (2) significant impacts that can be avoided, reduced, or minimized through mitigation measures required to be implemented as part of the Proposed Project.

In order to assist the reader in tracking between impacts and related mitigation measures, individual impacts and the associated mitigation measures have been given correlating numbers and letters. For example, for the issue of biological resources, the first significant impact is identified in text in the analysis portion of the discussion as BIO-1, representing biological resources impact number 1. The measure designed to attenuate that impact is identified as M-BIO-1 (i.e., mitigation for biological resources impact number 1). Biological resources, cultural and tribal cultural resources, noise, and paleontological resources include mitigation which would reduce Project impacts to less than significant.

Each environmental issue area describes the following topics:

- Existing conditions
- Regulatory framework
- Analysis of project effects and determination as to significance
- Cumulative impacts
- Significance of impacts prior to mitigation
- Mitigation
- Conclusion

2.1 Aesthetics

A Visual Resources Report was prepared for the Proposed Project to determine the potential for significant impacts to aesthetics and community character as a result of Project development. The Visual Resources Report (DUDEK 2021) was prepared in conformance with the County Guidelines for Determining Significance and Report Format and Content Requirements, Visual Resources (2007b). The results of the analysis are presented below and included as Appendix H to this EIR.

2.1.1 Existing Conditions

2.1.1.1 *Project Site*

As discussed in Chapter 1.0, the Project site is in the unincorporated community of Rancho San Diego in San Diego County. The site is located within the Jamacha Valley. Willow Glen Drive forms the northern boundary of the Project site, which is bisected by the Steele Canyon Road bridge over the Sweetwater River (refer to Figure 1-3, *Project Vicinity [Aerial Photograph]*). The

Project site gently slopes down from east to west, with elevations ranging from approximately 380 feet amsl in the northeastern portion of the site to 320 feet amsl in the southwestern portion of the site.

The site is currently occupied by the Cottonwood Golf Club, which consists of two 18-hole courses. While the (eastern) Ivanhoe Course is active and open to the public, the (western) Lakes Course has been closed since 2017 and is no longer being maintained as an active course (refer to Figures 1-14, *Lakes Course Layout*, and 1-15, *Ivanhoe Course Layout*). The Ivanhoe Course has relatively linear fairways that include bunkers and water hazards, some of which were created during previous sand extraction activities and are lined with mature native and non-native trees (e.g., eucalyptus, Fremont/western cottonwood, and willows) to separate fields of play (see Photo A, Figure 2.1-1a, *On-site Existing Conditions*). West of Steele Canyon Road, weedy shrubs and grasses are interspersed with pockets of exposed soils throughout the closed Lakes Course, which is only subject to periodic mowing (see Photo B, Figure 2.1-1a). Clusters of trees, two ponds/water hazards, and several dry depressions that previously supported golf course water hazards occur within the western portion of the Project site, along with several sandy paths that traverse the unmaintained area.

On the Ivanhoe Course, on-site facilities include a clubhouse, equipment maintenance and storage area, and an on-course restroom. The approximately 11,500 SF, single-story and rectangular clubhouse is centrally located within the eastern Ivanhoe Course and occupies approximately 0.75 acre (see Photo C, Figure 2.1-1a). The clubhouse was constructed in the 1960s when the golf courses were developed and is situated near a fenced driving range that extends east of the Sweetwater River. The building has a white brick and wood-siding façade with decorative stone elements and a low-pitched roof with wooden lattice screening lining the edges of the roof to screen mechanical equipment. An open, 13,000-SF storage yard is located south of the clubhouse and is enclosed and separated from the clubhouse and golf course by fencing and hedges. Course parking occurs in two connected asphalt-paved parking lots located north of the clubhouse and adjacent to Willow Glen Drive (see Photo D, Figure 2.1-1a). The upper lot, located adjacent to Willow Glen Drive, is larger (1.6 acres) with designated spaces for approximately 200 vehicles. There are two ingress/egress locations to/from the parking lot, which is located slightly downslope from Willow Glen Drive (approximately 10 feet) (see Photo D, Figure 2.1-1a). The lower lot (approximately 0.75 acre) is adjacent to the clubhouse and has space for approximately 120 vehicles. The lower lot is accessed by two one-way ingress/egress ramps from the upper lot and sits approximately 8 feet lower in elevation than the upper lot. A small, landscaped slope separates the parking lots; mature trees line the southern edge of the lower lot and separate the parking areas from the clubhouse and adjacent storage yard.

An approximately 2.2-acre equipment maintenance and repair facility is located within the Ivanhoe Course, southwest of the clubhouse. This facility provides a maintenance and storage area for the tractors, mowers, and other landscaping equipment used for course maintenance. The maintenance area includes two aboveground fuel storage tanks, two garage repair structures (3,440 SF and 3,800 SF), and an approximately 375-SF office building. Covered parking bays are provided on the north and southwest perimeter of the yard for equipment. The facility is surrounded by mature trees and landscaping, which provide some visual shielding from the clubhouse, golf house, and off-site vantage points. One vacant one-story residential building is located on an approximately 1.1-acre parcel immediately adjacent to Willow Glen Drive within the western Lakes Course. The

structure is California ranch in style and is surrounded by a chain-link fence with green mesh, mature trees, and dense landscaping which largely shields it from passing viewers on Willow Glen Drive.

The Sweetwater River channel extends through the length of the site, entering at the northeastern Project boundary and continuing in a mostly northeast to southwest direction to the southwestern boundary, where it exits the site and continues southwest toward the Sweetwater Reservoir. The river is channelized with a natural bottom and is relatively narrow (approximately 13 feet wide) where it enters the Project site, but gradually expands to a width of approximately 119 feet in width below the Steele Canyon Road bridge. West of the bridge, the river channel narrows to widths ranging from approximately 54 to 110 feet as it meanders through the closed Lakes Course in a northeast-southwest direction toward the southwestern property boundary. Four cart bridges spanning the river to allow access to fairways and facilities on either side of the river channel (refer to Photo E on Figure 2.1-1b, *On-site Existing Conditions*).

As shown on Figure 2.2-3, *Vegetation and Sensitive Resources,* and described in further detail in Subchapter 2.2, *Biological Resources,* the Project site supports approximately 20 vegetation communities/land use types, including some native vegetation communities. The Lakes Course portion of the Project site west of Steele Canyon Road is primarily characterized by disturbed ruderal vegetation, several man-made ponds, non-native vegetation along Willow Glen Drive, and a mixture of native and non-native vegetation along the southern boundary. The eastern portion of the site (the active Ivanhoe golf course) is characterized by landscaped turf grass, native and non-native planted trees, cart paths, parking lots, clubhouse, and other maintenance facilities. In addition, the Ivanhoe course is traversed by an electrical transmission corridor that supports three transmission lines (see Photos F and H, Figure 2.1-1b). Two large and geometric steel lattice towers and a single tall tubular steel pole are installed approximately 700 feet to the west of the equipment maintenance and repair facility.

Vegetation along the Sweetwater River channel has been heavily modified by past and current uses and is currently dominated by low, maintained and irrigated grass or bare ground. During most of the year, the channelized riverbed appears dry and barren compared to the verdant, irrigated fairways of the eastern Ivanhoe Course (see Photo G, Figure 2.1-1b). A comparable color contrast does not occur on the idle western Lakes Course due to the dominance of low and brown/olive ruderal shrubs and grasses and lack of irrigation. Occasionally, water released from the upstream Loveland Reservoir flows within the Sweetwater Riverbed following heavy rain events when transfers to the Sweetwater Reservoir are conducted (see Photo H, Figure 2.1-1b). A section of the river along the southwestern Project boundary (approximately 2,360 feet in length and 130 to 250 feet in width) is densely vegetated with riparian vegetation dominated by willows intermixed with non-natives such as giant reed and tamarisk. This section of the river is located outside the boundary of mining subphases.

Small patches of Diegan coastal sage scrub habitat at the southeastern and southwestern Project boundaries connect to larger swaths of coastal sage scrub within nearby preserved lands and open space. Dominant species include California sage brush, California buckwheat, single whorl burrobrush, and broom baccharis. Disturbed coastal sage scrub on site occurs as narrow bands of habitat to the south of Willow Glen Drive at the northeastern boundary, and to the west of Steele Canyon Road along the southern boundary. These areas consist of scattered shrubs of California

sagebrush and California buckwheat growing among planted non-native trees and woody debris deposited on the slopes. Scattered stands of eucalyptus woodland occur throughout the site, mostly at the northeastern, southeastern, and southern boundaries. Scattered eucalyptus trees also occur throughout the golf course among the trees lining the fairways. Peruvian pepper trees, eucalyptus, and oleander line Willow Glen Drive along the site's northern boundary.

Man-made ponds on site consist of open water habitat excavated in upland areas, which serve as water hazards and aesthetic features for the golf courses. Four ponds are present in the eastern portion of the site and six occur to the west of Steele Canyon Road. The water level in these constructed ponds is maintained artificially by pumping water into them. Several dry depressions that previously supported water hazards are present on the western Lakes Course.

2.1.1.2 *Surrounding Area*

Additional portions of the Jamacha valley and surrounding mesas and mountainous topography characterize the physical setting of the areas surrounding the Project site. Land use in the vicinity is limited by physical constraints associated with the presence of the Sweetwater River channel, which passes through the area in a northeast-to-southwest direction, and by the afore-mentioned steep terrain on the north and south. The Sweetwater River has several artificial impoundments upstream of the Project site, including Loveland Reservoir, which is subject to water transfers and controlled releases by the Sweetwater Authority. In the Project vicinity, the Sweetwater River channel slopes gently from approximately 400 feet amsl to 300 feet amsl. Land to the north and east slopes steeply to over 700 feet amsl. The area to the south consists of rugged terrain rising quickly to elevations over 800 feet amsl, and continuing to rise to San Miguel Mountain, at over 2,500 feet amsl, approximately 3 miles to the south.

Biological resources that contribute to the visual context in the region generally include core blocks of coastal sage scrub and chaparral, open space conserved within the SDNWR, and perennial waters and riparian habitat associated with Sweetwater River. In some areas both upstream and downstream of the Project site, the Sweetwater River is scantly vegetated and open, similar to its on-site appearance. In other areas, the river corridor is heavily vegetated with riparian vegetation, including dense stands of trees such as cottonwoods, willows, and western sycamores (intermixed with non-natives such as giant reed, tamarisk, eucalyptus, peppertree, and Mexican fan palm). Undeveloped lands to the north, east, and south of the site are primarily comprised of coastal sage scrub and chaparral habitat, with smaller areas of grassland also present. A mesa rising to the north of the Project site creates a notable visual "wall" that, along with area mountains and hillsides, comprise primary elements of the Project viewshed. Residences line the mesa edge north of the site. South of the Project site, hillsides and mountains line the river valley.

The existing visual character and quality of the surrounding area is characterized in the Valle de Oro Community Plan as a balance of urban, semi-rural agricultural, and open space land uses, with the Rancho San Diego area developed with large-scale, master-planned residential and commercial developments interspersed with large areas of green-belt and biological open space for wildlife preservation. Land uses in the surrounding area include residences, parks, and commercial uses of the Rancho San Diego community to the north and west, and undeveloped land and extractive operations to the northeast. Rural residential development, small-scale agricultural uses, and the Steele Canyon Golf Club (including a 27-hole golf course and estate-style residential uses) are

located to the south and southeast and the SDNWR is located to the to the southwest. Existing land uses and facilities in the surrounding area are illustrated in Figure 1-3.

Willow Glen Drive generally parallels the alignment of the Sweetwater River, and provides access to rural and tract-style residential neighborhoods, recreational facilities including golf course and extractive operations. The roadway consists of four-lanes west of Steele Canyon Road and two lanes east of the golf course. The Project site is crossed by Steele Canyon Road via a bridge that spans the Sweetwater River. An existing view from the northbound lane of Steele Canyon Road as it spans the river is shown on Figure 2.1-2a, *Off-site Existing Conditions* (see Photo I). Residential development in the area includes several subdivisions of tile-roofed, single-family homes generally larger than 1,500 SF on landscaped, fenced yards. These include Emerald Point and Corte Madera, adjacent subdivisions located north of the site with access off Willow Glen Drive at Muirfield Drive and Medina Drive, respectively; the gated Monarch Ridge development located northeast of the site off Hillsdale Road and Vista Grande Road; the Cottonwood community located north of the site off Hillsdale Road and Wind River Road; and the La Tierra development located south of the Project off Ivanhoe Ranch Road. Larger estate-style single-family residences on large lots are located south of the Project site, including those immediately adjacent to the Project site located on Heatherwood Drive, Wildwind Drive, and Cottonwood Springs Lane, as well as the gated Steele Canyon Estates and golf club located to the southeast. The proximity of residential lands uses to the Project site is shown on Figure 1-3.

The visual environment to the south and southwest of the Project site is shown in the foreground of Photo J (taken from the SDNWR Wildlife Refuge Loop trail) and in the background of Photo K (taken from the mesa north of the Project site), Figure 2.1-2a. One isolated single-family residence is located north of the Project site, just east of the clubhouse and parking lot with access from Willow Glen Drive. Two additional homes and a small-scale agricultural operation are located off Ivanhoe Ranch Road along the southern property boundary between the Project site and the Steele Canyon Golf Course. Schools in the area include Jamacha Elementary School located approximately 0.25 mile to the south, Steele Canyon High School located approximately 0.5 mile to the south, Valhalla High School located approximately 0.75 mile to the northwest, Hillsdale Middle School located approximately 0.5 mile to the west, and Cuyamaca College located approximately 0.66 mile to the west (refer to Figure 1-3).

Several parks are located within the residential developments near the Project site, including Cottonwood, Damon Lane, Hillsdale, Hilton Head, Steele Canyon, and Woodhaven County parks. These parks range from large grassy areas featuring mature shade trees, benches, and paths/paved walkways (e.g., Cottonwood, Damon Lane, Woodhaven) to facilities offering playgrounds, playing fields, and picnic areas (Hillsdale, Hilton Head, Steele Canyon). The closest park is Hilton Head County Park, located at 1605 Hilton Head Road, which features a children's playground, splash pad, multi-use sports field, basketball court, exercise stations, shaded picnic and barbecue areas, and a concrete walking path. County parks and existing trails in the Project vicinity are shown on Figure 2.1-3, *Viewshed Analysis*, as additionally described below. Of the parks listed above, views to the Project site and more specifically, a small portion of the Phase 1 area, are only available at Hilton Head County Park.

Located southwest and east of the Project site, the SDNWR has an existing trail system that includes two trails in the vicinity with potential views of the Project: Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail

and McGinty Mountain Trail (Hiking San Diego County 2016, 2015). The trails are currently open to hiking, biking, and horseback riding. Located south of the Project site at the dead end of Par Four Drive, the Wildlife Refuge Loop trailhead provides access to an approximately 3.3-mile loop trail through the eastern portion of the SDNWR. The loop trail includes a "lower" and "upper" segment and the upper segment provides elevated vantage points to the Lakes Course and western portions of the Ivanhoe Course. The McGinty Mountain trailhead is located on Jamul Drive, approximately 2.3 miles southeast of the Project site. This trail reaches the McGinty Mountain Peak at approximately 2,183 feet amsl and is 5 miles total out and back. While distant and present within an expansive viewshed, the Project site is faintly detectable (primarily, the bright greens of the irrigated Ivanhoe golf course) from the switchbacks and ridgeline segments of the trail.

The County has identified a number of existing and proposed community pathway and trails located along public rights-of-way, over private property, and through County-owned land in the vicinity of the Project in the Valle De Oro Community Trails and Pathways Plan, which is a component of the County Trails Program Community Trails Master Plan (CTMP; County 2005, as amended). Two existing trails described in the Valle De Oro Community Trails and Pathways Plan are located within the Project viewshed.

Sweetwater Regional Trail (Trail E) is an existing and proposed regional trail totaling approximately 7.6 miles in length in the Valle de Oro CPA that would extend into the Crest/ Dehesa, Spring Valley, and Sweetwater CPAs along the Sweetwater River. As shown in Figure 2.1-3 (identified as Sweetwater River Trail), a portion of this trail west of the Project site (and north and west of the Sweetwater River) has been completed. Views to the Project site from the completed trail segment, however, are restricted due to intervening vegetation and development. The proposed segment of the trail parallels Willow Glen Drive and the entire length of the northern boundary of the Project site for approximately 1.7 miles. The Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail (Trail 5), also referred to as the Par 4 trail by the USFWS, is an existing trail totaling approximately 6.0 miles within the SDNWR, south and southwest of the Project site. This trail follows the Par 4 trail identified by the SDNWR and extends to the south. Since the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail overlies and extends beyond the Par 4 Trail, "Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail" is used throughout this EIR in place of the Par 4 Trail.

Lastly, existing mining operations and storage yards in the vicinity of the Project include the approximately 94-acre, privately owned Hester's Granite Pit operated by Robertson's Ready Mix and located approximately 0.7 mile northeast of the Project site, and the County Department of Public Works Roads Division 1 Headquarters (includes gravel, rock, miscellaneous equipment and materials storage), located approximately 0.7 mile southwest of the Project site. Hester's Granite Pit is generally located outside of the Project viewshed due to intervening terrain and the 60-acre borrow pit (located off SR 94 and Singer Lane) is obscured from public view due to vegetation and development near SR 94.

2.1.1.3 *Project Site Visibility/Viewshed and Landscape Unit*

Project Viewshed

A "viewshed" is an analytical tool to aid in identification of views that may be affected by a potential project. The viewshed is defined as the surrounding geographic area from which the

on-site elements of the Project are likely to be seen. The viewshed boundary represents the geographic limits for this visual assessment.

Figure 2.1-3 illustrates the Project viewshed on an aerial photographic base within a 3.0-mile radius. Views within this radius are considered close enough to allow viewers to perceive Project elements such as landform modification, vegetation removal, and (potentially) the spatial mass and form of temporary structures and processing equipment. Note that although built versus natural elements are distinguishable from further distances, topographic modifications and structures beyond approximately 1.0 mile tend to begin to become visually muted and distinguishable only as facets of the larger regional landscape.

The percentage of visibility is a conservative number, since visual screening by intervening structures or landscaping is not considered by the model. Because of intervening development, vegetation and landscaping, the entire Project site and multiple subphase areas would not be visible from all of the identified locations within the viewshed area. Even under conditions in which topography or other intervening elements do not obstruct views, views to any given point within a viewshed may not be clear due to levels of humidity or haze. Atmospheric conditions such as fog, mist, haze, and/or smog can decrease visibility and cause features to lose sharpness at approximately 0.5 mile.

The Project site is located in an area of varied topography which is constrained by and somewhat limits the number of surrounding public vantage points. As shown in Figure 2.1-3, based on topography alone, the viewshed indicates that the Project site is potentially visible mostly from nearby areas within the Jamacha valley and adjacent hillsides/ridgelines that face the Project site, as well as segments of SR 54/Jamacha Road, SR 94/Campo Road, and other more distant roadways. The undeveloped hillsides and mountainous areas to the south and east of the Project site generally delineate the southern and eastern extent of the viewshed boundary. The hillsides and mountains that are shown to have visibility can easily be seen from the Project site because of the scale of and silhouettes displayed by these features; however, since the Project site is confined within the context of the valley, it may not be as visually distinct in views to the site from these distant locations. The northern and western viewshed boundary is defined by the varied topography within developed areas of Rancho San Diego and El Cajon. These areas primarily support residential and commercial uses, with parks and educational facilities as well as open space areas interspersed throughout.

The computer-generated viewshed was field checked by Project analysts and specific sensitive locations (segments of SR 54 and SR 94, existing trails, and areas of the adjacent Rancho San Diego community) were visited to confirm or eliminate visibility. Particularly along roadways and trails that abut structures and landscaping associated with the surrounding development, views are generally obscured due to these intervening features as described in the general Project Setting discussion.

Landscape Unit

A landscape unit is a portion of the regional landscape and can be thought of as an outdoor room that exhibits a distinct visual character. A landscape unit will often correspond to a place or district

that is commonly known among local viewers. Specifics related to visibility and intervening uses are provided as relevant within analyses below.

The overall "outdoor room" within which the Project is located consists of a single landscape unit, characterized by the Jamacha valley landscape. The landscape unit is defined by a mix of recreational/golf course uses, agriculture, residential, and undeveloped areas within and adjacent to the river corridor. The Sweetwater River is generally contained by the surrounding mountains and hillsides that enclose the Project viewshed. This unit is defined for the Project by the topography (e.g., hills, mesas and ridgelines) that confine views to the valley and by more distant mountainous slopes.

Visual Character

The visual character of the Project area encompasses visually diverse forms, including the uniformly landscaped golf course areas within the Project site, geometric and rectilinear structures in the residential areas, and more natural, complex vegetation in the riparian and mountainous areas. The hillsides rise from the valley floor, creating a visual contrast with the flatter land areas of the valley and a visually diverse pattern of elements within the landscape. The result is a mix of the natural and built environment with an emphasis on mature vegetation (both planted and native).

