

3.13 Recreation

This section evaluates the potential impacts related to recreation during construction, invasive plant management, and maintenance of the Project. Construction activities include the earthwork involved in the estuarine restoration and infrastructure improvement portions of the Project. Invasive plant management activities include the removal of dense-flowered cordgrass (*Spartina densiflora*), European beachgrass (*Ammophila arenaria*), and dwarf eelgrass (*Zostera japonica*) using any one or a combination of the methods described in Section 2.5 (Proposed Invasive Plant Management). Maintenance activities include periodic repairs and improvements to the non-motorized boat put-in, trails, parking lots and road within the Project Area, and also include monitoring activities. The study area for this section is the same as the Project Area.

3.13.1 Setting

Physical Context

The study area is located within the 2,600 acre (1,052 hectares) Eel River Wildlife Area, and includes 805 acres (326 hectares) of land managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) as fish and wildlife habitat, and for public recreational uses.

The study area is generally bound by the Pacific Ocean to the west, Table Bluff to the north, McNulty Slough to the east, and North Bay to the south. It is currently accessible from an existing gravel road leading south from Table Bluff Road as well as the sand road commencing at the south end of the Humboldt Bay south spit. The north end of the gravel access road terminates into Table Bluff Road, a two-lane paved road maintained by the County of Humboldt. A locked gate currently restricts access to the gravel access road.

Existing Recreational Features

The study area is utilized for a range of recreational activities including fishing, wildlife viewing, bird-watching, hiking, boating, and seasonal hunting. There are no established trails within the study area, however recreational users can utilize opportunistic paths on the levees. Although access to the site is available year-round, visitation tends to be seasonal and aligned with established hunting seasons. The study area supports hunting of waterfowl, coots, and snipe. CDFW estimates that the study area attracts approximately 10 hunters per day during the hunting season, five days a week. The duck hunting season begins the third weekend in October and extends through the third weekend in January. The hunting season for coots is concurrent with the waterfowl hunting season, the hunting season for snipe begins October 20th and ends February 3rd, and the pheasant hunting season begins November 10th and ends December 23rd. Visitation for other recreation uses provided within the study area is estimated at 10 visitors per day (C. Barolotta, pers. comm. 2018).

Other public recreation facilities or access points in vicinity of the study area include Cock Robin Island, Crab Park, Cannibal Island Mad River Slough Wildlife Area, Fay Slough Wildlife Area, and the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge)

(including the Salmon Creek, Hookton Slough, and Dunes Units). All of these recreational facilities allow recreational uses similar to the study area, including seasonal hunting. For purposes of comparison to visitation and recreation in other areas, the Refuge averages approximately 20,000 visitors per year for the entire complex, and approximately 12,825 visitors per year to the visitor center in Loleta alone.

3.13.2 Regulatory Framework

Federal

There are no federal regulations that apply to the proposed Project related to recreational resources.

State

California Coastal Act

The study area is within the Coastal Zone. The California Coastal Act contains numerous policies relevant to recreation, as summarized below:

Public Resources Code Section 30210

In carrying out the requirement of Section 4 of Article X of the California Constitution, maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse.

Public Resources Code Section 30211

Development shall not interfere with the public's right of access to the sea where acquired through use or legislative authorization, including, but not limited to, the use of dry sand and rocky coastal beaches to the first line of terrestrial vegetation.

Public Resources Code Section 30212

a) Public access from the nearest public roadway to the shoreline and along the coast shall be provided in new development projects except where (1) it is inconsistent with public safety, military security needs, or the protection of fragile coastal resources, (2) adequate access exists nearby, or (3) agriculture would be adversely affected. Dedicated accessways shall not be required to be opened to public use until a public agency or private association agrees to accept responsibility for maintenance and liability of the accessway.

Public Resources Code Section 30214

(a) The public access policies of this article shall be implemented in a manner that takes into account the need to regulate the time, place, and manner of public access depending on the facts and circumstances in each case including, but not limited to, the following: (1) Topographic and geologic site characteristics. (2) The capacity of the site to sustain use and at what level of intensity. (3) The appropriateness of limiting public access to the

right to pass and repass depending on such factors as the fragility of the natural resources in the area and the proximity of the access area to adjacent residential uses. (4) The need to provide for the management of access areas so as to protect the privacy of adjacent property owners and to protect the aesthetic values of the area by providing for the collection of litter.

