

E5.6 NATIONAL WILDERNESS AREAS, WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS, AND TRAILS

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) requires that Licensees describe National Wilderness Areas (NWAs), National Wild and Scenic River (WSR) reaches, and National Recreation or Scenic Trails, and any potential effect of a hydroelectric project on these nationally-designated resources. These three resource types are discussed below. As part of the FERC relicensing process, a series of interrelated studies was conducted to assess and evaluate recreation resources associated with the Upper North Fork Feather River (UNFFR) Hydroelectric Project (Project). The studies were commissioned by Pacific Gas and Electric Company (Licensee).

E5.6.1 National Wilderness Areas

There are four NWAs in the region surrounding Project lands. The Ishi, Caribou, and Thousand Lakes NWAs exist within the Lassen National Forest, north and west of Project lands. The Bucks Lake NWA exists within the Plumas National Forest, south of Project lands. These wilderness areas are described below.

In summary, no Project lands lie within these NWAs. The Ishi, Caribou, and Thousand Lakes NWAs are not impacted by the Project due to their distance away from the Project area. Bucks Lake lies less than 0.25 mile from the Project area. The Project is not expected to impact Bucks Lake NWA because Project lands lie north of the Feather River Canyon, while the NWA lies south of the canyon and is thus relatively inaccessible. Limited access is available to hikers via the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) which crosses state route (SR) 70 at Belden Rest Area.

Visitors to Licensee, United States Forest Service (Forest Service), and private recreation facilities in the Project area may hike the PCT; however, the numbers of these visitors are relatively small.

E5.6.1.1 Ishi NWA

The 41,000-acre Ishi NWA is located more than 25 miles directly west of the Project area in the southern Cascade Foothills, approximately 20 miles east of Red Bluff, CA. This area is a unique, low-elevation wilderness. The land has been incised by wind and water and is dotted with basaltic outcroppings, caves, and bizarre-looking pillar lava formations. Landscape consists of east-west running ridges and rugged river canyons. The drier, warmer southern slopes are covered with chaparral, while pines and oaks live on the moister north-facing slopes. Unique to this area are dense islands of ponderosa pine growing on terraces left after rivers cut the canyons. No paved, gravel or maintained dirt roads provide access to the Ishi. Unmaintained dirt roads provide access for users who hike and camp in the Ishi. Predominant recreational uses are non-water-based, as there are very few lakes. There are no Project impacts to Ishi NWA due to the distance between the two areas.

E5.6.1.2 Caribou NWA

The 20,500-acre Caribou NWA is located approximately 5 miles directly north of the Project boundary on the northern end of Lake Almanor. The area borders the eastern boundary at Lassen National Park. This area is a gently-rolling, forested plateau with many forest-fringed lakes.

The forest cover is mostly lodgepole pine with a mixture of Jeffrey pine, white and red fir, western white pine, and hemlock. Past volcanic and glacial events have created crater peaks, cinder cones and numerous large and small depressions which have become beautiful lakes. Caribou Peaks, Black Cinder Rock, and Red Cinder are points of interest. The average elevation is 6,900 feet and the highest point, Red Cinder, is 8,370 feet. No paved roads provide access to Caribou.

One gravel and a few unmaintained dirt roads provide access for users who hike and camp within the NWA. Predominant recreational uses are non-water-based, although those who hike and camp have opportunities to fish at several small lakes within Caribou. It may receive visitors who also utilize Project lands; however, because of the difference in recreation-related opportunities at each, Caribou likely receives a smaller number of visitors. There are no Project impacts to Caribou NWA due to these factors.

E5.6.1.3 Thousand Lakes NWA

The 16,335-acre Thousand Lakes NWA is located more than 30 miles northwest from the Project boundary at the northern end of Lake Almanor. The wilderness is in the southern Cascade Foothills, approximately 30 miles east of Shasta Lake. The area consists of contrasting topography, offering volcanic and glacial formations, rocky ravines, mountain slopes, open meadows, and stands of lodgepole pine and red fir. It is dominated by the 8,677-foot Crater Peak, the highest point in Lassen National Forest. The lowest point in Thousand Lakes NWA occurs at the base of the volcano, at 5,546 feet.