The Project site is relatively flat, with the Sweetwater River channel comprising a consistent linear element as it curves through the site. In the eastern Ivanhoe Course, the river channel sits at a lower elevation than the golf course areas that comprise most of the site. Low-growing, maintained grasses appear relatively smooth and regular, but are punctuated by mature trees and other contrasting features including sand traps, constructed ponds, cart bridges, and pathways. Tall and greyish steel lattice towers and a single tubular steel pole on the Project site also punctuate the low grasses. Mature trees are generally of a standard shape and height throughout the site, and blend with the naturally vegetated river channel in the southwestern portion of the site, as well as with off-site areas. On-site structures are generally screened by mature trees and shrubs and do not appear to be dominant or out-of-scale features within the visual environment. The western portion of the site features some of the same pattern elements, but textures are noticeably less smooth due to the unmanicured, disturbed nature of the existing vegetation.

The visually dominant colors in the viewshed generally are the green and brown tones displayed by vegetation. Shades of green are brighter in irrigated areas and these colors fade into ashy and brown shades within unmanicured and scrub habitat areas. The dense riparian vegetation of the Sweetwater River creates a notable swath of dark green along the southwestern Project boundary and southwest of the site. The structures in the surrounding area are white or light-colored geometric and rectilinear elements, and frequently have red tiled roofs. Residential subdivisions to the north of the Project site are massed in groupings large enough to be visually dominant within the landscape unit, and those on the developed mesa are skylined as viewed from the south, particularly at lower elevations such as along Willow Glen Drive and Steele Canyon Road.

Overall, the visual character of the landscape unit is suburban in nature due to the integration of the built environment primarily comprised of suburban residential neighborhoods and the golf course with natural features of the river corridor and surrounding hillsides and mountainous landforms.

2.1.1.4 *Visual Quality*

Visual quality is evaluated by identifying the vividness, intactness, and unity present in the viewshed. This approach to evaluating visual quality can help identify specific methods for mitigating specific adverse impacts that may occur because of a project. The three criteria for evaluating visual quality are as follows:

- Unity is the visual coherence and compositional harmony of the landscape considered as a whole. It frequently attests to the careful design of individual components in the landscape.

- Intactness is the visual integrity of the natural and built landscape and its freedom from encroaching elements. It can be present in well-kept urban and rural landscapes, as well as in natural settings.

- Vividness is the visual power or memorability of landscape components as they combine in distinctive visual patterns.

The visual unity of the valley within which the Project site is located is considered moderately high. The area generally displays compositional harmony; however, disparate features (i.e., undeveloped open space areas, recreational uses such as the Cottonwood and Steele Canyon golf courses, and residential development) are present and visible. Similar vegetative elements such as mature trees tend to unify the different land uses. McGinty Mountain, the San Miguel Mountains, and the hillsides north of the Project site are visually dominant features that highlight the topographic diversity within the viewshed. These topographic features tend to emphasize the overall coherence of the visual environment. The Project site has moderately high visual unity, due mostly to its low diversity and visual organization of repeating aesthetic features (flat areas covered with low-growing vegetation interspersed with uniformly planted mature trees and built elements of the golf course such as buildings, pathways, water features, and sand traps). Mature trees located throughout the site and along the perimeter tend to emphasize the general consistency of the on-site vegetative elements and visually connect the site to surrounding areas and the Sweetwater River channel.

The intactness of the area is moderate. While the diverse elements within the area do not detract from the visual coherence of the environment as a whole, when viewed more closely, the developed areas and structures encroach somewhat into the natural areas of the valley, reducing the intactness. Most of the structures and more dense residential development are located along the hillsides north of the valley and south of the Project on the valley floor and adjacent hillsides. The intactness of the Project site also is moderate, degraded by the disturbed nature of the western Lakes Course, which is unmaintained, unirrigated, and displays a much less manicured appearance relative to the Ivanhoe Course. The western and eastern portions of the Project site, divided by the Steele Canyon Road bridge, visually contrast from one another and also are somewhat dissimilar to the surrounding areas, some of which are either more densely developed (e.g., residential areas) or more naturally vegetated (e.g., off-site portions of the Sweetwater River and mountainous areas).

The vividness of the Project Area is moderately high. The view of the valley edged by the surrounding ridgelines and natural segments of the Sweetwater River are memorable. However,

the noticeable contrast between the adjacent Lakes and Ivanhoe Course, unmaintained golf course signage and chain-link fencing, and multiple transmission lines and support structures, notably detracts from the overall memorability of the area. The Project site itself is moderately vivid within the larger valley landscape, although the vividness and visual cohesiveness of the golf course scenery is reduced due by the appearance of the unmaintained, unirrigated western Lakes Course.

2.1.1.5 *Viewer Response*

Viewer response, or awareness, is composed of two elements: viewer sensitivity and viewer exposure. These elements combine to form a method of predicting how the public might react to visual changes brought about by a project's implementation.

Viewer sensitivity is defined as both the viewers' concern for scenic quality and the viewers' response to change in the visual resources that make up the view. Local values and goals may confer visual significance on landscape components and areas that would otherwise appear unexceptional in a visual resource analysis.

Viewer exposure is typically assessed by measuring the number of viewers exposed to the resource change, type of viewer activity, duration of the view (including the speed at which the viewer moves), and position of the viewer. A viewer's response is also affected by the degree to which they are receptive to the visual details, character, and quality of the surrounding landscape. A viewer's ability to perceive the landscape is affected by their activity. For example, a viewer on vacation in San Diego County would probably take pleasure in looking at the landscape, and an individual may be strongly attached to the view from his home. A local County resident commuting to work, however, may not "register" those same visual resources on a daily basis.

Viewer Groups and Sensitivity, Exposure and Awareness

Motorists

Sensitivity. Motorists traveling along Willow Glen Drive have views onto the Project site that vary from screened to somewhat open. Roadway improvements and tree removal would, however, be unscreened and located in the foreground distance zone of motorists. A relatively open view towards the northeastern corner of the Project site and more distant mountains from the westbound lane of Willow Glen Drive is shown on Photo L, Figure 2.1-2b. An existing photo towards the Project site where dense landscaping is installed along Willow Glen Drive is shown on Photo M of Figure 2.1-2b. Views to mining phase areas would be experienced over a relatively short duration given the travel speeds along Willow Glen Drive. At the intersection with Steele Canyon Road, longer view durations or "static" views may be experienced due to the traffic signal, as motorists may slow down approaching a red light or stop during the red phase. While some vegetative screening along the property boundary adjacent to the roadway results from existing shrubs and mature trees, partial to open views onto the site can be experienced along the entire length of the Project. Roadway improvements and tree removal would, however, be unscreened and located in the foreground distance zone of motorists. Motorists along this roadway are assessed as having a high sensitivity to change, given the high percentage of anticipated area residents among users of this local road, and the identification of this road as a scenic highway corridor in the Valle de Oro Community Plan.

Along the bridge span over Sweetwater River, motorists on Steele Canyon Road are provided brief views onto the Project site. On the approach to and over the bridge, views are available to the idle Lakes Course and currently operating Ivanhoe Course. The roadway provides access to several residential neighborhoods, which constitute the principal land use along the roadway. Existing mature vegetation and development adjacent to the roadway south of the Project site restrict views such that views are only available where the roadway crosses the Project site and river. Sensitivity is assessed as moderately high because most motorists are anticipated to be residents from local neighborhoods.

Other roadways in the Project area, such as Muirfield Drive (perpendicular to Willow Glen Drive), are further removed from the site, carry less traffic, are not identified as scenic corridors, and would have limited views of the site due to intervening vegetation and development. Overall, however, Muirfield Drive is expected to carry almost wholly residents of the area, who are generally expected to be highly sensitive to change. Portions of the site would be visible for less than approximately five seconds for motorists traveling south on Muirfield Drive between Hilton Head road and Willow Glen Drive. At the intersection with Willow Glen Drive, views of slightly longer duration may be experienced by motorists due to the stop sign. Based on these considerations, motorists on Muirfield Drive are presumed to have moderate sensitivity.

Exposure. Motorists on Willow Glen Drive comprise the highest volume of potential viewers to the site. Average daily traffic (ADT) rates obtained during recent traffic counts ranged from 13,900 ADT along the segment from Hillsdale Road east of the Project site to Steele Canyon Road to 18,300 ADT along the segment between Steele Canyon Road and Jamacha Road/SR 54, respectively (Linscott, Law and Greenspan, Engineers [LLG] 2021a~~b~~). These viewers would also have the longest duration of potential views of the Project from a roadway within the viewshed. Travel time along the length of the Project is estimated at 2.5 minutes for drivers traveling at the posted speed limit of 45 mph. However, due to the presence of mature trees and shrubs that tend to line the Project boundary from Muirfield Drive to the cluster of homes located near the northeast corner of the site, available views to the golf course are partially or entirely shielded. There are areas where breaks in road-adjacent vegetation allow for open, but discontinuous views, to select subphase areas. Photos L and M depict the range in quality of existing views toward the site from Willow Glen Drive.

Motorists on Steele Canyon Road comprise the second highest volume of potential viewers to the site, with ADT noted as 14,500 for the segment from Willow Glen Drive to Jamul Road (San Diego Association of Governments [SANDAG] 2015). The site would be visible for less than approximately 30 seconds for motorists traveling south and north. On Steele Canyon Drive, concrete k-rail barriers and metal railing partially block lower elevation features on the Project site in the foreground from view. Given the variables described above, motorists experience a moderate level of exposure to views onto the Project site.

For other roadways in the Project vicinity from which the Project may be viewed, although there are brief sections of roadway from which the Project can be seen; intervening topography, screening vegetation, and/or abutting residences generally obscure views to the Project site, as described throughout this report. Views also become additionally attenuated by distance. The brief duration of views available from moving vehicles and the relatively low number of viewers with

access to these locations indicates that motorists on roads in the residential areas to the north and south of the Project have moderately low to low exposure.

Awareness. Viewer awareness for motorists and vehicle occupants would range from moderately low to high. For example, viewer awareness for Willow Glen Drive motorists travelling adjacent to the proposed Phase 1 area would be moderate. While the presence of intervening mature trees and tall shrubs tend to screen the Project site from view, the removal of vegetation from the golf course and introduction of tan-colored features (e.g., soil stockpile, equipment, and vehicles) would be visible to motorists and their passengers. Diminished views and viewer awareness would be similar where Willow Glen Drive parallels the proposed Phase 2 area and would increase to a moderately high level near proposed Phase 3 from Steele Canyon Road due to reduced landscaping along the road. Furthermore, the effects of roadway improvements would be clearly visible to motorists. On Steele Canyon Road, viewer awareness would be high where the road crosses the Project site and low due to distance and the screening effect of proposed intervening reclamation activities in other areas.

Although motorists on local roads may note Project-related changes, their primary focus generally would be on speed of travel and interaction with other drivers on the road, as well as attention to potential bicycle users. This, combined with both the relatively short duration of exposure time and the number of competing visual elements in the viewshed, is expected to lessen the importance of specific view elements for this group of viewers. Traffic conditions and competing visual elements would comprise an element of distraction from passenger views as well, but it generally would be less than for the driver. In these cases, passengers within the vehicle may be more focused on views of the landscape. Although lessened in level of effect, any distraction at all, when combined with the relatively short duration for visibility, would result in the visual impact of specific view elements being less important for this group of viewers (e.g., less important relative to viewers such as residents, discussed below).

Recreationalists

Sensitivity. Public parks in the Project vicinity with potential views of the Project site include Hilton Head County Park and Steele Canyon County Park. Due to intervening vegetation and structures associated with adjacent development, the Project site is not visible from Steele Canyon Park. Hilton Head County Park is surrounded by residential development, which limits views of the Project site; limited views are available from a small area of park where a narrow view corridor along Muirfield Drive is present and Project site areas are visible between homes adjacent to Muirfield Drive and a landscaped median (see Photo N, Figure 2.1-2b). Sensitivity to change to existing visual conditions from this park is assessed as moderately low, given the limited site visibility and the fact that park users would generally be focused on the features of and activities occurring in the park and not surrounding areas.

The County trails map shows that designated community trails and pathways are existing or planned within the SDNWR southwest of the Project site, and along other roadways with views to the Project site, including Willow Glen Drive, Hillsdale Road, and Ivanhoe Ranch Road. Existing County-designated trails with visibility of the Project site, the Sweetwater Regional Trail and Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail, are located west/southwest of the Project. For the Sweetwater Regional Trail, views of the Project are limited to the eastern portion of the trail where it terminates

near the western Project boundary due to the presence of intervening vegetation and topography between the trail and the Project site along segments of the trail located further west and south. The Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail offers limited clear views into the Project site, For example, the loop trail includes a relatively short, elevated segment that, due to a narrow path, rocky characteristics, and less direct route from trailheads, is assumed to receive markedly less use than the more accessible "lower" segment of the trail situated closer to the Sweetwater River, and no use from equestrians. Despite the proximity and visibility of the Project site from the upper trail, views are experienced within a broad visual environment and comprise an overall small portion of the seen landscape. Regardless, recreationalists walking the trail that are already familiar with the area would be sensitive to Project-related changes. Sensitivity of recreationalists using the upper trail would be moderately high, due to the proximity of the Project site from the trail, the expansiveness of views, and the view duration.

From the lower trail, views are primarily focused on the mature riparian vegetation associated with the Sweetwater River and the hillside to the south. With the exception of lower trail segments to the east and west of the upper trail, the Project site is routinely screened from view by intervening elements (i.e., riparian vegetation) in the foreground.

From the McGinty Mountain Trail, located over 2.0 miles east of the Project, the Project site occupies a relatively small portion of the visible landscape due to the expansive views offered at higher elevations along the trail. Sensitivity is assessed as moderately low since changes in the visual environment may be detectable for regular trail users—but not overwhelmingly so—due to the distance from the site. Where trails are future actions (e.g., proposed pathways and trails), viewers are not expected to be particularly sensitive to Project changes. Future recreationalists would not be located immediately adjacent to or on the project site until the mining is already occurring or the site has been reclaimed and revegetated, and therefore, would not be comparing the visual experience to an existing condition.

Designated Class II Bike Lanes are located within road right-of-way along Willow Glen Drive, Steele Canyon Road, Jamacha Road, Jamul Drive, and Hillsdale Road. Other local roadways may be utilized as bikeways but are not designated. Riders along these roadways are expected to be recreationalists as opposed to commuters. Sensitivity of bicyclists is expected to be like that of motorists traveling along the same roadways, which is assessed as moderately high depending on the location and distance from the Project site. Since bicyclists travel at slower speeds than motorists do, their sensitivity may be higher than that of motorists.

Exposure. As described under "Surrounding Area," the only park with direct views of the Project site is Hilton Head County Park. Also as noted, surrounding homes and landscaping limit views of the Project site from most of the park such that only narrow views along Muirfield Drive to the northwestern perimeter of the Project site are available. Park users with potential views to the site (primarily from the multi-use sports field or briefly from the perimeter path), are expected to be focused on recreational activities occurring within the park. Therefore, the exposure associated with park users is assessed as low.

As noted above, several existing and proposed community trails and pathways are in the Project vicinity. Views from Wildlife Refuge Loop and McGinty Mountain trails can be expansive, especially at higher elevations (refer to Photo J, Figure 2.1-2a, for a representative view from an

elevated segment of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail), especially at higher elevations. Mature vegetation obscures views along lengths of the trails (particularly, lower elevation segments of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail), but views are generally open. Exposure is increased on the higher portions of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail since it is closer to the Project site and (relative to the McGinty Mountain Trail), comprises a large portion of the available view. As viewers move west from the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail trailhead, pockets of dense coastal sage scrub vegetation obscures views of the Project site. As experienced from the more distant McGinty Mountain trail, the Project site comprises a small portion of the extremely expansive views available to trail users. Views to the westernmost portion the Project site from an approximate 415-foot-long segment of the Sweetwater River Trail are available. Despite the opportunity for expansive views of the Project site and surrounding area, recreationalists hiking on nearby trails overall have moderately low exposure, mainly due to the low number of users. Per the SDNWR, estimated users of the reserve lands within the trails near the Project site average approximately 2,300 individuals per year for the Wildlife Refuge Loop trail and 4,300 individuals per year for the McGinty Mountain trail (USFWS 2019). Where planned trails and pathways do not yet exist, viewers are not expected to be particularly sensitive to Project changes. These future recreationalists would not have access to proposed on-site trails until post reclamation, nor would they be walking immediately adjacent to the Project site until the mining is already occurring or the site has been reclaimed; therefore, they would not be comparing site conditions to an existing pre-project condition.

As noted above, recreational cyclists can be present on designated Class II Bike Lanes on Willow Glen and Steele Canyon Road, as well as other non-designated roadways. These viewers would be moving at cycling rates of travel and travelling within the narrow road corridors with motorized vehicles. While cyclists could have slightly more sustained views to visible portions of the Project site compared to motorists, the frequent lack of a designated bike lane and travel with motorized vehicles suggests that cyclists may be equally focused on roadway conditions as motorists.

Awareness. For park users within the Hilton Head County Park, awareness of changes associated with the Proposed Project would be low, since views are limited, and park users are assumed to be focused on park activities and features. Hikers and equestrians in the nearby SDNWR and along existing County trails are assumed to have a high awareness of the surrounding area and the available views, including those that encompass the Project site. While some regular trail users may wish to retain the existing character of the Project site, others may prefer a more natural character consistent with adjacent segments of the unaltered river corridor. Occasional or first-time visitors may not have expectations regarding potential views; however, introduction of the visually contrasting elements/change/and or movement on site could be notable and would increase Project awareness. This could be high for users of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail due to the proximity of the trail to the Project site and the focus of trail users on the views and scenery. Along the McGinty Mountain Trail, as well as the County-designated Sweetwater Regional Trail, views toward the Project site are not sustained for long durations, as the trail alignments have winding sections (or switchbacks) that alter the line of sight for hikers and other trail users. In addition, views onto the Project site from the majority of the Sweetwater Regional Trail are entirely blocked by intervening vegetation. The changing focus of the recreationalists on the McGinty Mountain Trail and Sweetwater Regional Trail, combined with intervening uses/vegetation, would be expected to reduce viewer awareness of activity on the Proposed Project to moderate levels.

Compared to motorists, cyclists on Willow Glen Drive and Steele Canyon Road would have similar expectations but greater awareness due to a slower travel speed.

Residents

Sensitivity. Several homes are located within the Project viewshed, including large, estate-style single-family residences and smaller, denser residential subdivisions. For these viewers, although views are private and most are restricted due to intervening topography, structures, or vegetation, the Project parcels contribute to an often-seen and intimately known view. Although home orientation or screening vegetation would obstruct many views, residential viewers are expected to be highly sensitive to changes in the immediate visual environment.

Exposure. The number of homes where residents may experience views of the Project site from their property is conservatively estimated for each view location below; it should be noted that actual views are expected to be reduced given the presence of landscaping and fencing associated with these properties, as well as the fact that the viewshed modeling does not consider intervening structures in determining the extent of views.

Residential development located just north of Willow Glen Drive with potential views of the Project site include an isolated residence located northeast of the clubhouse; a row of homes off Royal Saint James Drive (20 homes); homes within the Emerald Point development located off Emerald Point Court (17 homes); and homes within the Corte Madera development located off Wingfoot Place, Augusta Court, and Sawgrass Street (36 homes). For the homes immediately adjacent to Willow Glen Drive, the presence of mature trees located between the roadway and the residences obscure views toward the Project site. Further east and at higher elevations above the valley, the larger Cottonwood residential development would have the most homes (95) with potential views of the Project site. Generally, portions of the Project site would only be visible to the residences on the southern edge of the mesa with views looking south. Cottonwood development homes with potential views to portions of the Project site are located off roads including Wind River Road, Lime Rock Court, Ricard Court, and Runabout Place. Located east of Hillsdale Road and off Monarch Ridge Lane, the gated Monarch Ridge community would have fewer residences (13 homes) with potential views of the Project site due to the layout of the development, varied topography of the area and intervening elements between non-ridgeline homes and the Project site. South of the Project site, adjacent development with potential views of the Project site include approximately 16 homes located off Heatherwood and Wildwind Drive; 17 homes located in the La Tierra development off Cottonwood View Drive, Palm Vista Court, and Lasyen Court; and potentially, several homes located off Cottonwood Springs Lane. Potential views from the Steele Canyon Estates development appear to be obscured due to intervening topography, landscaping/vegetation, and/or structures; however, there may be up to approximately 10 homes located at the northern end of the development with potential views. For all of the residences that have been identified with potential views of the Project site, views would be private and from the backyard of the residential properties or upper floor of homes.

Where residents in the viewshed have long-term, stationary views, they are rated as experiencing moderate to moderately high exposure.

Awareness. Although views from many homes may be substantially obscured or absent based on intervening structures or vegetation, viewer awareness for residents with views of the Project site would typically be high, especially those with foreground views and for Wind River Road residences located along the ridge of the mesa to the north of the Project site. Residential viewers with long-term exposure to the site would be accustomed to the current visual environment and character of the Project site. Nearby residents are expected to be highly aware of changes associated with Project implementation.