- (b) It is the intent of the Legislature that the public access policies of this article be carried out in a reasonable manner that considers the equities and that balances the rights of the individual property owner with the public's constitutional right of access pursuant to Section 4 of Article X of the California Constitution. Nothing in this section or any amendment thereto shall be construed as a limitation on the rights guaranteed to the public under Section 4 of Article X of the California Constitution.*
- (c) In carrying out the public access policies of this article, the commission and any other responsible public agency shall consider and encourage the utilization of innovative access management techniques, including, but not limited to, agreements with private organizations which would minimize management costs and encourage the use of volunteer programs.*

Public Resources Code Section 30233

- (a) The diking, filling, or dredging of open coastal waters, wetlands, estuaries, and lakes shall be permitted in accordance with other applicable provisions of this division, where there is no less feasible less environmentally damaging alternative, and where feasible mitigation measures have been provided to minimize adverse environmental effects, and shall be limited to the following:*
 - (3) In open coastal waters, other than wetlands, including streams, estuaries, and lakes, new or expanded boating facilities and the placement of structural pilings for public recreational piers that provide public access and recreational opportunities.*
 - (6) Restoration purposes.*
 - (7) Nature study, aquaculture, or similar resource dependent activities.*
- (c) In addition to the other provisions of this section, diking, filling, or dredging in existing estuaries shall maintain or enhance the functional capacity of the wetland or estuary. Any alteration of coastal wetlands identified by the Department of Fish and Game, including, but not limited to, the 19 coastal wetlands identified in its report entitled, "Acquisition Priorities for the Coastal Wetlands of California", shall be limited to very minor incidental public facilities, restorative measures, nature study, commercial fishing facilities in Bodega Bay, and development in already developed parts of south San Diego Bay, if otherwise in accordance with this division.*

Public Resources Code Section 30240

- (a) Environmentally sensitive habitat areas shall be protected against any significant disruption of habitat values, and only uses dependent on those resources shall be allowed within those areas.*

(b) Development in areas adjacent to environmentally sensitive habitat areas and parks and recreation areas shall be compatible with the continuance of those habitat and recreation areas.

Local

Lands within the study area are owned by CDFW or are under the jurisdiction of the State Lands Commission, and therefore will not require a Conditional Use Permit from Humboldt County nor adherence to the Humboldt County General Plan or the Local Coastal Program Eel River Area Plan. Because potential impacts related to recreation would be limited to the study area, local and regional regulatory policies are not included in this analysis.

3.13.3 Evaluation Criteria and Significance Thresholds

Under criteria provided in Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, the Project would be considered to have a significant impact on recreational resources if it would result in any of the following:

- Increase the use of existing neighborhood and regional parks or other recreational facilities such that substantial physical deterioration of the facility would occur or be accelerated; or
- Include recreational facilities or require the construction or expansion of recreational facilities which might have an adverse physical effect on the environment.

The following sections describe the anticipated environmental impacts on recreational resources due to the Project.

3.13.4 Methodology

The impact analysis included in this section is based on documented usage patterns, interviews, and other information collected from the County of Humboldt and CDFW.

3.13.5 Impacts and Mitigation Measures

Impact REC-1: Would the Project increase the use of existing neighborhood and regional parks or other recreational facilities such that substantial physical deterioration of the facility would occur or be accelerated?

During construction of the Project, the existing recreational activities the site provides, such as fishing, hunting, bird watching, kayaking, boating, equestrian use, and hiking, would be temporarily unavailable to the public. The temporary closure of all or a portion of the study area would occur between the months of May and October over a two year period (likely 2021 and 2022) when the estuarine restoration component of the Project is implemented. Similarly, recreational access may be temporarily impacted (up to two weeks) in parts of the study area during invasive plant management activities, which would typically occur between August 1 and March 15. As discussed above, the duck hunting season begins the third

weekend in October and extends to the third weekend in January, with other hunting seasons ending as late as February. Although hunters may be displaced to another public facility open for hunting at the beginning of the season during the construction phase, it is not anticipated that other recreational facilities would be substantially deteriorated due to a slight increase in hunters for a short period of time (e.g., two weeks) over a limited number of construction seasons (two years). Under a worst case scenario, hunters would have to utilize another recreational facility for one full hunting season and a partial season the following year. However, as the season is confined to a few months a year and there are at least four other public facilities in the vicinity open to hunting, it is not likely that substantial physical deterioration of any hunting-related recreational facilities would occur during construction of the Project. Invasive plant management activities in hunted areas would be timed to avoid interfering with hunter access, and would have no impact on this recreational use.

Other recreational activities such as kayaking, bird watching, and hiking would also be temporarily displaced to adjacent parks or facilities during Project construction and/or invasive plant management activities. As noted above, this displacement is not anticipated to substantially deteriorate the other facilities due to the passive nature of the activities, the short-term nature of the anticipated use, and ability to disperse displaced uses to several proximate sites. A less than significant impact would occur during both the construction phase and during ongoing invasive plant management activities.