The seven major lakes that lie within Thousands Lakes Valley contain trout. Several species of wildlife make their home in the NWA including black-tailed deer, black bear, pika, pine marten, northern goshawk, spotted owl, pileated woodpecker, and Clark's nutcracker. No paved roads provide access to Thousand Lakes. One gravel and a few unmaintained dirt roads provide access for users who hike and camp within the NWA. The predominant recreational uses are non-water-based, although those who hike and camp have opportunities to fish at the small lakes. There are no Project impacts to Thousand Lakes NWA due to the distance between the two areas.

E5.6.1.4 Bucks Lake NWA

The 21,000-acre Bucks Lake NWA is located in the northwestern portion of Plumas National Forest south of SR 70 and the Project area near Belden, CA. For a 2 mile stretch along the UNFFR, from its confluence with the East Fork downstream to Belden, the Project boundary remains less than 0.25 mile from Bucks Lake NWA. Along this stretch, the NWA lies on the south side of the Feather River Canyon across from the Project boundary. From Project lands, it is accessible to users who are hiking the PCT, which runs from north to south through Bucks Lake NWA. The area has a broad diversity of vegetation and topography, and a few small lakes and ponds are located throughout. Vegetative cover varies from chaparral fields to conifers, oaks and pure stands of red fir. Bare rock slopes, cliffs, quaking bogs and small mountain meadows are found at the higher elevations. Elevations range from 2,000 feet in the Feather River Canyon to 7,017 feet at Spanish Peak. Two paved roads provide access to the south end of the area, near Bucks Lake.

One gravel road provides access to the east side of the NWA and a few unmaintained dirt roads provide access for users who hike and camp. The predominant recreational uses are non-water-based, although those who hike and camp have opportunities to fish at a few small lakes. There are no Project impacts to Bucks Lake NWA due to these factors.

E5.6.2 National Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Middle Fork of the Feather River was one of the nation's first rivers to be designated as part of the original National WSRs System in 1968. The Middle Fork Feather WSR reaches run east to west for over 50 miles from its headwaters near Beckwourth, CA, through the center of Plumas National Forest, to Lake Oroville. The designated reaches total 78 miles, including 33 miles of wild river area, 10 miles of scenic river area, and 35 miles of recreational river area. The Middle Fork of the Feather River WSR reaches have no relationship to the Project as they are located more than 25 miles south of Lake Almanor and 16 miles from the southern FERC Project boundary near Belden, along SR 70. Visitors to Licensee, Forest Service, and private recreation facilities in the Project area may boat or fish this WSR Reach, however, the number of these visitors is anticipated to be relatively small.

E5.6.3 National Recreation or Scenic Trails

The PCT is one of eight National Scenic Trails in the U. S., spanning 2,650 miles from Canada to Mexico through the western states of Washington, Oregon, and California. The PCT generally runs in a north-south direction west of the Project area through Lassen and Plumas National Forests.

The PCT crosses SR 36 approximately 6 miles west of Lake Almanor. It then runs north to south approximately 11 miles directly west of Butt Valley Reservoir and through the Belden Rest Area along SR 70, one of the developed recreation sites in the Project area. This rest area may serve as a trailhead for some PCT users, however, its primary function is a roadside rest stop. Visitors to Licensee, Forest Service, and private recreation facilities in the Project area may hike the PCT; however, the numbers of these visitors are relatively small.

Other Federally-designated trails in the Project vicinity include the Heart Lake National Recreation Trail and the McGowan Lake Cross Country Ski Trail. Both trails are located in the Lassen National Forest near the southwest corner of Lassen Volcanic National Park. Additionally, the LART has been proposed as a National Recreation Trail.