2.1.1.6 *Key Views – Orientation and Existing Visual Character and Quality*

Analyzing all views from which a proposed project would be seen is not feasible, and some potential views to the Proposed Project, such as those from private residences or property, are not accessible to the public. The selected key views consist of photographs taken from public viewpoints and were identified based on the number and frequency of views, scenic status, the potential sensitivity of viewers, depth and breadth of view, and the types of Project-related features that would be visible. In addition, consistent with County guidelines concerning the selection of key views, the selected viewpoint would clearly display the visual effects of the Project and represent the primary viewer groups potentially affected by the Project. Based on these considerations, four key views have been selected, with their locations illustrated on Figure 2.1-4, *Key Views*.

Key View 1

Orientation. Key View (KV) 1 is located on the "upper" Wildlife Refuge Loop loop trail (identified by the County as the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail) within the SDNWR located south and southwest of the Project site. The trailhead begins at the western end of Par Four Drive near the Project property boundary where it forks in two directions: one trail borders the southern edge of the Project site adjacent to the Sweetwater River channel at elevations ranging from 340 to 380 feet amsl and one trail extends upward following the curve of the hillside at elevations ranging from 370 to 470 feet amsl. Located approximately 0.10-mile south of the Project site and at an elevation of 445 feet amsl, KV 1 is orientated to the northeast (refer to Figure 2.1-5a, *Key View 1 – Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail [SDNWR] – Existing Conditions*).

From the elevated vantage point of KV 1, viewers (recreationalists-hikers) are provided views to the entirety of the Phase 1 area. At KV 1, Phase 2, 3, and the processing plant future locations would be reduced in scale due to distance; however, the site visibility experienced by viewers at KV 1 is notably greater than at other public vantage points that offer clear views to the Project, including KVs 2, 3, and 4. The upper trail appears to be used only by hikers. Mountain bikers, equestrians, and casual walkers with or without dogs appear to utilize the lower trail because the lower trail is a level and wide dirt trail.

From the lower trail, views are primarily focused on the mature riparian vegetation associated with the Sweetwater River and the hillside to the south. As depicted in Figure 2.1-5a, from the upper trail larger expanses of the Project site and in particular, the unmanicured Lakes Course, is visible.

Existing Visual Character and Quality. Existing views from KV 1 encompass the river valley and hillsides to the north, with distant views to the hills and mountain areas of Dehesa Mountain and

Mount Sycuan to the northeast. As experienced from KV 1, the river valley consists of flat areas covered with low-growing vegetation cut through by a swath of dense riparian vegetation associated with the Sweetwater River. The view is characterized by natural, undulating lines associated with the river channel, exposed soils, grasses, low shrubs, scattered trees, and unnatural lines of cart paths in the unmanicured Lakes Course. Two cart path bridges are prominent built features in the middleground view. Hillside areas to the north of the Project site are punctuated with rows of homes within residential developments immediately adjacent to Willow Glen Drive and the ridgeline homes on the hills to the north. Green and brown vegetation dominates the view, with the drab-toned coastal sage scrub in the foreground and on the hillsides to the north; dense riparian vegetation of varying shades of green in the middle ground; and brown, unmanicured grassy areas of the former Lakes Course with clumps of green from the mature trees scattered throughout the course. The varying land uses appear to be in scale with one another, providing moderately high visual continuity.

The visual quality of the view is moderately high but visibly reduced by the disturbed nature of the former Lakes Course that tends to contrast with surrounding natural and more orderly developed areas. The riparian vegetation and adjacent coastal sage scrub habitat that dominate the foreground and middleground hillsides exhibit a high degree of unity and intactness and are moderately vivid elements. The surrounding mountain ranges and prominent peaks juxtaposed against the valley floor provide highly memorable visual elements that increase the overall vividness of the view. The uniformity of the red-roofed residences bordering the northern property boundary contribute to the sense of unity, with cohesive landscaping and mature trees visible throughout.

The primary viewer groups from this key view—the limited number of hikers using the upper Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail—would be sensitive to and highly aware of changes within the Project site due to the proximity of the Project site from the trail, the expansiveness of views, and the view duration. Approximately 2,300 recreationalists per year (or approximately 45 users per week) use the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail, most likely on the lower trail segment. From the lower and more consistently trafficked segment of the trail, views toward the Project are fully to partially screened by mature vegetation in the river corridor. Overall, the moderately low overall exposure (i.e., low annual number of trail users), limited number of users of the upper trail, and relatively short view durations would result in moderate viewer response.

Key View 2

Orientation. KV 2 looks east from the northbound travel lane of Steele Canyon Road, on the bridge spanning the Sweetwater River. KV 2 depicts the clearest view of Phase 2 and the proposed processing plant from a public viewpoint. As shown in Figure 2.1-6a, *Key View 2 – Steele Canyon Road Bridge – Existing Conditions*, the Sweetwater River channel and Ivanhoe golf course areas are visible from this roadway. The unmanicured Lakes Course is also visible from the road to the west, but the view is oriented to the east and the Ivanhoe Course. Steele Canyon Road is primarily used by motorists but also receives limited use by pedestrians (a sidewalk is present along the northbound lane) and cyclists. Limited use by pedestrians and cyclists is assumed because no sidewalks are provided along Steele Canyon Road south of the bridge and bike lanes are not striped on the road. KV 2 depicts the clearest public view of the area east of Steele Canyon Road bridge, which would include the processing plant location, as well as Phase 2.

Existing Visual Character and Quality. Views from KV 2 and the Steele Canyon Road bridge encompass the disturbed river valley, surrounding hillsides and distant mountains that enclose the Project viewshed (see Figure 2.1-6a). In the foreground, the narrow and sparsely vegetated river channel creates a visible line in the landscape. Adjacent exposed soils covered slopes in the foreground appear disturbed compared to the maintained golf course areas to the south. This KV is also characterized by built elements including a dirt road used for golf course maintenance access and multiple power lines. The grey, arching line of a metal golf cart spanning the river channel is approximately 0.25 mile away and is off-center in the view. Tall lattice steel transmission poles are constructed on the naturally vegetated hillside to the north. Like KV 1, green and brown vegetation and tan soils dominate the view at KV 2, with the disturbed vegetation of the river channel contrasting with the light to darker green grass of the maintained Ivanhoe Course. The river channel and adjacent areas are lined by irregular rows of mature trees that display varying shades of green. A dense row of mature dark green trees lines the property boundary along Willow Glen Drive, obscuring views to the scenic highway.

Adjacent hillsides to the north/northeast of the Project site, as well as the densely vegetated and brown/dark green slopes of McGinty Mountain located to the east and southeast are visible in the middleground (the peak of McGinty Mountain is not visible in the KV 2 photograph). The reddish and dark stippled Dehesa Mountain, located approximately 4.5 miles to the northeast, is also visible in the background beyond power transmission lines. Lastly, the broad, mounded peak of Viejas Mountain and the slightly hazy and broad form of Cuyamaca Peak are visible to the east in the background.

Overall, the visual quality of the view is moderate. The sparsely vegetated river channel that dominates the foreground of the view is not particularly vivid or intact due to the juxtaposition of unmaintained, unirrigated areas and maintained golf course fairways. Further, the prominence of the dirt maintenance road and the presence of silhouetted transmission poles reduces vividness and intactness. The combination of constructed and natural elements provides for a moderately low degree of intactness and unity. The skyline created by ridges, mountains, and hillsides in the background as well as the line of mature trees along the northern property boundary provide some degree of unity, but this is reduced by the dark (albeit thin), transmission lines and multiple steel lattice towers and poles. The contrasting appearance of the constructed elements dominating the foreground view further diminish unity. Except for distant mountainous peaks, there are no highly memorable visual elements within this view. Although the riverbed is dry for the majority of the year, during wet winters when water released from the upstream Loveland Reservoir flows on site, a slightly higher degree of vividness would be perceived with the presence of flowing water within the riverbed (refer to Photo H, Figure 2.1-1b, which depicts seasonal water flow in the Sweetwater River).

Viewer exposure would be brief (on the approach to and on the Steele Canyon Road bridge, views to the Ivanhoe golf course are available for approximately 13 seconds assuming a travel speed of 45 mph); however, viewer response to the changes in visual character and quality would be high given the proximity and number of daily viewers (primarily motorists) at KV 2.

Key View 3

Orientation. KV 3 looks southwest from westbound Willow Glen Drive approximately 375 feet west of the driveway to the existing Cottonwood golf course parking lots (see Figure 2.1-7a, *Key View 3 – Willow Glen Drive at Golf Course Clubhouse – Existing Conditions*). The primary viewers at this location are motorists and cyclists. In addition, the nearest sidewalk parallels the eastbound travel lane at this location and as such, pedestrians are considered in the context of visual change experienced at this KV. This KV represents a typical view from the most heavily traveled roadway with available views to the Project site. The KV was also selected because Willow Glen Drive is included in the County Scenic Highway System. While Willow Glen Drive generally follows the alignment of the Sweetwater River, the river is lower in elevation than the road and is not visible at or near this key view. At this location, Willow Glen Drive is approximately 25 feet higher in elevation than the existing grade of the proposed processing plant area. Further, existing mature trees alongside Willow Glen Drive are planted on a gradual slope that falls towards the processing plant area (the southern extent of the planted area is located approximately 5 to 7 feet lower in elevation than the surface of Willow Glen Drive).

Existing Visual Character and Quality. As illustrated, Willow Glen Drive and the existing landscape screen that parallels the road occupy most of the existing view. Except for a visible gap that permits views onto the Project site, at KV 3 the site is currently blocked from view of road users by the landscape screen that is comprised of tall (approximately 20 to 30 feet tall) eucalyptus and pepper trees. The Willow Glen Drive corridor is crossed by an assortment of transmission and communication lines. As viewed from KV 3, multiple lines are visible and span the road (several visible utility poles are installed to the immediate south of the Willow Glen Drive). A dark, rugged ridgeline punctuated by a single knoll supporting a water tank is visible in the middleground beyond Willow Glen Drive.

At KV 3, the presence of a dense screen of mature trees alongside Willow Glen Drive is unique in the area and due to uniform scale and similar color tones, the screen displays heightened unity and intactness. Along with glimpses of mountains and the golf course landscape, the landscape displays appealing and scenic qualities. However, prominent foreground elements (including Steele Canyon Road and transmission infrastructure) reduce view memorability and contribute to overall moderate vividness. While the golf course is a built element, it features naturalized components (primarily trees as experienced from KV 3) that are visually compatible with the middleground and background visual landscape, providing a moderate to moderately high degree of unity and intactness.

Viewer response to changes in visual conditions would be high given the number of viewers along Willow Glen Drive and the scenic designation of the road by the County.

Key View 4

Orientation. KV 4 is from an overlook off Wind River Road in the Cottonwood residential neighborhood located atop an elevated mesa landform to the north of the Project site. The view is located between two private residential lots at the edge of a 25-foot wide, wood-chipped covered strip of undeveloped land and is oriented towards the southeast (see Figure 2.1-8a, *Key View 4 – Wind River Road Lookout – Existing Conditions*). As shown in Figure 2.1-8a, rugged mountains,

the river valley, and flat, seasonally tan-colored undeveloped open areas beyond the Cottonwood Golf course, are dominant features from this vantage point.

The primary viewers from this locale are residents along Wind River Road and nearby neighborhood streets. In 2007, the local homeowners installed two benches and several palm trees and agaves just south of the Wind River Road; however, as observed during fieldwork conducted in August 2019, the seat portions of the benches have been removed, rendering the benches unusable for seating. From Wind River Road and the adjacent sidewalk, views to the Project site are obscured by a slight topographic rise in the immediate foreground. Similarly, views to the Project site from a seated position at the benches (assuming the presence of bench seats) are partially obscured by wood chip-covered terrain in the immediate foreground. While a greater volume of potential receptors occurs on Wind River Road, the adjacent sidewalk, or at the overlook benches, KV 4 was established at the edge of the overlook as this location provides improved visibility to the Project site.

Existing Visual Character and Quality. From this KV, the easternmost portion of the Project site is notably lower in elevation than the overlook (by approximately 350 feet) and appears to extend to the east due to similar forms, lines, and colors displayed by the adjacent Steele Canyon golf course. From KV 4, the verdant grass of the Ivanhoe course is punctuated by pockets and lines of unirrigated, yellow grasses, sandy areas of disturbance, and irregular lines of mature trees. Narrow sand-colored bands created by cart paths traverse the Project site and several ponds break up the continuity of these elements. The dense and darkly colored riparian corridor of Sweetwater River is visible on the left side of KV 4 and on the Project site; the channelized segment of the river is marked by an overall subtle line of clumped mature trees to the immediate south of Willow Glen Drive (the visible two-lane road in the foreground). These elements are visible in the foreground/middleground and while notable, the viewer's focus at KV 4 tends to note the narrow valley marked by relatively flat and seasonally tan/gold strips of land separated by thin bands of upland vegetation, visibly altered hills and eventually, to a broad "V" created by rugged ridgelines to the southeast. Like the Project site, the verdant greens and curvilinear form of Steele Canyon golf course fairways and greens contrast with dark and densely vegetated hills and more distant mountains including prominent (and broad) McGinty Mountain to the east. The pyramidal peak of Jamul Butte and the hazy, mounded form of Lyons Peak are visible. Middleground hills and slopes to the southeast have been visibly altered by residential development and vegetation removal. As a result, patches of tan color soils and straight lines are evident to the southeast (see Figure 2.1-8a).

Overall, the visual quality of the view is moderately high. The available view is broad and includes contrasting golf course elements that are surrounded by unmodified hills and mountainous topography. Due to the rugged composition of visible mountains that form a consistent backdrop to the view, vividness is considered moderately high although reduced by valley components (golf greens and trees) that contrast with more natural topography and vegetation. Intactness and unity are reduced to a moderate level due to the competing colors and lines in the landscape and the notable alterations to hills and slopes to the southeast. Lightly colored patches and stripes in the middleground to background topography interrupt the continuity of dark, dense vegetation and tends to attract attention. The Project site itself displays moderately high intactness and unity; however, visible pockets of exposed soils disrupt and reduce the perceived visual quality.

The primary viewer group from this key view (residents in the Wind River Road neighborhood) would be highly sensitive and aware of changes on the Project site due to the proximity of the Project site from the overlook and private residences, the expansiveness of views and prominence of vantage points, and view duration.

2.1.1.7 *Regulatory Setting*

The Proposed Project is subject to several regulations applicable to the protection of visual resources, as well as plans and policies that ensure adequate consideration is given to preserving and/or enhancing the visual qualities of an area. These policies aid in evaluation of the planning agency/community perception of visual qualities within an area, as well as providing guidance as to whether Proposed Project modifications would be visually compatible with County and/or community goals. The Proposed Project is subject to the following guidelines and policies.

Caltrans State Scenic Highway Program

The San Diego region includes several officially designated scenic highways protected by the California Scenic Highway Program, administered by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans). Designated scenic highways are located in areas of outstanding natural beauty and are provided with special conservation treatment to keep the natural views protected. There are also highways identified by the program as eligible scenic highways, which are considered scenic resources, but the local jurisdiction has not adopted a scenic corridor protection program or applied to Caltrans for official designation. The five highways in the San Diego region that are officially designated by Caltrans as state scenic highways include SR 52 (from Santo Road to Mast Boulevard adjacent to Mission Trails Regional Park), SR 75 (San Diego-Coronado Bay Bridge and Silver Strand), SR 78 (adjacent to Anza Borrego State Park), SR 163 (adjacent to Balboa Park), and SR 125 (from Interstate 8 to SR 94) (Caltrans 2019). None of the officially designated highways is in proximity to the Project site. One eligible scenic highway, SR 94 from Interstate 8 to SR 125, comes within one mile west/south of the Project site.

County of San Diego General Plan

The San Diego County General Plan (General Plan) was adopted in August 2011 and provides a framework for the future growth and development of the unincorporated areas of the County consistent with an established community vision (County 2011b). The General Plan is based on a set of guiding principles designed to protect the County's unique and diverse natural resources and maintain the character of its rural and semi-rural communities.

The Conservation and Open Space (COS) Element of the County General Plan describes the natural resources within the County and goals and policies to preserve them. The COS Element provides direction for future growth and development in the County with respect to the conservation, management, and utilization of natural (biological, water, agricultural, paleontological, mineral, visual [including scenic corridors and dark skies]) and cultural resources; protection and preservation of open space; and provision of park and recreation resources.

Specific elements relative to visual resources are described in Goal COS-11, which addresses preservation of scenic resources, including vistas of important natural and unique features, where visual impacts of development are minimized and details applicable policies regarding visually

sensitive areas, and preservation of unique or special visual features. The COS Element also specifically addresses scenic corridors and establishes a County Scenic Highway System. The goal of the County Scenic Highway System is to protect and enhance the aesthetic quality of the natural landscape within the viewshed of all scenic highway corridors. Roadways in the vicinity of the Project site that are identified as scenic roadways in the COS Element include SR 94 from SR 125 to Interstate 8 and Willow Glen Drive from Jamacha Road to Dehesa Road, which fronts the northern Project boundary. These roadways are included as part of the County Scenic Highway System. Finally, the maintenance of dark skies in San Diego County is vital to the two observatories, Palomar Observatory and Mount Laguna Observatory, that depend on them for astronomical research. Although both of these sites are distant from the Project site and dark skies policies specific to these facilities are not applicable to the Project, others addressing light and glare in rural communities do apply. Project consistency with relevant goals and policies is evaluated in Appendix B, *Planning Analysis*, and discussed in Section 3.1.6, *Land Use*, of this EIR.

Valle de Oro Community Plan

The Valle de Oro Community Plan (adopted in August 2011) augments the 2011 General Plan and contains goals and policies as well as design guidelines specific to the Valle de Oro CPA (County 2011d). The Project site is located in the eastern portion of the Valle de Oro CPA. Relative to community character, the Community Plan envisions a "unique balance of urban, semi-rural, agricultural, and open space land uses." Specific guidance provided in the Valle de Oro Community Plan is related to community character (including landscape requirements along Mobility Element roads), land use (buffering of residential areas from industrial uses/ rehabilitation), open space, community design, specific plan areas, conservation, and protection of scenic highway corridors. It is also noted that the Valle de Oro Community Plan identifies Willow Glen Drive and Jamacha Road/SR 54 from SR 94 to El Cajon as scenic highway corridors. Although the western end of the Project site is located just 700 feet from SR 54, it is not visible from this roadway due to intervening topography, development and vegetation. The Valle de Oro Community Plan provides general design policies and guidance, including guidelines for development within the Rancho San Diego Specific Plan. Each of the relevant policies is addressed in Appendix B and Section 3.1.6 of this EIR.

Valle de Oro Community Trails and Pathways Plan

The San Diego County Trails Program (adopted in June 2005) Valle de Oro Community Trails and Pathways Plan identifies existing and future trails and pathways within the Valle de Oro community. The recreational trails in the Valle De Oro CPA serve about 42,000 people (County 2005; as of January 1, 2018, SANDAG estimated that the CPA includes a total population of 42,025 persons [SANDAG 2019]). The plan identifies several existing recreational trails and features within the community, including the Sweetwater Regional Trail; SDNWR trails; and other nature walks, jogging loops, and equestrian trails within the Rancho San Diego area.

Rancho San Diego Specific Plan

The Rancho San Diego Specific Plan covers a total of approximately 2,963 acres located generally around the intersection of SR 94/Campo Road and SR 54/Jamacha Road. As noted above, the Specific Plan is based on the Valle de Oro Community Plan, which provides the guidelines for

developing the Specific Plan within the Community Plan text. Approximately 32 acres located in the southwestern portion of the Project site are within the Rancho San Diego Specific Plan area. This area was incorporated into the Specific Plan area as an extension of the Cottonwood Golf Club to replace the fairways affected by the Steele Canyon Road bridge over the Sweetwater River (County 2013).

County of San Diego Zoning Ordinance

A MUP is required for the proposed Mining Operations (Extractive Use). In accordance with Section 7358 of the Zoning Ordinance (County 1978, as amended), before any use permit may be granted or modified, it shall be found that:

a. That the location, size, design, and operating characteristics of the proposed use will be compatible with adjacent uses, residents, buildings, or structures, with consideration given to:

    - Harmony in scale, bulk, coverage and density;
    - The availability of public facilities, services and utilities;
    - The harmful effect, if any, upon desirable neighborhood character;
    - The generation of traffic and the capacity and physical character of surrounding streets;
    - The suitability of the site for the type and intensity of use or development which is proposed;
    - Any other relevant impact of the proposed use; and

b. That the impacts, as described in paragraph "a" of this section, and the location of the proposed use will be consistent with the San Diego County General Plan.

c. That the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act have been complied with.

County of San Diego Resource Protection Ordinance

The County's RPO provides special regulations applicable to certain types of discretionary applications, including MUPs. The ordinance focuses on the preservation and protection of the County's unique topography, natural beauty, diversity, natural resources, and quality of life. It is intended to protect the integrity of sensitive lands including wetlands, wetland buffers, floodplains/floodways, sensitive habitats, cultural resources, and steep slopes (lands having a natural gradient of 25 percent or greater and a minimum rise of 50 vertical feet, unless said land has been substantially disturbed by previous legal grading), all of which are components of visual quality and community character.