Once constructed, the study area would provide an improved parking area and access road, a formal non-motorized multi-use trail system, and a new non-motorized boat put-in, which would increase recreational opportunities in the study area and improve recreational facilities onsite. It is anticipated that the Project could result in up to 30 to 40 additional vehicles visiting the site per week compared to existing conditions, or four to six additional vehicles per day. This modest increase in use of the study area would be accommodated by the Project's improved parking area and multi-use trail system and the Project would not impact other recreational facilities in the vicinity.

By its nature, the Project would not directly or indirectly induce population growth. The Project does not create housing nor necessitate the development of housing. The Project would not result in the extension of utilities or roads or other infrastructure into outlying areas and would not directly or indirectly lead to the development of new sites that would induce population growth. Given the number of existing park and recreational options available in the Project vicinity and the fact that the Project would not induce population growth, the Project would not increase the use of parks such that substantial physical deterioration would occur. The impact would be less than significant.

Mitigation Measures: No mitigation is necessary.

Level of Significance: Less than significant.

Impact REC-2: Would the Project include recreational facilities or require the construction or expansion of recreational facilities which might have an adverse physical effect on the environment?

The Project includes proposed improvements to on-site recreational facilities, including an improved parking area and access road, a formal non-motorized multi-use trail system, and a new non-motorized boat put-in. The potential environmental impacts associated with installation of these elements are evaluated in the appropriate sections of this Draft EIR, including, but not limited to, Section 3.1 (Aesthetics), Section 3.3 (Air Quality), Section 3.4 (Biological Resources), and Section 3.9 (Hydrology and Water Quality).

Several of the proposed Project features would reduce the physical effect on the environment from visitors to the area. The existing parking area located at the north end of the access road would be gravelled to confine vehicular use within a prescribed area. The access road would be re-surfaced with asphalt concrete pavement, and the entryway would be monitored to ensure no visitors enter before sunrise and after sunset, limiting the hours of accessibility of the site. A path running parallel to the access road would be surfaced with gravel to direct foot traffic into the study area along a specific path. A new pervious concrete parking area would be established near the south end of the access road and would contain additional parking spaces, including an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)-accessible parking space and van pull out area. The proposed trails and associated bridge improvements would guide visitors through the area and protect sensitive habitats in the study area from unfettered access. The trails would also be ADA-accessible and would be constructed with pervious pavement. Additionally, the non-motorized boat put-in would provide a designated area to launch non-motorized boats, which would reduce deterioration, erosion, or other impacts to sensitive habitats, including wetlands, in the study area. The non-motorized boat put-in would also be ADA-accessible. For these reasons, the proposed recreational components of the Project would minimize adverse physical effects on the environment from on-going or increased recreational use.

The Project would not directly or indirectly induce population growth that would require the construction or expansion of recreational facilities beyond those included in the Project. As discussed in the Setting section, visitation to the study area and parks in the vicinity is fairly low. Visitation to areas distant from the Highway 101 corridor tends to be even lower. In light of the fact that a visit to the study area would require at least a half hour commitment of time by the average tourist, it is unlikely that visitation would increase measurably as a result of the Project.

Hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and general exploration serves as the primary draw to the study area. The study area would remain open to all of these uses after the Project is implemented. Hunters concerned about how potential Project-related changes in habitat types and bird use would impact hunting opportunities would also have access to other areas open to public hunting in the vicinity, including Cannibal Island, Mad River Slough Wildlife Area, Fay Slough Wildlife Area, and the Humboldt Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

Applicable state laws addressed above provide clear and consistent policy direction to provide, increase or enhance recreational and open space opportunities, with which the Project would be consistent.

The impact associated with provision of recreational facilities would be less than significant.

Mitigation Measures: No mitigation is necessary.

Level of Significance: Less than significant.

3.13.6 Cumulative Impacts

Impact REC-C-1: Would the Project contribute to a cumulatively significant impact to recreational resources?

As discussed in Impact REC-1 and REC-2, the Project would have a less-than-significant impact on the environment relative to increased use or expansion of recreational facilities. Similar to the Project, implementation of cumulative projects identified in Table 3-1 (Projects Considered for Cumulative Impacts), such as the Salt River Ecosystem Restoration Project and the Eel River Estuary Preserve and Centerville Slough Enhancement, include recreational components, and may result in additional recreational use and on-going maintenance in the Project vicinity. Similar to the Project, the cumulative projects are predominantly restoration based, would not induce population growth, would not increase the use of parks such that substantial physical deterioration would occur, or require the expansion of recreational facilities. Therefore, the cumulative impact would be less than significant.

Mitigation Measures: No mitigation is necessary.

Level of Significance: Less than significant.

3.13.7 References

Humboldt County. 1982. Eel River Area Plan of the Humboldt County Local Coastal Program.

Bartolotta, C. 2018. CDFW Wildlife Habitat Supervisor II Personal Communication between Cahill and Bartolotta, regarding recreational uses in the study area and vicinity. October 15.