Pursuant to Section 86.605(d) of the County Code of Regulatory Ordinances, sand, gravel or mineral extraction projects (such as the Proposed Project) are exempt from RPO requirements provided that certain mitigation measures are implemented as a condition of the MUP. In addition,

the RPO prohibits impacts to mature riparian forest for mineral extraction. Areas to be mined on the Project site consist of a landscaped golf course and mature riparian forest does not occur within areas that would be mined. Therefore, compliance with the provisions of the County's RPO are not discussed further in this section.

County of San Diego Light Pollution Code

The Light Pollution Code, also known as the Dark Sky Ordinance, was adopted "to minimize light pollution for the enjoyment and use of property and the night environment by the citizens of San Diego County and to protect the Palomar and Mount Laguna observatories from the effects of light pollution that have a detrimental effect on astronomical research by restricting the permitted use of outdoor light fixtures on private property" (Sections 5~~9.101~~1.201 of the County Code of Regulatory Ordinances). The County designates all areas within a 15-mile radius centered on the Palomar Observatory and within a 15-mile radius centered on the Mount Laguna Observatory as Zone A, with all other areas of the County designated as Zone B. Zone A has specific light emission restrictions that are more stringent than those for Zone B.

The Project site is located over 40 miles from the Palomar observatory and approximately 28 miles from the Mount Laguna Observatory, and is therefore, within the Outdoor Lighting Ordinance Zone B. As such, outdoor lighting, such as security or parking lot lighting, must be less than 4,050 lumens and fully shielded within Zone B and on the Project site.

2.1.2 Analysis of Project Effects and Determination as to Significance

2.1.2.1 *Potential Conflict with Important Visual Elements or Inconsistency with Applicable Design Guidelines*

Guideline for the Determination of Significance

The Proposed Project would result in a significant impact if:

1. The Project would introduce features that would detract from or contrast with the existing visual character and/or quality of a neighborhood, community, or localized area by conflicting with important visual elements or the quality of the area (such as theme, style, setbacks, density, size, massing, coverage, scale, color, architecture, building materials, etc.) or by being inconsistent with applicable design guidelines.

Guideline Source

The guidelines for significant visual impacts are from the County Guidelines for Determining Significance for Visual Resources, which provide guidance for evaluating adverse visual effects (County 2007b). Significance Guideline 1 protects the existing visual character and visual quality by not allowing adverse changes or elements with high visual contrast. These aspects of the Project are assessed by analyzing changes that would occur in particular "key" views, and viewers' responses to the changes.

Analysis

This section describes overall changes to visual character and quality of the visual environment due to Project implementation. As described above, visual impacts resulting from changes associated with the Proposed Project are determined by assessing the change in the character and quality of the visual resource and predicting viewer response to that change. The level of visual impact is determined by combining the severity of the resource change with exposure (number of people) and the degree to which people are likely to oppose the change. Specifics are illustrated through discussion and simulations associated with visible changes from key public viewpoints that would most clearly display visual effects of the Project from public vantage points available to identified viewer groups, as described in Section 2.1.1.

Visual simulations were created to illustrate anticipated conditions during mining and reclamation and post-reclamation phases and follow the general summary text immediately below. The simulations provide the public and decision makers with a reasonably accurate projection of future conditions based on Project-related changes to current views and existing visual conditions.

Visual Character and Quality of Project Features During Mining and Reclamation

The visual character and quality of the existing landscape would change substantially during the mining and reclamation phases of the Project. Proposed activities would result in a gradual visual resource transition from a partially open golf course to an active aggregate extraction operation featuring a processing plant, construction vehicles and equipment, stockpiles, and excavated pits. Overall, the existing visual character of the river valley is suburban in nature, with the residential neighborhoods and golf courses integrated into the natural features of the river corridor and surrounding ridgelines and hillsides. The visual quality of the Project site and surrounding area is moderately high and moderate in terms of visual unity and intactness, respectively, and the vividness of the setting is moderately high, due to the scenic and memorable nature of the valley edged by the surrounding ridgelines, as moderated by the noticeable contrast of the two golf courses and the multiple electrical facilities. The majority of the Project site is currently surrounded by approximately 6-foot-high chain link fencing.

Mining operations would strongly contrast with existing conditions and would introduce substantial changes to terrain and vegetation in views at public points in the Project vicinity. For example, existing on-site vegetation and structures associated with the current and former golf courses would be removed, and soil would be excavated outside the river channel in individual subphase areas, including within excavation pits with maximum depths of up to 40 feet bgs. The processing plant area and associated equipment, as well as the overland conveyor and extraction equipment would be visible from public trails, roads, and private residences and would tend to create moderately strong contrast within the existing visual environment. The overland conveyor would extend from the processing plant area to the active mining subphase areas and would be a new linear element extending upwards of 0.5 mile in length across the site. The removal of grasses and trees and exposure of soils, which would be lighter in color than the existing on- and off-site vegetation, and the presence of equipment would be visually codominant due to their high contrast in color, form, and line with the existing visual environment. Where visible stockpiles up to 25 feet tall would appear as conical or mounded features within the processing area and along the edges of subphase areas.

From approximately the west edge of the Project site to Steele Canyon Road, existing landscape vegetation south of Willow Glen Drive and along the Project frontage, which primarily consists of trees and shrubs such as acacia, Peruvian pepper trees, and oleander, would be maintained during mining and reclamation operations to provide a visual screen between Project activities and the public. East of Steele Canyon Road and at Muirfeld Drive, existing vegetation south of Willow Glen Drive would be removed to accommodate a proposed westerly driveway onto the Project site. Also, east of Muirfield Drive and east and west of primary Project ingress and egress, existing trees and shrubs bordering the Project site would be removed to accommodate proposed widening of Willow Glen Drive. The removal of screening trees would allow for open and relatively clear views onto the Project site from Willow Glen Drive. However, following road widening efforts and concurrent with development of the processing plant, the landscape entrances and screening plan would be implemented. Near the processing plant area, container stock trees including 68 coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) (15-gallon container and 24-inch box size), 31 Fremont cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*) (15-gallon container size), and 3 Western redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*) (36-inch box size) would be planted immediately south of Willow Glen Drive. While trees would be spaced approximately 20 to 25 feet on center, at installation coast live oak trees would be approximately 6 to 8 feet tall, Fremont cottonwood trees would be approximately 6 to 8 feet tall, and Western redbud trees would be 8 to 10 feet tall. Tree plantings would be supplemented with 5- and 15-gallon container size shrubs, including California lilac (*Ceanothus* x 'Ray Hartman'; approximately 18 to 24 inches tall at installation), toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*; (approximately 1 to 2 feet tall at installation), and lemonade berry (*Rhus integrifolia*; approximately 1 to 2 feet tall at installation). Due to tree spacing and the 1- to 2-foot height of container shrubs at initial planting, views to the processing plant area and prominent features including stockpiles, wash screens, feed hoppers, storage containers, settling ponds and the bare ground underlying the plant area could be available to Willow Glen Drive users during Phase 1 mining activities. However, as depicted on the landscape screening and entrances plan (refer to Figures 1-11a-e), a six-foot-high chain-link fence with green mesh screening would be installed between new landscape and Willow Glen Drive and would effectively block lower profile elements at the processing plant, and the bare ground surface underlying the plant, from view. The visual experience of the mesh screening would create a monotonous, walled viewing experience for road users and would reduce the visual quality of the Willow Glen Drive landscape.

While most of the Project site is currently surrounded by approximately six-foot-high chain link fencing, mesh screening is not installed. Therefore, views of the Project site are available through the existing fencing and on-site elements (i.e., the river corridor, greens and fairways, and trees) contribute to the existing scenic quality of the Willow Glen Drive Corridor. In addition to mesh screening installed along the Willow Glen Drive frontage near the processing plant, temporary mesh screening is proposed to be installed atop the Steele Canyon Road bridge parapet rail (along the northbound travel lane of the bridge) during mining operations in Phase 1 and 2 to screen views of the processing plant and mining activities from users of Steele Canyon Road. Under existing conditions, views to the east and west from the Steele Canyon Road Bridge are open and extend beyond the Project site to local hills and prominent mountain terrain including San Miguel Mountain (to the west) and McGinty and Dehesa Mountains (to the east). Mesh screening would block elements of the Project from view of road users at select locations including the Steele Canyon Road Bridge and Willow Glen Drive near the processing plant; however, the installation of mesh screen would notably alter existing visual experience of these roads and the quality of existing views. As noted previously, mesh screening would introduce a continuous walled element

to the corridor that would contribute to reduced views and a monotonous visual experience. Mesh screening near the processing plant would be maintained throughout the duration of active mining operations (up to 10 years). The bridge mesh screen would be removed following completion of subphase 2B mining, approximately one year after reclamation plantings in subphase 2A. As such, the bridge mesh screening would be in place for approximately 5 years. Once mining and reclamation activities have been completed and site security is no longer a concern, the temporary fencing along the property boundary would be removed.

Areas disturbed by mining activities would be progressively reclaimed and revegetated as mining proceeds across the Project site. Mining activities are planned to occur in smaller subphase areas to limit disturbance and implement phased reclamation and revegetation. Mining activities in each subphase area would occur over an approximate duration of one year each, so that the entire Project site or phase areas would not be disturbed at one time. Backfilling, reclamation, and revegetation would occur immediately following the completion of mining operations in each subphase area. Generally, reclamation and revegetation of each subphase would occur over a two-year period following the completion of mining. While riparian trees and shrubs would incrementally soften the overall character of the reclaimed area and would gradually mask the appearance of exposed soil, both mining and reclamation activities would produce strong visual contrast that would degrade the existing character of the Project site and result in reduced visual quality through reduced intactness and unity of elements. Compared to the golf course, the active mining operation, backfilled and denuded terrain, and newly planted (and seeded) areas of riparian and upland plant palettes would contrast with the existing character of the site through the removal of notable elements (e.g., golf course greens, fairways, and trees) and land cover and terrain disturbance associated with extraction/mining activities. In addition, the final elevation and vegetation with an erosion control seed mix in the subphase 1C area would create internal site contrasts in form, line, and color with areas of revegetation (refer to Figure 2.1-5c)

Visual Character and Quality of Project Features Post Reclamation

The post-reclamation visual environment would be an extension of existing pattern elements characteristic of the Jamacha valley; however, until revegetation plan vegetation reaches maturity (in approximately 10 to 15 years for each subphase), revegetated areas would display a stippled character that would contrast with adjacent areas of dense vegetation along the Sweetwater River corridor (refer to Figures 2.1-5b and 2.1-8b, referenced below). Differences in vegetative density, size, and coverage would be apparent to viewers at KV 1 and KV 4 and at locations along Willow Glen Drive and Steele Canyon Road. Once vegetation reaches maturity across the Project site (approximately 15 to 20 years from initiation of mining activities), vegetative diversity resulting from Project implementation would be compatible with the existing visual character of the community and would blend with the existing riparian forest and coastal sage scrub habitats within the Project site and surrounding area. At this time, the Project would result in a visual environment with high compositional harmony/unity that appears intact. The overall vividness and memorability of the site would be relatively high (improved over the existing condition of golf course variation) and would enhance the overall visual quality of the Project site and surrounding area, especially from elevated vantage points where broad views are available.

The remaining portion of this discussion illustrates the overview above, detailing specifics associated with Project-related changes as documented through mining and reclamation, and post-reclamation, Project phases from each of the four key views.

Key View 1

As noted in Section 2.1.1, KV 1 is located on upper segment of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail within the SDNWR, located south and southwest of the Project site (see Figure 2.1-5a). It is representative of the worst-case scenario in terms of public views and visual effects associated with the Project as recreationalists-hikers would be provided views to the entirety of the Phase 1 area. At KV 1, Phases 2, 3, and the processing plant would be reduced in scale due to distance; however, the site visibility experienced by viewers from KV 1 is notably greater than at other public vantage points that offer clear views to the Project.

As noted above, the upper trail appears to be used only by hikers. Mountain bikers, equestrians, and casual walkers with or without dogs appear to utilize the lower trail because the lower trail is a level and wide dirt trail. From the lower trail, views are primarily focused on the mature riparian vegetation associated with the Sweetwater River and the hillside to the south and to portions of the site that would not be mined. In addition, with the exception of lower trail segments to the east and west of KV 1, Phase 1 areas that would be mined and Phase 2 areas located further to the northeast are not visible from the lower trail due to intervening elements (riparian vegetation) in the foreground.

Mining and Reclamation Proposed Project Features. During subphase 1A, excavation and reclamation activities would comprise the majority of the middleground landscape as viewed from KV 1. The planting of new 15-gallon sized willow and/or cottonwood trees in small pockets adjacent to the Sweetwater River (during subphase 1A-1) would also be evident in views from the upper segment of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail. Subphase 1A-1 plantings would be installed prior to and during installation of the processing plant. This analysis assumes that at installation, newly planted willow and/or cottonwood trees in the subphase 1A-1 area would be approximately 4 to 6 feet high. As such, during mining of subphase 1C, these plantings are conservatively assumed to be 7 to 10 feet high. Following installation, subphase 1A-1 plantings along the Sweetwater River would be visible at KV 1 but due to their height at planting/installation, would not block views to the processing plant.

In addition to the existing riparian vegetation and coastal sage scrub habitat in the foreground that would be retained, subphase 1B and 1C areas would maintain their existing visual character during the approximately 12-month duration of Phase 1A mining. Approximately 22.1 acres (i.e., subphase 1A) of the larger approximately 79-acre Phase 1 area would be graded and mined over this timeframe. During these activities, construction vehicles including loaders and the conveyor extending from the processing plant (located east of Steele Canyon Road and near the current Cottonwood Golf Course clubhouse) would introduce new stationary and mobile elements to the view. In addition, exposed tan soils displayed by the actively mined subphase 1A area would also be seen from KV 1. The processing plant, including settling and muck ponds, storage containers, stockpiles, and screening equipment, would be partially obscured from view due to subphase 1A-1 plantings along the Sweetwater River, the installation of mature box trees near the processing plant boundary, and distance (the nearest element of the plant would be located

approximately 0.85 mile distant from KV 1). The irrigated, mature trees proposed to be planted along the western and southern boundary of the processing plant footprint (36-inch box Mexican elderberry trees, approximately 8 to 12 feet high) would be installed in ground and would be maintained throughout the duration of mining operations on the Project site.

After approximately one year and following subphase 1A mining operations, the approximately 22.1-acre area would be filled, brought to finished grade, and planted. Consistent with the conceptual revegetation and plan (see Figure 1-10), the subphase 1A area would be planted with appropriate riparian vegetation to include willow, mule fat, cottonwood, and other trees and shrubs. In addition, initiation of mining operations in the adjacent approximately 26.5-acre subphase 1B area would occur and similar visual features as described above for subphase 1A active mining operations would be visible from KV 1. The subphase 1C area (immediately north of subphase 1B) would retain its existing visual character as mining operations would not occur in this area until the duration of subphase 1B is complete (i.e., approximately one year). Over the 12-month period of mining, Project features proposed in the subphase 1B area would include construction vehicles including loaders and the conveyor extending from the processing plant and through the subphase 1C area (a conveyor corridor would be established adjacent to the Sweetwater River alignment). Subphase 1B activities would add contrasting stationary and mobile elements to the view; receptors at KV 1 would be somewhat familiar with these elements due to their presence during subphase 1A. In addition, during subphase 1B operations, plantings in the subphase 1A-1 area adjacent to the river corridor and larger revegetation efforts associated with subphase 1A would be irrigated and would incrementally improve upon the post-mining view with each successive year of growth. Riparian vegetation such as willows and mule fat planted in these areas would grow relatively quickly with irrigation and would be 5 to 8 feet (willows) and 2 to 3 feet (mule fat) high approximately one year following installation. As such, revegetation would have a moderating effect on visual impacts as mining progresses within any given subphase area. As experienced from KV 1, exposed lightly colored soils displayed by the surface of the actively mined subphase 1B area would be detectable immediately north of the densely vegetated Sweetwater River corridor in the foreground. Lastly, the recently planted subphase 1A area and more specifically, the thin, vertical form of new trees and spreading shrubs intermixed with pockets of exposed tan soils, would be noticeable.

Figure 2.1-5b, *Key View 1 – Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail [SDNWR] – During Mining*, depicts active mining of the subphase 1C area. In addition, subphase 1A and 1B areas are shown at final backfill elevations and depicted as revegetated with approximately two years of growth (subphase 1A) and one year of growth (subphase 1B). For purposes of this analysis, plant materials in the conceptual revegetation plan are assumed to grow at an approximate annual rate of between 12 inches (shrubs) to 36 inches (fast-growing trees (cottonwood, willow) and shrubs (mule fat and Mexican elderberry [*Sambucus mexicana*]) before reaching typical maximum heights. As with other subphases, visible elements in the subphase 1C area would include construction vehicles including loaders and the conveyor extending from the processing plant and through the subphase 1C area. Construction vehicles and the conveyor are depicted in Figure 2.1-5b. Additional Project features depicted include the side slopes of the overexcavation area, the new Project access point off Willow Glen Drive at Muirfeld Drive, and stockpiles located in the northern portion of subphase 1C. A staging area is proposed in the overexcavation area and would not be visible from KV 1. As viewed from KV 1, the flat form and lightly colored soils displayed by the surface of the actively mined and graded areas of subphase 1C would be visible immediately north of the newly planted

subphase 1B area and the Sweetwater River corridor. In addition, over-excavation of the area would occur after initial grading and would result in a visible cut (approximately 30 to 35 feet deep) into the surface of the subphase 1C area. Aggregate extraction in the approximately 30-acre subphase 1C area would occur for approximately 12 months and would be delivered to the processing plant via a conveyor that would appear as a low, dark horizontal line at KV 1.

In addition, the installation of noise barriers along the northern Phase 1 boundary (i.e., parallel to Willow Glen Drive) in accordance with mitigation measure M-N-1 would be partially visible from KV 1 (see Figure 2.1-5b). The noise barriers would be 12 feet high and would be installed around proposed stockpiles that would be located on the Project site and roughly parallel to Willow Glen Drive. Noise barriers would be installed when Phase 1 excavation activities would occur within 400 feet of the nearest residences. Pursuant to the requirements of M-N-1, the noise barrier would be solid and may be constructed of masonry, wood, plastic, fiberglass, and/or steel.

Changes to Visual Character and Quality and Viewer Response. Implementation of the Proposed Project would substantially change the composition of the existing pattern elements and character of the site as viewed from KV 1. Once initiated, active mining operations in subphases 1A, 1B, and 1C areas would remove remaining trees and vegetation within the unmanicured Lakes Course and introduce visually contrasting elements such as excavation equipment and exposed soil excavated to depths of approximately 20 feet bgs. The anticipated visual impacts resulting from vegetation removal and grading/overexcavation would be strong at KV 1. Mining of the individual subphase areas would each occur over approximately one-year periods and during this timeframe, contrasts in form, line, and color would be apparent and attract attention. As depicted in Figure 2-1.5b, visible foreground disturbances would detract from the existing available view. Also, the temporary noise barrier (per mitigation measure M-N-1) would be visible from KV 1 and would create a neutral-colored and relatively low horizontal line that would be partially screened by existing trees and stretch across the northern boundary of the Phase 1 area.

With the removal of existing vegetation in subphase 1A (and later in subphase 1C), the currently obscured Steele Canyon Road bridge and proposed processing plant site located to the east would be revealed in the middleground. Due to distance and competing elements (i.e., subphase 1A mining operations), visible elements of the processing plant would not be visually prominent as experienced from KV 1 (see Figure 2.1-5b). Phase 1 Project elements would be in the foreground and middleground of the KV 1 landscape for approximately 36 months, after which reclamation and revegetation activities would occur for up to an additional 24 months. These activities and specifically the planting of fully irrigated riparian vegetation on previously mined lands, would achieve a visible reduction in contrasts associated with vegetation removal, grading, and excavation within a two-year timeframe. Further, the subphase approach to mining operations would minimize visual change in the larger phase area and visible landscape (to the extent feasible) by avoiding vegetation removal and topographic disturbance until necessary (i.e., until the subphase area becomes active).

When mining operations are occurring in Phase 1 and early in Phase 2 (within the area closest to Steele Canyon Road, which is visible from KV 1, the overall quality of the visual environment would be strikingly reduced. Currently, the unmanicured course exhibits moderately low vividness and intactness, but has a uniformly disturbed/sparsely vegetated appearance across the western portion of the site. With the contrasting elements of the ground clearing, mining

operations/exposed soil, and newly revegetated areas, the vividness, intactness, and unity of the middleground landscape would be noticeably reduced. Lastly, while removal of the golf cart bridge spans would eliminate built features that draw attention to the middleground view, the Project proposes the introduction of construction vehicles and a conveyor, which would be active elements in the landscape.

The primary viewer groups from this key view—hikers using the upper Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail—would be sensitive to changes within the Project site. As noted, approximately 2,300 recreationalists per year (or approximately 45 users per week) use the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail, most likely on the lower trail segment. From the lower and more consistently trafficked segment of the trail, views to Phase 1 activities would be obscured and partially screened by existing mature vegetation in the river corridor. Overall, the moderately low overall exposure (i.e., KV 1 is representative of a mobile viewpoint) and number of users of the upper trail would result in a moderately high viewer response.

Post-Reclamation Proposed Project Features. Reclamation of completed Phases 1, 2, and 3, and the processing plant area are depicted in Figure 2.1-5c, *Key View 1 – Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail [SDNWR] – Post-Reclamation*. In the visual simulation, the overexcavation area in subphase 1C has been backfilled and reclaimed to final elevation. Figure 2.1-5c depicts the application of an erosion control seed mix and the access road off Willow Glen Drive to the site is also shown. The processing plant area is depicted with an erosion control seed mix. The low flow channel of the Sweetwater River is depicted in Figure 2.1-5c, as is mature vegetation in subphase 1A and 1B areas. As the scenario depicted in Figure 2.1-5c is post-reclamation, trees in subphase 1A-1 are shown with approximately 12 years of growth, vegetation (i.e., trees and shrubs) in subphase 1A is shown with approximately 10 years of growth, and vegetation in subphase 1B is shown with approximately 9 years of growth. From KV 1, vegetation in subphase 1A and 1B would display a similar height and spread.

As viewed from KV 1, areas of the Project site disturbed by extraction operations would be progressively reclaimed as mining of individual subphase areas is completed. The final landform on the Project site would be a relatively flat plain that is backfilled to achieve an elevation similar to adjacent riparian areas; the graded pad area adjacent to Willow Glen Drive would be at a slightly higher elevation than the riparian areas. Backfilled and reclaimed landforms would be revegetated through a combination of container plants and hydroseeding with a diverse native seed mix. Figure 2.1-5c depicts the revegetation completed in Phases 1 and 2 as incrementally maturing over time; weed control and maintenance on the site would occur continuously during Project operation and during the post-reclamation maintenance and monitoring period to reduce the occurrence of undesirable non-native species. The effects of revegetation efforts, including approximately 10 acres of riparian enhancement (e.g., removal of exotic and invasive species, planting of riparian habitat), would be implemented adjacent to the Sweetwater River channel and may be visible from KV 1.

From the elevated vantage point of KV 1, the raised and flat form and tan color of subphase 1C would be result in strong contrast in form and color with adjacent areas of mature vegetation. While contrasts associated with this area would lessen as the erosion control seed mix germinates, and plant species fill in and cover the site, the light tones would stand out against the green tones displayed by existing and newly planted vegetation. A new 4-foot high, steel pipe gate would be

installed on the new access driveway off Willow Glen Drive. Small triangular planting areas would be constructed where the driveway meets Willow Glen Drive and planted with small shrubs intermixed among existing trees.

Changes to Visual Character and Quality and Viewer Response. At maturity (approximately 10 to 15 years post reclamation for each subphase), the visual character of the Project site would be enhanced with native vegetative cover and appropriate landforms for site drainage. As depicted in Figure 2.1-5c, the existing riparian habitat visible in the foreground would extend across the Project site with southern willow scrub and mule fat scrub vegetation planted adjacent to the river channel. In addition, upland areas would be revegetated with coastal sage scrub communities, providing continuity with the adjacent sage scrub habitat of the SDNWR visible in the foreground. Once mature (i.e., in 10 to 15 years following initiation of mining activities), the revegetated areas would improve the visual character of the reclaimed Project site and visually blend the area with nearby vegetation of the river valley.

Reclamation and revegetation would result in a visual environment with enhanced harmony/ unity and intactness. The intactness of the view would be increased with the introduction and maturity of native vegetation within the riparian corridor that would replace seen elements of the existing unmanicured golf course and mining operations. The southern willow scrub, mule fat scrub, and coastal sage scrub plant palettes proposed in this area would provide visual continuity between the reclaimed areas of the Project site and the surrounding area; however, enhanced intactness and continuity would be limited as viewers at KV 1 would experience an abrupt transition between new vegetation along the riparian corridor and the higher elevation area that would be hydroseeded with an erosion control seed mix. As shown in Figure 2.1-5c, both the prominence and horizontal scale of the higher elevation area would attract the attention of viewers and result in heightened awareness. Further, the consistent tan/brown color of this area would contrast with the green tones of riparian vegetation and like visible residential development in the view, this area would negatively affect visual character and quality of the landscape.

Key View 2

KV 2 looks east at the Steele Canyon Road bridge, the Sweetwater River channel and Ivanhoe golf course areas from the northbound travel lane of Steele Canyon Road, on the bridge spanning the Sweetwater River. KV 2 depicts the clearest view of Phase 2 and the proposed processing plant from a public viewpoint. Although the key view is oriented east, the unmanicured Lakes Course is also visible from the road to the west. The existing views are shown in Figure 2.1-6a, and described in Section 2.1.1, above.

Mining and Reclamation Proposed Project Features. Subphase 2A excavation and reclamation activities would comprise most of the eastward view from the Steele Canyon Road bridge. Phase 2 mining operations would be initiated approximately three years after the initiation of Phase 1. At the time of subphase 2A initiation, active mining of Phase 1 would be complete, but subphase 1C would be in the reclamation and revegetation phase west of the bridge. Figure 2.1-6b, *Key View 2 – Steele Canyon Road Bridge – During Mining*, simulates the Phase 2 mining operations that would be visible beyond the existing railing along the Steele Canyon Road Bridge. During subphase 2A, the approximately 15-acre area (located north and south of the river channel) would be cleared and actively mined. All existing vegetation and built features (e.g., a small bridge and

cart paths within these areas) would be removed and exposed soils would display a relatively consistent form and tan color. In addition to vegetation removal, numerous project components would be visible in the eastward view from KV 2 including the mine conveyor and parallel access road (visible along the south side of the river channel), tree removal to accommodate the Willow Glen Drive improvements, new landscaping included in the landscape screening and entrances plan, the processing plant, and box trees to be places along the west and south boundary of the processing plant. In addition, an 8-foot-high noise wall would be installed on-site parallel to Willow Glen during active mining of subphase 2A. During the depicted scenario (i.e., subphase 2A), new landscaping installed along Willow Glen Drive would have experienced approximately four years of growth post-installation and trees would be approximately 15 feet high and shrubs approximately 7 feet high. As viewed from KV 2, the processing plant, including stockpiles, equipment, settling and muck ponds, and trucks, would be minimally screened by mature box trees installed along the west and south plant footprint prior to the initiation of Phase 1. During subphase 2A (i.e., approximately four years post-installation), the trees would be approximately 10 feet high, assuming a conservative growth rate of 1 to 2 feet per year for species such as Mexican elderberry. A portion of the immediate foreground (including the Project site) would be obscured by the low wall and rail present along the Steele Canyon Road bridge.

Existing screening associated with the existing wall (approximately three feet high) would be enhanced through the installation of green screening mesh fencing along the railing. As measured from the top of the concrete wall to the top of the fencing, screening mesh would be 3-feet high. During active mining in Phase 2 (subphases 2A and 2B), the screening mesh would extend the length of the Steele Canyon Road bridge railing on the east side of the road; screening mesh would not be installed to the north or south of the bridge. The excavated subphase 2A areas north and south of the river channel and the slightly elevated processing plant would be screened from view of motorists, but the screening mesh would alter the view compared to existing conditions. Further, the effects of tree removal on the Project site occurring to the east of KV 2 and the creation of stockpiles and presence of processing equipment at the processing plant would be noticeable above the fencing. Figure 2.1-6c, *Key View 2 – Steele Canyon Road Bridge – During Mining*, simulates the proposed screening mesh that would be installed prior to the initiation of Phase 2 mining operations. The fencing would remain in place during the approximately 24-month total duration of proposed mining operations in subphases 2A and 2B. The fencing would largely block views from vehicles, but Project features could potentially still be visible to pedestrians and cyclists who could look over the screening, as depicted in Figure 2.1-6b.

As fencing would not be installed to the north and south of the bridge, views to the processing plant and Phase 2 mining activities would be available to northbound Steele Canyon Road users for approximately 145 feet north of the bridge to Willow Glen Drive and 185 feet south of the bridge to the existing presence of mature vegetation. Both the scale and density of the vegetation block the Project site in east-oriented views from Steele Canyon Road. As viewed from these segments of Steele Canyon Road, similar elements as described above in the unmitigated scenario of views from the Steele Canyon Road bridge would exist. Also, pedestrians occasionally use the sidewalk that parallels the northbound Steele Canyon Road travel lane (a sidewalk is not construct along the southbound lane on the bridge). On the bridge, views to the processing plant and Phase 2 mining activities would be clearly visible to pedestrians. With the installation of screening mesh atop the bridge railing, the views of most pedestrians towards the processing plant would be blocked.

Following the completion of mining operations and reclamation activities in the subphase 2B area, the mesh screen fencing installed on the east side railing of the Steele Canyon Road bridge would be removed. The subphase 2A areas would be reclaimed and replanted with riparian vegetation prior the end of the approximately one-year mining period for subphase 2B. Upon completion of the subphase 2B one-year mining period and removal of the bridge screen, southern willow scrub container plantings and riparian seed applied in subphase 2A would be noticeable and would remain visible. The processing plant (i.e., ponds, stockpiles, conveyors and screens, storage containers) would be minimally screened as container plants and applied seed mixtures installed in subphase 2A and 2B areas would not be of sufficient height to screen the plant. The visible sliver of the subphase 3D area to the south of the processing plant would retain its existing visual character (e.g., trees and low grasses would remain). South of the river, subphase 2C grading and mining operations may be visible beyond the newly planted subphase 2B area, which would still be in the revegetation phase.

Changes to Visual Character and Quality and Viewer Response. At KV 2, the visibility of and proximity to Project effects on existing visual character and quality would be clear and stark. Due to elements displaying high contrast, the unity of the foreground landscape would be greatly reduced. The vividness of focal mountain features in existing views would also be reduced as foreground activities and effects would attract attention. In the mitigated scenario, the installation of linear screening atop the bridge railing would block processing plant equipment and mining activities from view; however, the mesh fence would represent a notable departure from the current view of primarily green fairways and mature trees that characterize the Ivanhoe Course. These elements create interest in the existing view. The mesh screen would contrast with the existing open character of mobile views at KV 2. For example, the straight line and rectangular form of the fence would be apparent to roadway users. While the local hills and mountains surrounding the Project site would remain visible above the fence, the lack of open views across the site would be perceived as a negative effect. Therefore, the unity, intactness, and vividness of the existing view would be reduced during mining and reclamation. The overall visual quality during Project implementation would be low.

From KV 2, viewers would experience "close up" views of the anticipated strong contrast associated with mining and processing activities on the Project site. Once installed, the mesh screen atop the bridge railing would screen on-site visual change associated with an active sand mining operation comprised of exposed soil, processing plant activities, alteration of existing terrain and removal of existing vegetation, vehicles, and equipment. While the neutral mesh screen is anticipated to be perceived more positively than unobstructed views of an active mine and reclamation activities at this location, the viewer response would be adverse. Viewer exposure for off-peak hour motorists and other road users would be brief; occurring on the approach to and on the Steele Canyon Road bridge, views to the Ivanhoe Course are available for approximately 13 seconds assuming a travel speed of 45 mph. However, during peak hour travel times when queues tend to back up onto the bridge and further south, viewing duration would be considerably longer. During either scenario (i.e., peak or off-peak) viewer response to the changes in visual character and quality are expected to be high.

Post-Reclamation Proposed Project Features. Revegetation completed during Phase 2 would be visible in the foreground and middleground of KV 2 (see Figure 2.1-6d, *Key View 2 – Steele Canyon Road Bridge – Post-Reclamation*). As shown, the processing plant would be removed,

final grade would be established, and revegetation plantings in the subphase 2A and 2B areas (including western sycamore, western cottonwood, mule fat willow, Mexican elderberry, and low wetland shrubs, grasses, and sedges) are shown with approximately seven and six years of growth, respectively. Assuming typical growth rates, cottonwood, willow, and other fast-growing trees would have grown to a height of up to 20 feet and shrubs approximately 7 to 8 feet high. Box trees placed around the processing plant area would have been removed/relocated at the end of reclamation and thus, would not be present in the post-reclamation scenario. The area previously occupied by the processing plant would be blocked by mature vegetation in the foreground and middleground. Since southern willow scrub/riparian forest vegetation is proposed in these areas, views would be dominated by progressively maturing vegetation lining the river channel, which would eventually be of a density similar to the existing condition along the southwestern boundary of the Project site. Due to the elevated location of KV 2 on Steele Canyon Road, the hillside to the north of the site, McGinty Mountain, and distant mountains to the east would remain visible above riparian vegetation on the Project site. While obscured by vegetation, the final landforms on the Project site would consist of a relatively flat floodplain that gently slope downward from east to west; banks of the widened river floodplain are proposed to slope up to the adjacent landscape surface at a 3:1 (horizontal: vertical) or less gradient.

Changes to Visual Character and Quality and Viewer Response. The long-term visual environment of the reclaimed areas visible from KV 2 would be characterized as a natural riparian river valley. Where the river channel currently appears sparsely vegetated and somewhat visually contrasting with the existing golf course (Figure 2.1-6a), it would be expanded and appear densely (and more naturally) vegetated with riparian plant species, including a diverse mix of tall trees and shrubs proposed within the riparian plant palette. The natural features of the reclaimed river corridor would introduce a continuity of pattern elements currently absent from the site that would visibly extend the river corridor east to the surrounding hillsides and mountainous landforms that form the larger landscape unit.

Reclamation of the site would improve the overall visual quality of the existing visual environment and would create a vivid and memorable appearance with a high degree of unity and intactness (see Figure 2.1-6d). The Project would introduce native vegetation to the site and visibly extend the riparian river corridor, removing almost all of the competing visual elements (e.g., disturbed areas, sparse river channel, developed golf course landscaping and features) that currently detract from the intactness of the visible landscape. As shown, electrical transmission towers, poles, and overhead lines visible above the trees and along ridgelines would remain as dissonant elements experienced at KV 2. The natural components on the Project site would form a coherent, harmonious visual pattern that would extend to the surrounding hillsides and distant mountains. Like KV 1, from KV 2 the overall visual character and quality of the post-reclamation site would improve, and viewer response would be expected to be high and positive.

Key View 3

KV 3 is from westbound Willow Glen Drive approximately 375 feet west of the driveway to the existing Cottonwood golf course parking lots and is oriented to the southwest (see Figure 2.1-7a). Primary viewers are motorists and cyclists. In addition, the nearest sidewalk parallels the eastbound travel lane at this location and as such, pedestrians are considered in the context of

visual change experienced at this KV. Currently, as shown in Figure 2.1-7a, Willow Glen Drive and the nearby upper golf course parking lot are notable in the existing view.

Mining and Reclamation Proposed Project Features. As shown in the Figure 2.1-7b, *Key View 3 – Willow Glen Drive at Golf Course Clubhouse – During Mining*, the simulation of the Project from KV 3 during proposed extraction activities, the widened extents of Willow Glen Drive, including the dedicated right-turn lane proposed for access into the Project site and new striping associated with the undivided median, travel lanes, and bike lanes on Willow Glen Drive, would be visible in the foreground. The dedicated right-turn lane would provide access to a Project ingress point/driveway that would be used regularly by haul trucks during operations. The removal of existing trees to accommodate roadway improvements and the access driveway would also be notable. Approximately 67 trees currently located within the Project site adjacent to Willow Glen Drive would be removed to accommodate the roadway improvements; removal of these elements would result in reduced visual quality. Within the KV 3 viewshed, the removal of over 20 trees would occur. While distant mountain terrain currently blocked from view by screening trees would be revealed upon tree removal, the existing quality and character of the Willow Glen Drive corridor would be adversely impacted. As viewed from KV 3 and with the exception of the Project ingress alignment that would be cleared to accommodate operational access (the ingress alignment is proposed to the south of KV 3), the installation of the landscape screening and entrances plan in the post-initial planting scenario would result in screening of the Project site from view of road users; however, sediment stockpiles, elevated belt conveyors, and potentially, construction vehicles, would be visible above the perimeter fencing. The elevational difference between Willow Glen Drive and the Project site would also provide for obscured views to the processing plant and activities. At KV 3, the nearest portion of the landscape screening and entrances plan would be populated with 5-gallon shrubs (e.g., California lilac, toyon and lemonade berry) that would be between 12 and 24 inches high at planting. The installation of coast live oak and Fremont cottonwood trees (15-gallon and 24-inch box) and limited western redbud trees (36-inch box) is also proposed. Initial planting of the landscape screening and entrances plan and installation of a six-foot high chain link fence with green screening mesh is depicted in Figure 2.1-7b.

Figure 2.1-7b depicts a worse-case scenario wherein the majority of existing screening trees near KV3 and along the project perimeter in general would be removed to accommodate roadway improvements and the landscape screening and entrances plan. Existing trees, including pepper and eucalyptus species, located closest to KV 3 would be removed. As stated previously and shown in Figure 2.1-7b, perimeter fencing with screening fabric would block lower-scale features within the processing area (e.g., storage containers, muck ponds, settling ponds, etc.) from view of users of Willow Glen Drive at KV 3. While visible in the KV 3 simulation shown in Figure 2.1-7b, construction vehicles are mobile, would move around the site, and would typically be blocked from view by perimeter fencing. Portions of taller processing area components, including aggregate milling equipment, blade mills and screens, elevated conveyor belts, and stockpiles, would remain visible through the proposed ingress driveway and above the perimeter fence. Open and rectangular housing blade mills and screens atop steel scaffolding and diagonal conveyor belts would be the tallest components of the aggregate milling/screening equipment. As depicted in Figure 2.1-7b, stockpiles, which would be up to 25 feet high above ground level, would be partially visible. With the exception of landscaping planted near the access driveway, newly installed landscaping would not be visible as it would be located south of the perimeter fence and blocked

from view by mesh screening fabric. Lastly, removal of vegetation currently supported on the processing plant site including a limited number of ornamental trees would be apparent at KV 3.

Changes to Visual Character and Quality and Viewer Response. As experienced from KV 3, the removal of existing trees along the Willow Glen Drive corridor would be visible and create a noticeable reduction in visual quality. Tree removal, and the installation of new trees, would also contrast with existing visual character as the corridor is partially defined by the presence of mature trees along eastbound travel lanes. Generally, views onto the Project site (with the exception of at the proposed access driveway, which would be near KV 3) would be blocked by the combination of the elevation difference between Willow Glen Drive and the processing plant and perimeter fencing with screening fabric (see Figure 2.1-7b). However, the resulting contrasts associated with tree removal and visibility of sediment stockpiles and taller project components/features would result in overall strong contrasts and response from road users. Road improvements to Willow Glen Drive would be visible; however, new striping for travel and bike lanes and a new dedicated right-turn lane onto the Project site, would not contrast with the existing character of the corridor which currently includes striped lanes and occasional driveways. The visual dominance of foreground vegetation would cease, and while new elements including chain-link fencing with mesh screening would have a moderate effect on existing character and quality, tree removal would have a strong adverse effect on character and quality of the corridor. Screening trees are a defining features of the existing corridor experience and while Figure 2.1-7b represents a worst-case scenario of tree removal, the resulting view at Key View 3 would be notably less memorable and distinct. Furthermore, where visible, the form and line of stockpiles and processing equipment would be apparent in the context of the surrounding landscape but due to partial screening, these elements would create moderately weak contrast at KV 3. Project elements including Willow Glen Drive improvements, the landscape screening and entrances plan, and on-site components, including the processing plant, would not be dominant features in the KV 3 landscape. Lastly, removal of screening trees would result in increased visibility to nearby steel lattice towers, a tubular steel poles, and multiple transmission lines crossing the project site and Willow Glen Drive. Due to proposed tree removal, the installation of screening mesh fencing along the Willow Glen Drive corridor, and enhanced visibility of transmission line infrastructure, the unity, intactness, and vividness of the existing view would be reduced during mining and reclamation. The overall visual quality experienced at KV 3 during active mining of Phase 1A, however, is assessed as low.

Viewer response to the changes in visual conditions is assessed as high/strong given the number of viewers, the scenic designation of the road by the County, and the local familiarity with the Project site. Motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians who currently experience relatively pleasing views of moderate to moderately high visual quality along the County-designated scenic corridor would be presented with a diminished experience at KV 3 during active mining of Phase 2. Visual change within the Project site would be briefly experienced as motorists and other road users pass the new ingress driveway into the Project site (i.e., south of KV 3) and the reduced scale and spread of new landscape trees compared to existing mature trees and as such, effects to existing character and quality are anticipated to be strong. The viewer response is expected to be adverse due to the removal of existing screening trees experienced to the east and west of KV 3, visibility of haul trucks entering and exiting the site, widened extents of Willow Glen Drive, and views (albeit narrow) of effects associated with processing plant operations.

Post-Reclamation Proposed Project Features. Figure 2.1-7c, *Key View 3 – Willow Glen Drive at Golf Course Clubhouse – Post-Reclamation*, depicts a post-reclamation view of the Project site as experienced from Willow Glen Drive. As shown in the figure, screening mesh installed on the six-foot-high chain link fence paralleling Willow Glen Drive would be removed. The scenario depicted in Figure 2.1-7c is approximately 12-year post-installation of the landscape screening and entrances plan and includes revegetation of the subphase 2A area (at 7 years post-install) and subphase 2B area (at 6 years post-install). At this time, both subphase 3D and the processing plant area would be reclaimed and recently seeded with grasses included in the erosion control seed mix. Grasses on the subphase 3D area and the processing plant would not be visible due to regular management (i.e., mowing) and the presence of mature screening trees in the foreground. In the post-reclamation scenario, riparian trees, and shrubs in the subphase 2A and 2B areas would be approximately 12 to 18 feet high (or taller depending on species and container size at install). However, views to revegetated areas on the Project site would be partially blocked by mature shrubs in the foreground associated with the landscape screening and entrances plan. In the post-reclamation scenario (i.e., 12 years post initiation of Phase 1A mining), trees and shrubs closest to KV 3 in the landscape screening and entrances plan would be between 3 feet high (dwarf coyote brush) and 12 feet high (California lilac, toyon, and lemonadeberry) and would be of sufficient height to block most views onto the Project site (gaps in trees would allow for some views beyond the perimeter of the project site). Therefore, the backfilled subphase 3D and processing plant area, and revegetated subareas 2A and 2B, would generally be blocked from view at KV 3.

Changes to Visual Character and Quality and Viewer Response. For viewers along Willow Glen Drive, the post-reclamation visual environment would display a noticeable reduction in visual quality due to tree removal and increased visibility to transmission line infrastructure. The post-reclamation views would include additional hill and mountain terrain (compared to existing conditions); however, the removal of dense screening trees in the KV 3 landscape would result in a less distinct and interesting visual experience. While some existing eucalyptus and pepper trees would remain in place, Figure 2.1-7c depicts a worst-case scenario wherein the majority of existing screening trees visible at KV 3 would be removed. Under this scenario, the loss of tall and mature screening trees would be apparent and new trees would not yet be of sufficient height to replace the scale of screening trees in the existing condition. Further, the density of new plantings would be less than that of existing screening trees and would allow for clear viewing "windows" onto the project site. Immediately after mining activities have ceased, the overall vividness and memorability of the view would be moderate and at KV 3, and Project effects would reduce the overall visual quality of the County-designated scenic corridor compared to existing conditions. Viewer response at KV 3 would be expected to be adverse since the overall visual character and quality of the visible landscape would be reduced when compared to exiting conditions. Over time as vegetation reaches maturity, the overall vividness and memorability of the site would be high and would slightly enhance the overall visual quality of the County-designated scenic corridor compared to existing conditions. Like the other key views, viewer response at Key View 3 would be expected to be positive post reclamation since the overall visual character and quality would improve over exiting conditions.

Key View 4

KV 4 is from an overlook off Wind River Road in the elevated Cottonwood residential neighborhood north of the Project site. The rugged local mountains, the valley to the southeast,

and flat, seasonally tan-colored undeveloped open areas beyond the Cottonwood Golf course are dominant features from this vantage point. Primary viewers are residents along Wind River Road and nearby neighborhood streets. As depicted in Figure 2.1-8a, from KV 4, the verdant grass of the Ivanhoe course is punctuated by non-irrigated grasses, sandy areas of disturbance, and irregular lines of mature trees. Cart paths and several ponds are visible, as is the Sweetwater River corridor.

Mining and Reclamation Proposed Project Features. Figure 2.1-8b, *Key View 4 – Wind River Road Lookout – During Mining*, depicts mining during subphase 3A, including mining of the overexcavation area in the eastern portion of the subphase. This scenario assumes that the overexcavation area active in subphase 3A, shown in the middleground to the left of Figure 2.1-8b, would have been backfilled, brought to finished grade, and seeded with an erosion control mix. The balance of the subphase 3A area (located closest to Willow Glen Drive and KV 4) would be brought to an elevation higher than the backfilled overexcavation area. In accordance with the Project Revegetation Plan, most this area would be planted with the southern willow scrub plant palette (riparian) that would include fast growing trees and shrubs including mule fat, western sycamore, western cottonwood, willow, and Mexican elderberry; a riparian seed mix also would be applied to the area. Smaller linear bands of mule fat scrub and upland coastal sage scrub plantings would border the riparian planted area to the east and south. Figure 2.1-8b depicts new vegetation in a portion of the subphase 3A at initial planting height, as well as the drop structure proposed along the length of the widened river channel (appears as greyish texture on the slope at the eastern end of the overexcavation area). Planting of 15-gallon or larger cottonwood, sycamore, and willow trees are assumed; accordingly, the simulation depicts most of the tree vegetation on subphase 3A at an approximate height of four to six feet.

Excavation/mining operations in the approximately 16.5-acre subphase 3B area would be visible in the foreground/middleground on the Project site from this location. Specifically, mining and the operation of construction equipment and vehicles would be focused in the area paralleling Willow Glen Drive except for the northeast corner of the Project site that comprises subphase 3A, which would be planted with the southern willow scrub plant palette. Existing vegetation would be removed from the area and mining operations would expose underlying soils and display a consistent tan/brown color across the subphase 3A area. In the northeast corner of subphase 3A, a visible rectangular cut in the surface of the site would progressively deepen and become approximately 40 feet lower in elevation than surrounding lands. Aggregate extraction would be focused in this area during the duration of subphase 3A. A conveyor line would be installed and would proceed west of the excavation area. As viewed from KV 4, the over-excavation area would be visually prominent and produce strong contrast with the existing setting.

Proposed removal of existing trees associated with the proposed Willow Glen Drive improvements would be visible at KV 4. While modifications to Willow Glen Road would not be visually prominent, viewers at the KV 4 overlook may elect to access a narrow trail extending south and west from the overlook and providing views that include the Willow Glen Drive Corridor. The narrow trail also provides views to the processing plant area and portions of Phase 2. From trail vantage points, proposed road improvements and related tree removal would be more visible than at the overlook. In addition to road widening and related activities, 8-foot-high noise barriers installed in accordance with mitigation measure M-N-1 (refer to Subchapter 2.4, *Noise*, of this EIR) would be visible from KV 4. Barriers would be installed when mining activities in subphases 3A and 3B are located within 400 feet of the Steele Canyon Golf Course (i.e., along the southern

boundary of subphase 3A) or within 400 feet of residential land uses north of Willow Glen Drive (and downslope of KV 4). During the temporary periods of noise barrier installation, a dark and low continuous line that parallels segments of the Project boundary would be visible from KV 4. In addition, a proposed drop structure at the eastern end of the site where the Sweetwater River enters the property would be visible from the elevated vantage point of Key View 4. The drop structure (which would prevent head cutting of the channel during infrequent, high flow events) would be the width of the modified river channel (610 feet) on the slope face, extend approximately 20 feet below the slope face, and be constructed of grouted riprap (shown as the greyish texture on the slope at the eastern end of the overexcavation area in Figure 2.1-8b). Lastly, stockpiles would be visible along the southern boundary of the subphase 3B area.

Changes to Visual Character and Quality and Viewer Response. Project components visible from KV 4 (e.g., removal of existing vegetation, excavation effects, and related grade-separation within off-site and adjacent Phase 3 areas, exposed soil and aggregate processing activities, presence of processing equipment and trucks, and stockpiling of aggregate materials) would introduce visually contrasting elements that would substantially change the existing condition of the foreground and middleground views. Once initiated, mining of the individual subphase areas visible from KV 4 (i.e., 3A through 3C) would occur over approximately one year each, respectively. Specifically, subphase 3B Project elements would be in the foreground and middleground of the KV 4 landscape for approximately one year. Despite the anticipated changes to the visual character of the existing golf course and duration of mining operations in subphases 3A and 3B (i.e., a total of approximately 24 months), more distant middleground and background elements in the view would be unchanged and would continue to contribute scenic elements to the KV 4 landscape. While some of the subphase 3B area would be screened from view at KV 4 due to foreground topography, more open views to the entirety of subphases 3B, 3C, and 3D are available from the narrow trail that extends south and west from the overlook. Active mining operations for subphases 3A through 3D and resulting strong contrasts/changes to the existing visual character of the Ivanhoe Golf Course would persist for approximately 42 months. Visual change occurring on the site would continue beyond the approximately four-year during mining activities during reclamation, implementation of the revegetation plan, and establishment and maturation of the revegetation plan and plant species

During active mining operations and reclamation activities in subphases 3A and 3B, the quality of views from KV 4 would be noticeably reduced. While existing disturbances and patches of unirrigated areas are visible on the Ivanhoe Course, the Project would sequentially remove the verdant elements of the golf course from east to west. Golf course elements including golf carts would be replaced with dry, tan to brown tones of dying grasses, exposed lightly colored soils results from vegetation removal and grading/extraction activities, and the geometric form of the overexcavation area. Construction equipment and vehicles (including water and aggregate haul trucks), aggregate stockpiles, and a conveyor line and parallel access road would also be visible and contribute to the strong contrast associated with the construction scenario. In addition, the installation of temporary noise barriers would create straight linear elements in the view that would parallel the lines associated with the manufactured slopes resulting from excavation. As a result, the foreground/immediate middleground would display low intactness. Intactness and unity would be reduced and the contrasting and interruptive elements on the Project site in the foreground of the view would persist until the establishment of revegetation.

The primary viewer group from this key view (residents in the Wind River Road neighborhood) would be highly sensitive and aware of Project changes due to the proximity, available duration of views, and familiarity with the Project site. Viewer response would be high and adverse during active mining operations.

Post-Reclamation Proposed Project Features. Reclamation of completed subphases 3A and 3B would be visible in both the foreground and middleground of KV 4 (Figure 2.1-8c, *Key View 4 – Wind River Road Lookout – Post-Reclamation*). While the area of visible disturbance comprises a relatively small portion of the overall view at KV 4, visual effects anticipated to be experience during the establishment of revegetation would be strong and prominent. As proposed, reclamation would occur immediately following completion of mining operations in the subphase 3A and 3B areas. Once finished grades are achieved, subphase areas (except for the southeastern portion of subphase 3A) would generally be revegetated with container stock trees and shrubs and seed mixes in accordance with the Project revegetation plan. The southeastern portion of subphase 3A would be brought to finished grade and seeded with an erosion control seed mix primarily comprised of grasses. As shown in Figure 2.1-8c, areas outside of subphase 3A would be covered with vegetation that would establish and mature over time. As shown, with approximately 8 and 9 years of growth at the end of subphases 3A and 3B, respectively, height and density would incrementally increase over time. Prior to this time frame, vegetative density and height on the Project site would be less prominent and large pockets of exposed soils would be visible between planting groupings. The eastern border of subphase 3A and the southern boundary of subphase 3B would be seeded with an erosion control seed mix and in the post-reclamation scenario, would display the gold hues of low grasses. Visible vegetation within the southern willow scrub area includes fast-growing trees (e.g., willows, sycamores, and cottonwoods) and shrubs (i.e., mule fat and Mexican elderberry) and low grasses and herbaceous and grass-like plants including western ragweed, Douglas mugwort, and Pacific rush. In the post-reclamation scenario, riparian trees are shown at an approximate height of 12 to 18 feet.

Changes to Visual Character and Quality and Viewer Response. Post-reclamation and upon maturity of container stock plantings and seed mixture palettes, the visual character of the Project site would be enhanced with native vegetative cover. Areas revegetated with native plantings would display consistency in density and theme (in particular, the southern willow scrub planting areas). These planting areas would also be visually compatible with natural and mature vegetation located off site and in the Sweetwater River corridor (see Figure 2.1-8c). The finished elevation and revegetation following completion of subphase 3A would be maintained throughout the completion of subphases 3B, 3C, and 3D mining and post-reclamation activities and would create visible form, color, and texture contrasts with adjacent areas of revegetated lands. As depicted in Figure 2.1-8c, subphase 3A would be visible in the foreground and would be notable due to brown tones, smooth texture of soils, and the lack of tall vegetative growth; an erosion control seed mix comprised of grasses would be applied and would be regularly maintained.

At maturity, the areas revegetated with native plant palettes would notably improve the visual character of the reclaimed Project site and visually blend the former golf course area with the densely-vegetated river corridor and nearby hills and mountains that support coastal sage scrub and chaparral vegetation. With maturity of proposed revegetation, intactness and vividness would be substantially improved relative to existing and active mining conditions. Resulting intactness, vividness, and unity would; however, be weakened by the presence of the area of subphase 3A that

would be revegetated only with an erosion control seed mix and would be central to the KV 4 view.

Consistency with Applicable Goals and Policies

Mining and Reclamation. As described in Section 2.1.1, the Project is subject to the goals and policies of the General Plan COS Element, as well as the Valle de Oro Community Plan. For the portion of the Project site that is located within the Rancho San Diego Specific Plan area, applicable conditions of the Specific Plan are included in the goals and policies of the Valle de Oro Community Plan. The reader is referred to the discussion of Significance Guideline 4, below, as well as Appendix B and Subchapter 2.7 of this EIR. Mining and reclamation activities were found to be consistent with the goals and policies of the community plan.

Post Reclamation. The visual changes in the post-reclamation period were also analyzed for consistency with applicable goals and policies. The proposed reclamation would ensure the long-term compatibility of the site with the surrounding environment and the applicable goals and policies, and no inconsistencies or nonconformance issues were identified.

Perceived Contrast/Changes to Visual Character and Visual Quality

Mining and Reclamation. Based on the above analysis, the Project would change the composition of the existing pattern elements and character of the site, and mining operations and reclamation activities would visibly contrast with on-site existing conditions. The proposed mining and reclamation elements would replace existing views of the currently maintained Ivanhoe Course and the unmanicured Lakes Course with exposed soil and aggregate processing activities, processing equipment and trucks, and stockpiles of the proposed mining operations; perimeter fencing and mesh screening; and newly reclaimed, sparsely vegetated areas with temporary irrigation. Further, proposed mining operations would create substantial contrast and reduce the existing visual quality of the site and surrounding area. As described in detail for the key views, and in the assessment of viewer response, Project features during mining and reclamation would be visible from public roads and recreational facilities, as well as private residences within the Project viewshed. Views from land uses in the immediate Project vicinity would change substantially, and individual Project elements and the overall change in the visual environment would be noticeable by all viewer groups (i.e., motorists and other road users, recreationalists, and residents). The largest number of viewers, as well as the viewers having the most direct views onto the Project from public viewpoints, would be those traveling along Willow Glen Drive and Steele Canyon Road and would have open, partially opened to fully screened views onto the Project site. Motorists on Willow Glen Drive (part of the County Scenic Highway System) and Steele Canyon Road are assessed as having high sensitivity and their response to the perceived changes in the visual character/quality of the area would be high and adverse. From other nearby public roadways (e.g., Muirfield Drive located perpendicular to Willow Glen Drive, Ivanhoe Ranch Road located south of the Project site, and Hillsdale Drive located northeast of the Project site), limited views to the Project site are available. Where views are available along these roads, response to perceived changes in the visual character and quality of the site would be high and adverse.

For park users within the Hilton Head County Park, perceived changes to visual character and quality associated with Project effects would be negligible. Limited views to the Project site are

available from the park and while recreating and/or relaxing, park users would be focused on park activities and features. Recreationalists using the nearby SDNWR (in particular, elevated segments of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail) and County trails would have a high awareness of the surrounding area and the available views, and visible elements of the Proposed Project during the mining and early reclamation phases would be notable. Responses to the perceived Project changes would vary for each of the three trails with visibility of the Project site. Due to proximity and the lack of intervening screening elements, effects to the existing landscape resulting from mining and reclamation activities would be apparent from the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail and Sweetwater River Trail. As such, response to perceived changes to the visual character and quality of the site from these trails would be high and adverse. The McGinty Mountain Trail is distant from the Project site and while in the Project views, effects would be muted by distance and diminished by the broad nature of available views. Thus, response to perceived changes to the visual character and quality of the site would be low and not adverse.

Private residential viewers would generally experience views of the same Project features described above for the other groups (e.g., vegetation removal and resulting exposed soil, mining equipment and vehicles, excavation of terrain, processing plant, operations, stockpiles, and truck traffic). For most of the ridgeline homes located north of the Project site, higher elevations offer expansive views of the Jamacha Valley and surrounding mountainous terrain. Due to proximity, the lack of screening elements, and the elevated vantage point allowing overhead views of entire subphase areas, response to perceived Project changes to visual character and quality of the site and surroundings would be high and adverse.

Post Reclamation. The perceived contrast/changes to the visual setting resulting from Proposed Project changes may continue as assessed above for each of the identified viewer groups until the vegetation reaches a level of visual maturity (in approximately 10 to 15 years for each phase). Following the active mining and reclamation phases of the Project, the reclaimed terrain and establishing vegetation would gradually support and facilitate visual continuity between the Project site and the surrounding area. Mature vegetation would soften contrasts between newly planted areas and off-site areas supporting dense riparian vegetation. While response to perceived Project changes to visual character and quality of the site and surroundings would be high and adverse post reclamation and during establishment of vegetation in subphases areas (it could take up to 20 years post mining of subphase 1A for vegetation across the Project site to be considered mature). Ultimately, visual quality of the site would improve over time as vegetation becomes denser and taller and presents a coherent and unified appearance with that of the densely vegetated Sweetwater River corridor.

Summary of Resulting Visual Impacts

Mining and reclamation activities would result in adverse changes to vegetation and terrain that would substantially alter the existing visual character and composition of the visual environment. The unity, intactness, and vividness of the existing visual environment would be strongly reduced during mining and reclamation. The overall visual quality of the site during mining and reclamation would be moderately low due to the introduction of new encroaching elements that would noticeably contrast with the existing composition of the Project site and quality of the visual environment. Visibility of the processing plant and subphase 2A and 2B activities would be reduced by the installation of screening mesh and landscaping along portions of Willow Glen

Drive and Steele Canyon Road and by the installation of 36-inch box Mexican elderberry trees around the western and southern boundary of the processing plant. However, the adverse visual impacts that would occur during mining including the walled effects associated with the installation of mesh screening along segments of Willow Glen Drive and Steele Canyon Road would be experienced over a period of approximately 10 years. While unobstructed views are possible to portions of the Project site from KV 1 and 4, the volume of sensitive receptors is limited to a small portion of the overall population that would encounter the Project. Adverse visual impacts and strong visual contrast would persist beyond the active mining timeframe and would continue during reclamation of subphase areas and the establishment and maturation of revegetated areas. Due to the severity of anticipated visual change (and contrasts in form, line, and texture), the proximity of public vantage points to the Project site, and the 10-year duration of mining activities, **impacts to visual resources would be considered potentially significant (Impact AES-1)**.

2.1.2.2 *Removal or Substantial Adverse Change to Valued Visual Element*

Guideline for the Determination of Significance

The Proposed Project would result in a significant impact if:

2. The Project would result in the removal or substantial adverse change of one or more features that contribute to the valued visual character or image of the neighborhood, community, or localized area, including but not limited to landmarks (designated), historic resources, trees, and rock outcroppings.

Guideline Source

The guidelines for significant visual impacts are from the County Guidelines for Determining Significance for Visual Resources (County 2007b). Significance Guideline 2 addresses potential substantial damage to particular resources that represent or characterize a community or neighborhood.

Analysis

Whereas the discussion under Significance Guideline 1 addressed overall visual effects related to Project implementation and visual compatibility with the overall community, the Significance Guideline 2 analysis concerns specific on-site elements and whether those elements constitute valued visual elements of the on-site environment. No designated landmarks (i.e., a visual feature or element designated or identified in an adopted land use plan as an important visual or scenic resource) or identified visual resources such as unique topographical features, designated historic resources, or prominent rock outcroppings or ridgelines occur on site. Therefore, these issues are not discussed. The analysis below addresses potentially visually important trees and sensitive vegetation.

The Project site is primarily comprised of a golf course landscaped with low grass and ornamental trees. There are few areas of the site that support notable stands of trees or large areas of sensitive vegetation. No trees within these areas were identified as heritage trees. Occurrences of potentially important trees located on site primarily occur along the southern border of the Project site, east

of Steele Canyon Road at the southeast corner. Most of the mapped southern Cottonwood willow riparian forest and southern willow scrub areas would not be mined. Rather, these areas would be subject to removal of invasive species or left in the current condition. As such, these areas would be retained and would continue to contribute diverse visual elements to landscape views. No trees within these areas were identified heritage trees.

Riparian vegetation communities are valued for both biological value and visual aspects, and most of these resources would be retained during Project implementation. As described in Subchapter 2.2 of this EIR, the Project would result in direct impacts to a total of ~~1.63~~2.34 acres of riparian habitat or other sensitive vegetation communities, including 0.55 acres of disturbed wetland, 0.~~32~~ 44 acre of southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest, 0.13~~01~~ acre of southern willow scrub, 0.01 acre of tamarisk scrub, 0.01 acre of arundo-dominated riparian, and ~~0.8~~1.2 acre of Diegan coastal sage scrub (including disturbed) (HELIX ~~2021a~~2024). While impacts to sensitive vegetation communities would be limited, the riparian corridor of the Sweetwater River including the golf course is a major scenic resource of the community and the golf course and mature trees within the corridor would be considered features that contribute to the valued visual character and image of the neighborhood, community. Implementation of the Project would result in the loss of these features during mining which would be considered a **potentially significant impact (Impact AES-2)**.

2.1.2.3 *Substantial Obstruction, Interruption or Detraction from a Valued Vista*

Guideline for the Determination of Significance

The Proposed Project would result in a significant impact if:

3. The Project would substantially obstruct, interrupt, or detract from a valued focal and/or panoramic vista from:
    a. a public road,
    b. a trail within an adopted County or State trail system,
    c. a scenic vista or highway, or
    d. a recreational area.

Guideline Source

The guidelines for significant visual impacts are from the County Guidelines for Determining Significance for Visual Resources (County 2007b). Significance Guideline 3 is directed at potentially substantial adverse effects to scenic vistas and public vantage points available from roads, recreational areas, and trails important to be designated as scenic by the County or State. Changes to the resources that compose the view could be significant, depending on the degree and nature of the change, and whether the view would be obstructed.

Analysis

No designated or mapped scenic vistas, view corridors, or state-designated scenic highways are located near the Project site. Therefore, these issues are not discussed in the analysis below. The following analysis discusses valued focal or panoramic views from County-designated scenic highways and other public roadways, as well as existing trails and recreation areas in the viewshed. The County includes Willow Glen Drive, SR 54/Jamacha Road and SR 94/Campo Road in the County Scenic Highway System, and these roads are located within the Project viewshed as illustrated in Figure 2.1-4. Although the computer-generated topographic viewshed analysis indicates that views may be available from the latter two roadways (i.e., SR 54/Jamacha Road and SR 94/Campo Road), site visits and field review indicated that no views to the Project site are available from these roadways due to intervening vegetation and development. Therefore, these roadways are not discussed in the analysis below.

County Scenic Highways and Other Public Roads

Willow Glen Drive

The Valle de Oro Community Plan identifies Willow Glen Drive as a scenic highway corridor and the County includes Willow Glen Drive in its Scenic Highway System.

Users of Willow Glen Drive comprise the largest viewer group in the Project area. Motorists and other users of the road comprise the largest number of viewers with direct views onto the Project site from public viewpoints. The visibility of Project features from Willow Glen Drive is discussed throughout this analysis. In addition, KV 3 was established on Willow Glen Drive and visual simulations from the road (see Figures 2.1-7b and 2.1-7c) represent the anticipated visual change that would be experienced by road users during mining/reclamation and post reclamation. Near the processing plant, new landscaping is proposed along the Project site frontage of Willow Glen Drive and would gradually screen the processing plant and mining subphases in the surrounding area from view of road users. In addition, six-foot-high, chain-link fencing with mesh screening would border the new landscaping and would generally limit views onto the Project site from a segment of Willow Glen Drive (taller project components and occasionally, mobile construction vehicles would be visible above perimeter fencing). Despite partially blocked views of Project features and effects, the mesh screening itself is a contrasting feature that limits views and reduces visual quality along the Willow Glen Drive corridor. In addition, where new landscaping and mesh screening on fences is not proposed to be installed, road users would be offered glimpses into the Project site and visual change associated with vegetation removal and mining activities would be apparent.

Views to the verdant fairways and mature trees of the maintained Ivanhoe Course and the jumbled landscape of the closed Lakes Course would be partially screened by new fencing and landscaping to be installed along Willow Glen Drive. However, as mining activities advance from west to east across the site, vegetation on the Ivanhoe Course would be removed and the predominant features of the site would no longer occur. And despite the discordant elements on the Lakes Course compared to the Ivanhoe Course, the removal of vegetation, exposure of soils, excavation of terrain and presence of an active sand extraction operation would further impact landscape intactness and unity. While views to Project elements would be partially screened, narrow views to the Project

site (and visible contrasts) would detract from the scenic landscape visible from a designated scenic highway corridor. Further, the presence of mesh screening near the processing plant would interrupt and obstruct views and would create a partially "walled" experience for road users. Views to more distant ridgelines and mountainous terrain would not be obscured by the fence and mesh screening; however, the inclusion of fast-growing trees and shrubs in the landscape screening and entrances plan (designed to screen Project components from view) would gradually obstruct views to distant mountains visible from the westbound travel lane near the processing plant location. Thus, **impacts to existing views from Willow Glen Drive during mining and reclamation would be potentially significant (Impact AES-3a).**

Post-reclamation, long-term changes within the Project site would contribute positively to the visual experience of Willow Glen Drive motorists. At maturity (approximately 10 to 15 years post reclamation for each subphase), the existing visual character of the Project site would be enhanced with native vegetative cover and appropriate landforms for site drainage. The visual experience along the segment of the roadway bordering the Project site would be an extension of the continuous pattern elements of the surrounding visual environment within the river valley. While views to distant mountain terrain may be (briefly) partially obscured or interrupted by trees and shrubs associated with the landscape screening and entrances plan, the maturation of plant materials would create a unified appearance of vegetation along the Willow Glen Drive corridor that would mimic and build upon existing landscaping. Accordingly, long-term effects to a valued focal or panoramic vista from Willow Glen Drive would be **less than significant**.

Other Public Roadways

As discussed above under Significance Guideline 1, implementation of the Project would alter the existing elements on the Project site visible from adjacent public roadways. Therefore, the Project would alter the existing visual character of these views. However, no designated valued focal or panoramic vistas are located along other roadways near the Project site including Steele Canyon Road. As a result, associated impacts to valued views from other public roadways would be **less than significant**.

Trails

Panoramic views are available from the two SDNWR trails within the Project viewshed (Wildlife Refuge Loop and McGinty Mountain). KV 1 was established from the upper Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail and represents the existing view available from the elevated portion of the trail. Views of Project elements from the more heavily traveled (by equestrians, casual hikers, runners, mountain bikers, and walkers with dogs) lower trail would be screened by existing mature riparian vegetation associated with the Sweetwater River. Simulations from KV 1 are presented in Figures 2.1-5b and 2.1-5c and illustrate anticipated Project changes that would be visible from the upper trail during mining/reclamation and post reclamation, respectively. As illustrated, the exposed soil, excavation equipment/conveyor, and recently reclaimed areas within Phase 1 would be visible in the middleground from this trail and would create strong contrasts in form, line, and color on the Project site. Areas of exposed soils, the overreaction pit, and presence of mining equipment and mobile vehicles would detract from and interrupt the existing view as these components would grab the attention of viewers. Phase 2 mining activities and operations at the processing plant would be visible but distant.

Until revegetation within the reclaimed subphase areas reaches maturity, the visual effects of Phase 1 mining activities would generally persist and be experienced at KV 1. Assuming a 10- to 15-year period for plant communities in the revegetation plan to reach maturity, the Phase 1 area would visually blend with retained areas of riparian and coastal sage scrub vegetation within approximately 10 years post-initiation of mining activities in subphase 1A. While denser and taller trees and shrubs would gradually improve visual character and the quality of views compared to the active mining and reclamation scenarios, the subphase 1C area revegetated with only an erosion control seed mix may detract from and interrupt the scenic view available at KV 1. Further, the wide swath of grass seeded terrain would draw attention from the river corridor and mountains and reduce landscape intactness, unity, and overall visual quality. While the prominent peaks, ridgelines, and hills in the background of views from this area would not be obstructed, the volume of viewers at KV 1 is assumed to be low, anticipated visual change would be strong and detract from and interrupt the available view. Therefore, **impacts to existing views from elevated portions of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail would be considered potentially significant (Impact AES-3b)**.

From higher elevations along the McGinty Mountain trail, located over 2.0 miles east of the site, hikers may be able to distinguish between areas of the Project site being actively mined and off-site vegetation due to variations in color. However, the distance between the trail and the Project site would generally obscure prominent form and lines contrasts associated with vegetation removal and mining activities such that the perceived changes would not substantially affect scenic views. Due to the broad, panoramic nature of available views and the wide geographic area visible, color variations on the Project site would occupy a small portion of the seen landscape and would be a minor component. Also, with each year of vegetation growth following installation on the Project site, the distant, minor contrasts on the Project site would be reduced. Based on these considerations, impacts to valued focal and/or panoramic vistas from the McGinty Mountain Trail would be **less than significant**.

In the Project area, the Sweetwater Regional Trail parallels Jamacha Road from approximately Cuyamaca College Drive East to Willow Glen Drive; an approximately 200 foot-long, north-south segment of the trail borders the western boundary of the Project site. Vegetation removal and mining activities in subphases 1B and 1C would be visible from the trail. Existing easterly views from the trail segment are primarily comprised of the unmaintained Lakes Course in the foreground and mountainous terrain in the background. Despite the low visual quality displayed by elements on the Lakes Course, the removal of all vegetation, alteration of terrain, and presence of mining equipment and vehicles would sharply contrast with the existing character of the site. Further, foreground Project elements would be visually prominent during active mining and maturation of vegetation and as a result, would substantially detract from available views to local hills and mountains. **Impacts to views across the Project site from the Sweetwater Regional Trail would be considered potentially significant (Impact AES-3c)**.

Recreational Areas

As described above, Hilton Head County Park is the only park in the Project viewshed with potential views to the Project site. As experienced from the park's perimeter pedestrian path near Muirfield Drive and the southwestern corner of the baseball/soccer field, the visible activities on the Project site, specifically in the subphase 1B and 1C areas, would not substantially detract from

existing views. As previously stated, the existing view "down" Muirfeld Drive from the park's perimeter path towards the Project site is narrow. Further, existing landscaping planted along the path occasionally blocks the southerly view. An existing view from the park's path down Muirfeld Drive is shown on Figure 2.1-2b, Photo N. As shown, a sliver of grass on the unmaintained Lakes Course is visible but mature trees along the Willow Glen Drive corridor (and on the Project site) effectively block elements of the Lakes Course (i.e., surface features) from views. Trees on the course are visible above perimeter screening trees. While the construction of a new driveway onto the Project site, access gate, vegetation removal and mining activities in subphase 1B and 1C areas would be visible, most screening trees would remain in place during Project operations. Thus, views to the Project site would continue to be blocked by existing perimeter trees. Further, mature trees within the Sweetwater River corridor located south of the Project site would not be disturbed and as such, a tree line above the Project site and against the coastal sage scrub covered hill to the south would persist. Therefore, impacts associated with views from Hilton Head County Park would be **less than significant**.

2.1.2.4 *Compliance with Goals, Policies and Requirements*

Guideline for the Determination of Significance

The Proposed Project would result in a significant impact if:

2. The Project would not comply with applicable goals, policies or requirements of an applicable County Community Plan, Subregional Plan, or Historic District's Zoning.

Guideline Source

The guidelines for significant visual impacts are from the County Guidelines for Determining Significance for Visual Resources (County 2007b).

Analysis

Applicable land use plans governing visual character and quality include the County General Plan and the Valle De Oro Community Plan, as well as the County LPC, as described in Section 2.1.1. Specific goals and policies have been identified directed at visual quality and community character, and address development within the Rancho San Diego Specific Plan area. A Project consistency evaluation of these applicable goals and policies is provided in Appendix B and Section 3.1.6 of this EIR. In summary, the Project would be inconsistent with several goals and policies related to aesthetics contained within the County General Plan COS Element and Open Space Element, as well as the Valle De Oro Community Plan. During mining and reclamation, Project components and the visual effects of mining and reclamation activities would be visually incompatible with the existing visual setting and natural features of the surrounding area. Proposed activities and effects to landforms and vegetation would contrast with the existing character of the community. Proposed fencing and landscaping would help screen the visual effects of the Project from the largest viewer group in the surrounding area (motorists); however, due to the duration of mining activities (up to 10 years), the visible removal of vegetation from the site, the installation of linear screening mesh that would limit views and reduce visual quality, and resulting contrasts between actively mined (and newly reclaimed and revegetated) lands and the adjacent riparian corridor of the Sweetwater River, impacts would be adverse. While the Project would comply with

applicable goals and policies to the extent feasible for an extractive use and would implement a comprehensive reclamation plan to ensure that mined areas are backfilled and revegetated with appropriate plant communities, **impacts would be considered potentially significant (Impact AES-4)**.

2.1.2.5 *Visual Impacts Related to Lighting and Glare*

Guidelines for the Determination of Significance

The Proposed Project would result in a significant impact if:

1. The Project would install outdoor light fixtures that do not conform to the lamp type and shielding requirements described in Section 59.10~~5~~6 (Requirement~~s~~ for Lamp Source and Shielding) and are not otherwise exempted pursuant Section 59.108 or Section 59.109 of the San Diego County Light Pollution Code.

2. The Project would operate Class I or Class III outdoor lighting between 11:00 p.m. and sunrise that is not otherwise exempted pursuant Section 59.108 or Section 59.109 of the San Diego County Light Pollution Code.

3. The Project would generate light trespass that exceeds 0.2 foot-candles measured five feet onto the adjacent property.

4. The Project would install highly reflective building materials, including but not limited to reflective glass and high-gloss surface color, that will create daytime glare and be visible from roadways, pedestrian walkways or areas frequently used for outdoor activities on adjacent properties.

5. The Project does not conform to applicable Federal, State or local statute or regulation related to dark skies or glare, including but not limited to the San Diego County Light Pollution Code.

Guideline Source

The guidelines for significant visual impacts are from the County Guidelines for Determining Significance for Visual Resources (County 2007b). The County Guidelines for Determining Significance – Dark Skies and Glare (dated July 30, 2007, as modified on January 15, 2009), provide guidelines for significant impacts associated with lighting and glare (County 2009e).

Analysis

Lighting within the Project site currently consists of safety lighting within the clubhouse and maintenance building areas and the parking lots. The Ivanhoe Course only operates during daylight hours and the Lakes Course is no longer in operation. Roadways within the vicinity of the Project site are lit with streetlights. Visible night lighting in the area is primarily associated with private homes and commercial areas.

The Project would be designed to use the least amount of lighting possible while remaining in compliance with state and local regulations for safety. No highly reflective building materials would be used. Mining operations are only proposed to occur during daylight hours and the only new source of on-site lighting would be from shielded fixtures that would be installed around the processing plant area for safety and security purposes. Proposed safety lighting would be required to adhere to Division 9 of the County LPC. Lighting would be selectively placed and of the lowest illumination necessary for human safety (i.e., limited to less than 4,050 lumens output, maintaining compliance with state and local regulations, including the County LPC and dark skies policies). Generally, mounted sodium, metal halide, fluorescent, or LED lighting would be employed. Lighting would be directed downward and/or fully shielded and designed to minimize glare and reflection onto neighboring areas with cut-offs; no light would spill beyond the boundary of the Project site. Once the Project site is reclaimed (after a period of approximately 12 years), all safety lighting would be removed from the site.

The Project site is located approximately 40 miles from Palomar Observatory, in Zone B as identified by the LPC (all areas beyond 15 miles). Project lighting would not adversely affect nighttime views or astronomical observations because it would conform to the lamp type and shielding requirements as well as the hours of operation detailed in the LPC. Based on compliance with the County's LPC and Dark Sky Ordinance, visual impacts associated with Project-related lighting and glare would be **less than significant**.

2.1.3 Cumulative Impact Analysis

As stated in CEQA Guidelines Definitions and Section 15130, cumulative impacts are those resulting from proposed project effects combined with those of past, present, or probable future projects producing related or cumulative effects. For visual issues, projects within the Project viewshed (including the Proposed Project) would potentially contribute to regionally cumulative visual effects and are evaluated in this discussion. The viewshed includes areas with views to, or from, any single point on the Project, and therefore includes those projects that may be experienced in concert with the Proposed Project.

Cumulative projects identified in Table 1-14 that are located within the Project viewshed are presented in Table 2.1-1, *Cumulative Projects Within the Viewshed*. The two projects include the Cuyamaca College Facilities Master Plan Update and the proposed Ivanhoe Ranch residential development. These projects are not concentrated in one portion of the viewshed, and local topography, vegetation, intervening structures and land uses often block views between these project locales.

The Cuyamaca College Facilities Master Plan Update encompasses the Cuyamaca College campus, the southeastern corner of which is located approximately 0.3 mile northwest of the Project site. The Master Plan Update is proposed to provide updated long-range guidance for the replacement or modernizations of existing facilities and infrastructure improvements to serve the existing and future campus population; no expansion of classroom capacity is proposed (Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College District 2019). It also proposes improvements to the existing landscaping, gateway entry at Cuyamaca College Drive West, and open space restoration. The proposed activities would alter the appearance of certain portions of the campus; however, because no new facilities are proposed and the renovations/modernizations would be relatively

small in scale, the Master Plan Update would not result in a substantial adverse effect on panoramic scenic vistas or block views of important visual resources. On-campus development would be a continuation of existing community college uses, contiguous with existing campus development, and perceived as a logical extension of existing facilities. Since the proposed improvements would be consistent with existing campus development and would undergo design review to ensure compatibility, potential changes to visual character and quality would not be notable to off-site viewers. The Cuyamaca College development would not be highly visible in conjunction with the Proposed Project due to distance from the Project site and intervening topography, built uses, and landscaping. While there may be some areas at higher elevations that may have views of the improvements proposed within Cuyamaca College and the Project site (e.g., along trails located within the SDNWR), the combination of visual effects resulting from both projects is anticipated to be negligible, especially given the scale of proposed on-campus improvements. Additionally, the Cuyamaca College campus is buffered from County-designated scenic roadways and other nearby roadways by existing landscaping and commercial and residential development, such that there would be limited, if any, roadways from which views of both Cuyamaca College and the Proposed Project would be available.

The Ivanhoe Ranch project site includes approximately 122 acres immediately southeast of the eastern portion of the Project site, adjacent to the existing Steele Canyon Estates. The project proposes the development of 119 single-family residences and the designation of open space areas. The project is in the early stages of planning and no environmental analysis is currently available. Relative to potential visual impacts, the project would introduce a large number of buildings and suburban elements adjacent to an existing residential development (Steele Canyon Estates) within the open space area between the Project site and the Steele Canyon Golf Course. Visual changes associated with this development are anticipated to be relatively minor as experienced from public viewpoints such as roadways and trails, since the proposed structures would be located on relatively flat terrain that currently displays visual qualities consistent with that of graded pads. In addition, the new structures would be located adjacent to an existing rural residential neighborhood and as such, would visually blend with similar surrounding uses. For private views from nearby residential areas, particularly the Steele Canyon Estates, visual impacts associated with construction of the residential development would not be compounded by the visual impacts associated with implementation of the Proposed Project. Temporarily, there may be some overlaps in timing between the two projects (e.g., site grading for the Ivanhoe Ranch Project could overlap with Phase 3 mining activities and both projects would be visible from the Wind River Road lookout. While the Ivanhoe Ranch Project would result in the construction of new structures and the primary visual effects of the Proposed Project would include vegetation removal, excavation, and equipment operations, the combined visual change associated with the projects would temporarily create strong contrast in the landscape. Given the duration of Project activities and potential overlap with construction of the Ivanhoe Ranch project, a potential cumulative impact would occur and the Project's contribution would be cumulatively considerable.

2.1.4 Significance of Impacts Prior to Mitigation

The following significant impacts related to aesthetics would occur with Project implementation:

Impact AES-1 Implementation of the proposed mining and reclamation activities would detract from the visual quality of views from public viewpoints, resulting in a potentially significant impact related to scenic vistas.

Impact AES-2 Implementation of the proposed mining and reclamation activities would result in removal or substantial adverse change of features (i.e., golf course and visually notable trees) that contribute to the visual character of the area, resulting in a potentially significant impact related to scenic resources.

Impact AES-3a Implementation of the proposed mining and reclamation activities would affect views across the Project site from Willow Glen Drive, resulting in a potentially significant impact related to obstruction, interruption, or detraction from a valued vista from a public road.

Impact AES-3b Implementation of the proposed mining and reclamation activities would affect views across the Project site from elevated portions of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail, resulting in a potentially significant impact related to obstruction, interruption, or detraction from a valued vista from a trail within an adopted County and State trail system.

Impact AES-3c Implementation of the proposed mining and reclamation activities would affect views across the Project site from the Sweetwater Regional Trail, resulting in a significant impact related to scenic resources related to obstruction, interruption, or detraction from a valued vista from a trail within an adopted County and State trail system.

Impact AES-4 Implementation of the proposed mining and reclamation activities would not conform to certain applicable goals and policies related to visual resources during mining activities, resulting in a significant impact.

Impact AES-5 Implementation of the proposed mining and reclamation activities would result in a considerable contribution to a potential cumulative impact associated with the combined visual contrast in the landscape.

2.1.5 Mitigation

No additional mitigation is available to reduce project-level aesthetics impacts related to scenic vistas and resources, visual character and quality, and conflicts with applicable goals and policies that would occur during proposed mining and reclamation activities. These impacts would be significant and unmitigable until reclaimed and revegetated areas reach mature vegetation densities and height (at approximately 15 to 20 years post-initiation of subphase 1A mining when trees and shrubs in all subphase areas would reach maturity).

Several Project design considerations would be implemented during the mining and reclamation phases of the Project to reduce aesthetics effects, as documented in Section 7.2.1 of this EIR. These include retaining approximately 64 acres where no mining activities would be permitted, adhering to the proposed subphase plan, timely installation and removal of appropriate screening vegetation, use of screening mesh in selective locations on fencing along Willow Glen Drive and the Steele

Canyon Road bridge, use of shielded/downward-oriented lighting, and painting mining equipment in a light color to help diminish the contrasting quality of these features. A landscape screening and entrances plan would be implemented to provide additional vegetative screening along Willow Glen Drive. These considerations will become Project Conditions to ensure their implementation if the Project is approved.

2.1.6 Conclusion

The Project would introduce a phased mining operation, including reclamation and revegetation of disturbed areas, into the visual environment of the Project site and surrounding setting. The Proposed Project would change the composition of the visual environment in terms of dominance, scale, diversity, and continuity, by introducing exposed soil, mining operations and equipment, a processing plant area, and stockpiles that would be out of scale and visually dominant features. This would create notable physical changes in the composition of the visual environment, as viewed from Willow Glen Drive, Steele Canyon Road, and surrounding recreational trails and residential areas that would be inconsistent with the existing visual character of the area. However, existing vegetation and fencing combined with targeted screening elements including screening mesh and new landscaping associated with the landscape screening and entrances plan would, to the extent feasible, moderate the visual effects of the Project until reclaimed and revegetated areas reach mature vegetation densities and height (at approximately 15 to 20 years post-initiation of subphase 1A mining, trees and shrubs in all subphase areas would reach maturity).

While the Project is proposed to be phased such that only smaller subphase areas are mined individually, the visual effects of vegetation removal, mining, and extractive activities would create strong contrasts in the landscapes. In addition, the installation of new landscaping and mesh screening near the processing plant would block portions of the processing plant from view but would also shorten available views and reduce visual quality through creation of a walled experienced for road users. Views onto the Project site would be available from nearby roads, trails, and residential properties and contrasting forms, lines, and colors resulting from mining activities would be apparent from public and private vantage points. Once mining has been completed in each subphase area, excavated areas would be backfilled and reclaimed. The revegetation plan would be implemented and would entail the planting of container trees, shrubs, and the application of seed mixes. Over time, the native riparian and upland plant palettes would help reduce the visual effects of mining and reclamation activities by screening the ground surface and enhancing densely vegetated segments of the nearby Sweetwater River corridor. Several Project design features, such as installation of new landscaping (i.e., the landscape screening and entrances plan), fencing, mesh screening, box trees along the western and southern boundary of the processing plant, painting of mining equipment to blend with the color of the exposed soil, and limiting the height of stockpiles to 25 feet (see Chapter 7.0 for all design considerations), would help to reduce the visual impacts and enhance screening of Project components during active mining of the site. However, due to the anticipated strong contrasts associated with Project effects to terrain and vegetation; visibility of effects from roads, trails, and residences; and the duration of mining and reclamation activities (i.e., up to 12 years), impacts would be significant and unmitigable (Impact AES-1).

No designated landmarks (i.e., a visual feature or element designated or identified in an adopted land use plan as an important visual or scenic resource) or identified visual resources such as

unique topographical features, designated historic resources, or prominent rock outcroppings or ridgelines occur on site. The areas of potentially important trees on site primarily occur along the southern portion of the site where no mining is proposed. Riparian vegetation communities are valued for their both biological value and visual aspects, and most of these resources would be retained during implementation of the Proposed Project; however, as described in Subchapter 2.2, the Project would result in direct impacts to approximately 1.63 acres of riparian habitat or other sensitive vegetation communities, including 0.50 acre of disturbed wetland, 0.32 acre of southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest, 0.01 acre of arundo-dominated riparian, and 0.8 acre of Diegan coastal sage scrub habitats. While impacts to sensitive vegetation communities would be limited, the riparian corridor of the Sweetwater River including the golf course is a major scenic resource of the community and is considered visually notable at the local level. Therefore, implementation of the Project would result in the loss of these features during mining, which would be considered a significant and unmitigable impact relative to the loss of on-site sensitive vegetation and trees within the Sweetwater River corridor (Impact AES-2).

The Valle de Oro Community Plan identifies Willow Glen Drive as a scenic highway corridor. The Project would introduce visually contrasting elements into views from the roadway to the golf course that under existing conditions are partially screened and broken. Changes to views during Project mining and reclamation would be notable. Visually contrasting elements such as mining operations, construction equipment and vehicles, and stockpiles would be partially screened from view of motorists through the installation of screening fences and landscaping. However, detectable visual contrasts would remain strong and would be perceived negatively by road users. Further, scenic elements of existing views would be obscured by Project features and while these views would be restored once motorists travel beyond the Project site; the existing character of the site would be negatively affected. Lastly, the visual quality of the scenic landscape visible from Willow Glen Drive would be degraded as mining activities would impact existing intactness, unity, and memorability. Thus, scenic vista impacts from Willow Glen Drive would be significant and unmitigable (Impact AES-3a).

The changes created by the Project in the vistas available from the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail would be notable during Phase 1 and would create strong contrasts in form, line, and color on the Project site. Further, areas of exposed soils, the overexcavation pit, and presence of mining equipment and mobile vehicles would detract from and interrupt the existing view as these components would grab the attention of viewers. Phase 2 mining activities and operations at the processing plant would be visible but distant. Mining of Phase 1 would occur over a three-year period and reclamation of the overall area would be completed approximately five years post initiation of mining in subphase 1A. While the prominent peaks, ridgelines, and hills in the background of views from this area would not be obstructed and the volume of viewers at the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail is assumed to be low, anticipated visual change would be strong and Project elements would detract from and interrupt the available view. Therefore, the anticipated impacts to existing views from elevated portions of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail would be significant and unmitigable (Impact AES-3b).

Distance between the McGinty Mountain Trail and the Project site would generally obscure prominent form and lines contrasts associated with vegetation removal and mining activities such that the perceived changes would not substantially affect scenic views. Further, due to the broad, panoramic nature of available views and the wide geographic area visible, color variations on the

Project site would occupy a small portion of the seen landscape and would be a minor component. Therefore, impacts to valued focal and/or panoramic vistas from the McGinty Mountain Trail would be less than significant.

Vegetation removal and mining activities in subphases 1B and 1C would be visible from the Sweetwater Regional Trail. Further, existing easterly views from the short trail segment are primarily comprised of the unmaintained Lakes Course in the foreground and mountainous terrain in the background. Despite the low visual quality displayed by elements on the Lakes Course, the removal of all vegetation, alteration of terrain including the over-excavation area, and presence of mining equipment and vehicles would sharply contrast with the existing character of the Project site. Further, foreground Project elements would be visually prominent during active mining and maturation of vegetation and as a result, would substantially detract from available views to local hills and mountains. Therefore, potential impacts to views across the Project site from the Sweetwater Regional Trail would be significant and unmitigable (Impact AES-3c). Impacts associated with views of Project effects from Hilton Head County Park would be less than significant.

The Project would be inconsistent with several applicable goals and policies related to aesthetics contained within the Valle De Oro Community Plan and County of San Diego General Plan Conservation and Open Space Element. During mining and reclamation, the visual elements of the Project would be visually incompatible with the existing visual setting and natural features of the surrounding area and would contrast with the existing character of the Project site and surrounding community. While the Project has been designed to comply with the applicable goals and policies to the extent feasible for an extractive use, including implementation of a comprehensive reclamation plan that would ensure that the long-term conditions on site would comply, impacts during mining and reclamation would be significant and create several conflicts with goals and policies of applicable planning documents. As such, impacts related to compliance with the goals, policies, and requirements of applicable land use plans would be significant and unmitigable (Impact AES-4).

Mining operations are planned to be conducted during daylight hours, such that only safety lighting within the processing plant area would be required. All light fixtures would conform to the County LPC and no highly reflective building materials would be used. Project lighting would not adversely affect nighttime views or astronomical observations because it would conform to the County LPC lighting requirements as well as the hours of operation detailed in the LPC. Visual impacts associated with Project-related lighting and glare would be less than significant.

The Project would result in a considerable contribution to a potential cumulative visual impacts, since the combined visual change associated with potential visual impacts attributed to the Ivanhoe Ranch project compounded by the effects of the Proposed Project would temporarily create strong contrast in the landscape (Impact AES-5).

Table 2.1-1
CUMULATIVE PROJECTS WITHIN THE VIEWSHED

Project Name	County Reference Number	Location	Size (acres)	Development Type	Proposed Improvements
Ivanhoe Ranch	PDS2018-TM-5629, PDS2018-REZ-18-004, PDS2018-GPA- 18-005	5261 Ivanhoe Ranch Road (between Cottonwood Golf Course and Steele Canyon Golf Course) APNs: 518-030-34 and 518-030-37	122	Residential	119 dwelling units, open space
Cuyamaca College Facilities Master Plan Update	N/A	Bound by Fury Lane to the east and SR 54/ Jamacha Road to the south	165	Educational	Modernization/ renovations and site improvements/ infrastructure upgrades to existing facilities.

GPA = General Plan Amendment; REZ = Rezone; TM = Tentative Map; N/A = Not Applicable

This page intentionally left blank

A: Looking east from eastern portion of Project Site

B: Closed Lakes Course

C: Cottonwood Golf Club clubhouse

D: Cottonwood Golf Club parking lot

Source: Dudek (2020)

HELIX Environmental Planning

On-site Existing Conditions

Figure 2.1-1a

E: Looking south from eastern portion of Project Site

F: West of clubhouse looking southwest

G: Sweetwater River channel looking upstream from east of Steele Canyon Road bridge

H: Central portion of Ivanhoe Course looking southwest

Source: Dudek (2020)

HELIX Environmental Planning

On-site Existing Conditions

Figure 2.1-1b

I: View north (upstream) from Steele Canyon Road bridge

J: View northeast from Upper Wildlife Refuge Trail

K: View southwest from SDGE access roads

Source: Dudek (2020)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Off-site Existing Conditions

Figure 2.1-2a

L: View from Willow Glen Drive looking southwest across Ivanhoe Course

M: View from Willow Glen Drive looking southwest across to existing landscape screen

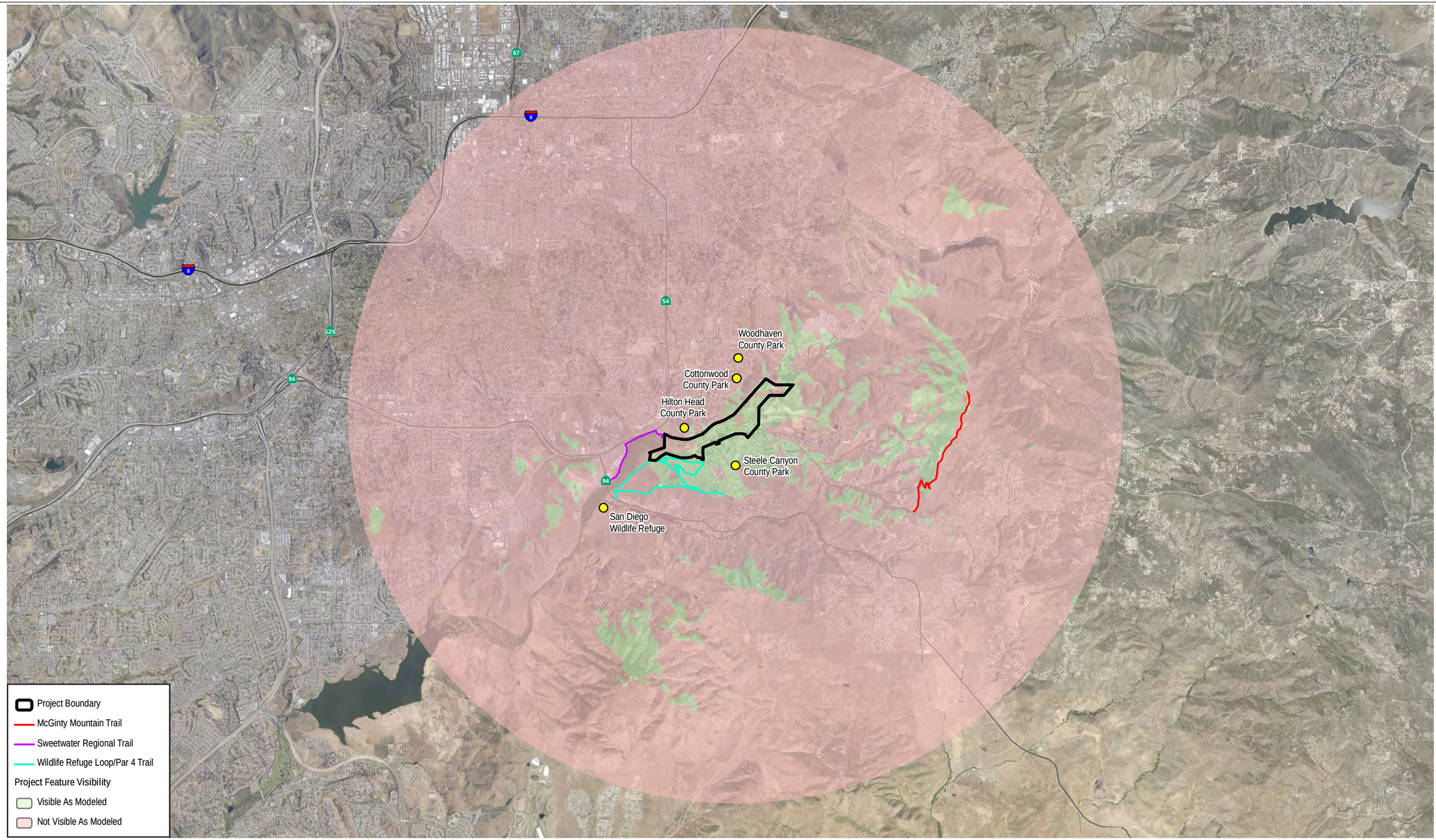
N: View from Hilton Head County Park looking south along Muirfield Drive

Source: Dudek (2020)

HELIX Environmental Planning

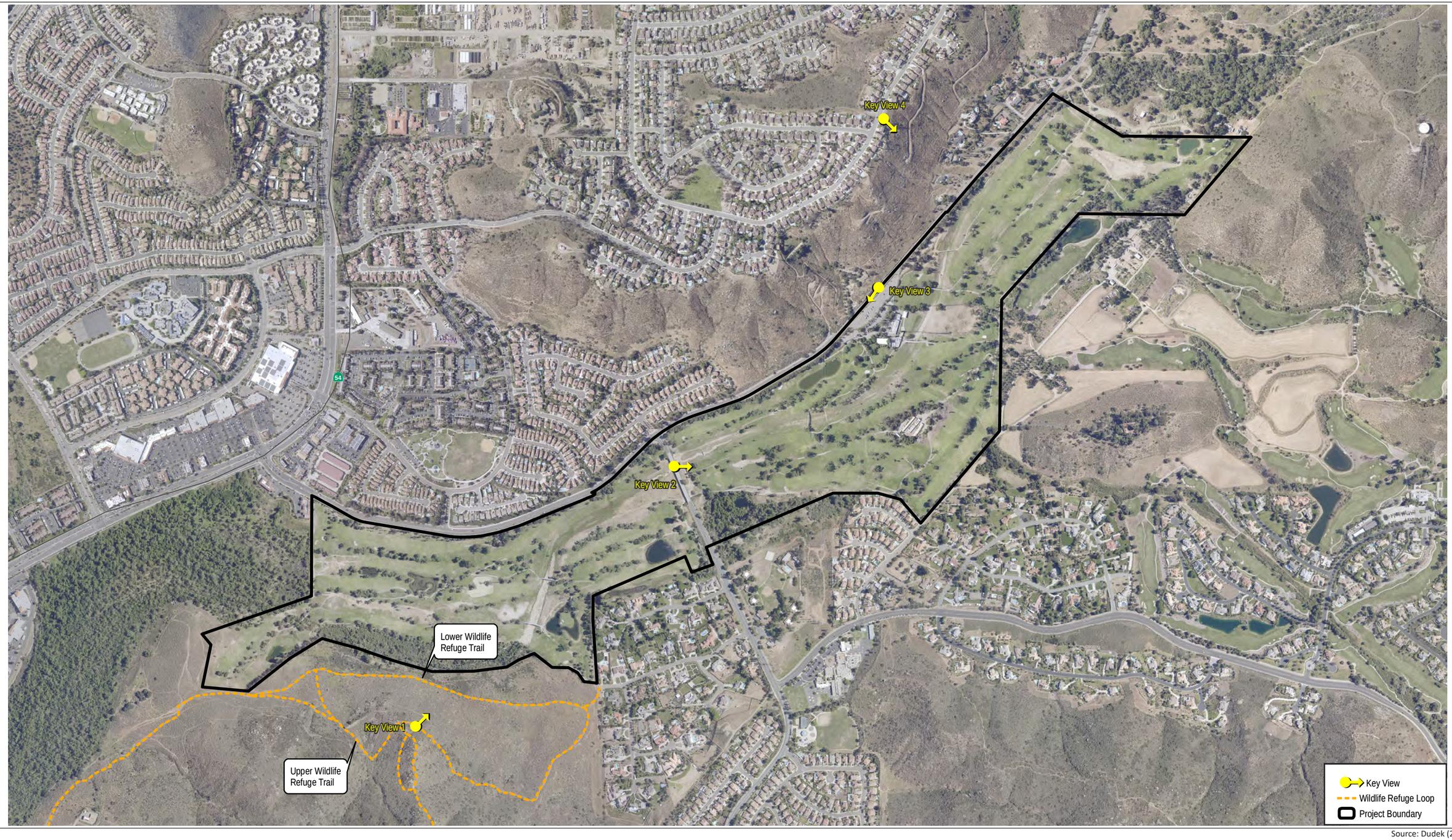
Off-site Existing Conditions

Figure 2.1-2b



I:\PROJECTS\SIR\SIR-02_Cottonwood\Map\EIR\Fig2.1-3_Viewshed.indd SIR-02 02/17/2020 -RK

Source: Dudek (2020)



Source: Dudek (2020)

I:\PROJECTS\S\SIR\SIR-02_Cottonwood\Map\EIR\Fig2.1-4_KeyViews.indd SIR-02 02/17/2020 -RK

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key Views

Figure 2.1-4

Existing view to the northeast from the upper segment of the Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail (SDNWR)

Source: Dudek (2020)

I:\PROJECTS\S\SCambraRealty_02975\SIR-02_Cottonwood\Map\EIR\Fig2.1-5a_KeyView1.indd SIR-02 02/17/2020-RK

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 1 - Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail (SDNWR) - Existing Conditions

Figure 2.1-5a

Conceptual Visual Simulation of Project During Subphase 1C Mining

Source: Dudek (2021)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 1 - Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail (SDNWR) – During Mining

Figure 2.1-5b

Conceptual Visual Simulation of Project Post-Reclamation

Source: Dudek (2020)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 1 - Wildlife Refuge Loop Trail (SDNWR) – Post-Reclamation

Figure 2.1-5c

Existing view to the east from Steele Canyon Road Bridge towards Project site

Source: Dudek (2020)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 2 – Steele Canyon Road Bridge - Existing Conditions

Figure 2.1-6a

Conceptual Visual Simulation of Project during Subphase 2A

Source: Dudek (2021)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 2 – Steele Canyon Road Bridge - During Mining

Figure 2.1-6b

Conceptual Visual Simulation of Project During Phase 2 Mining

Source: Dudek (2020)

I:\PROJECTS\S\CambroRealty_02975\SR-02_Cottonwood\Map\EIR\Fig2.1-6c_KeyView2.indd SR-02 02/17/2020 -RK

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 2 – Steele Canyon Road Bridge - During Mining

Figure 2.1-6c

Conceptual Visual Simulation of Project Post-Reclamation

Source: Dudek (2020)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 2 – Steele Canyon Road Bridge - Post-Reclamation

Figure 2.1-6d

Existign view from Willow Glen Drive towards Project site

Source: Dudek (2021)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 3 – Willow Glen Drive - Existing Conditions

Figure 2.1-7a

Conceptual Visual Simulation of Project During Mining of Phase 1A

Source: Dudek (2021)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 3 – Willow Glen Drive - During Mining

Figure 2.1-7b

Conceptual Visual Simulation of Project Post-Reclamation

Source: Dudek (2021)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 3 – Willow Glen Drive - Post-Reclamation

Figure 2.1-7c

Existing view to the southeast from the Wind River Road lookout

Source: Dudek (2020)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 4 – Wind River Road Lookout - Existing Conditions

Figure 2.1-8a

Visual Simulation of Project During Subphase 3B Mining

Source: Dudek (2021)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 4 – Wind River Road Lookout - During Mining

Figure 2.1-8b

Conceptual Visual Simulation of Project Post-Reclamation

Source: Dudek (2021)

HELIX Environmental Planning

Key View 4 – Wind River Road Lookout - Post-Reclamation

Figure 2.1-8c