3.2 Aesthetics

This section provides a description of the existing visual and aesthetic resources within the project area and relevant state and local plans and policies regarding the protection of scenic resources. Effects to the existing visual character of the project area as a result of project-related facilities are considered and mitigation is proposed based on the anticipated level of significance. The information provided in this section is summarized from the *Visual Impact Assessment for the Brawley Solar Project* (Appendix B of this EIR) prepared by Chambers Group, Inc.

3.2.1 Existing Conditions

Regional

Imperial County encompasses 4,597 square miles in the southeastern portion of California. The County is bordered by Riverside County on the north, the international border of Mexico on the south, San Diego County on the west and Arizona on the east. The length and breadth of the County provide for a variety of visual resources ranging from desert, sand hills, mountain ranges, and the Salton Sea.

The desert includes several distinct areas that add beauty and contrast to the natural landscape. The barren desert landscape of the Yuha Desert, lower Borrego Valley, East Mesa, and Pilot Knob Mesa provide a dramatic contrast against the backdrop of the surrounding mountain ranges. The West Mesa area is a scenic desert bordered on the east by the Imperial Sand Dunes, the lower Borrego Valley, the East Mesa, and Pilot Knob Mesa.

The eastern foothills of the Peninsular Range are located on the west side of the County. The Chocolate Mountains, named to reflect their dark color, are located in the northeastern portion of the County, extending from the southeast to the northwest between Riverside County and the Colorado River. These mountains reach an elevation of 2,700 feet making them highly visible throughout the County.

Project Site and Vicinity

The project is located on five privately owned parcels designated for agricultural uses. Currently the project site contains alfalfa fields within different levels of harvest. The project site is approximately one mile north from the City of Brawley's jurisdictional limit. Brawley is relatively central within the agricultural portion of the Imperial Valley, which extends from the southeastern portion of the Salton Sea to the United States and Mexico border. The Salton Sea lies northwest of the project site and sits comparatively lower in the landscape than the project site, as does much of the agricultural land to the immediate west and south.

Because of this gradual downward slope from east to west, areas to the north and east of the project site would be more likely to have views of the project where not impeded by natural or built features. Viewers in this area are associated with residences and land uses. North of the project site is agricultural land. Along the eastern edge of the project site there are two residences and agricultural land. South of the project site is a mixture of agricultural land and dirt lots used for staging activities. The City of Brawley Wastewater Treatment Plant is located along the western edge of the project site.

Views in this area are expansive and are generally characterized by sparse development framed by topographical features. Low-profile, weedy plants, such as Quail Brush Scrub and Bush Seepweed, are widespread on undeveloped and unfarmed lands, and ruderal vegetation is along waterways

associated with IID canals. Individual residences, transmission lines, transportation corridors (including roads and railroads), and agricultural equipment are discernable in the foreground (within 0.25 mile) and middle ground (0.25 to 3-5 miles away) views throughout the area. They are identifiable by their vapor plumes. These views to the west from the project site are backdropped by the Coyote Mountains and Fish Creek Mountains while views to the east are backdropped by the Chocolate Mountains.

Visual Character

Aerial imagery was reviewed to identify where the proposed project would potentially be visible from visually sensitive areas and selected preliminary viewpoints for site photography. Field surveys were conducted in March 2021 to photo-document existing visual conditions and views toward the project site. A representative subset of photographed viewpoints was selected. Assessments of existing visual conditions were made based on professional judgment that took into consideration sensitive receptors and sensitive viewing areas in the project area.

Figure 3.2-1 illustrates the photo documented key observation points (KOP) and the direction to which the photographs were taken. The photographs depicting the existing condition at the project site are presented below, and the visual simulations at each KOP depicting the proposed condition are presented in Section 3.2.3. Descriptions of the existing KOPs are as follows:

KOP 1 – View from North Best Avenue. KOP 1 is located along N Best Avenue, at the northeast corner of the project site (Figure 3.2-2). The view from KOP 1 is to the southwest, toward the proposed project's solar arrays (Viewpoint 1). This viewpoint represents views from an identifiable point along the most proximate roadway, where topography allows visibility of the project site. Additionally, the viewpoint represents the residents located at 5210 N Best Avenue in Brawley, California. The view is characterized by flat agricultural land to the west, south, and east with the nearby residence to the northeast. The Coyote Mountains and Fish Creek Mountains are visible far off to the south. The view of the project site is mostly unobstructed except for utility poles traveling along the western side of N Best Avenue.

KOP 2 – View from North Best Avenue and Ward Road. KOP 2 is located at the intersection of N Best Avenue and Ward Road, at the southeast corner of the project site (Figure 3.2-3). The view from KOP 2 is to the northwest, toward the proposed project's solar arrays, BESS, and substation (Viewpoint 2). This viewpoint represents views from an identifiable point along the most proximate roadway, where topography allows visibility of the project site. Additionally, the viewpoint represents the residents located at 5000 N Best Avenue and 5002 N Best Avenue. The view is characterized by flat agricultural land to the north; an abandoned residence and fenced corral to the west; a vacant dirt lot to the south; and the nearby residences to the northeast. Vegetation along the New River is visible to the west and the Chocolate Mountains are visible far off to the north and west. The view of the project site is partially obstructed by vegetation along the old corral and utility poles traveling along the western side of N Best Road.

KOP 3 – View from north end of Del Rio Country Club and Golf Course. KOP 3 is located along the Union Pacific railroad tracks on the northwest end of Del Rio Country Club and Golf Course, approximately 0.25 mile from the project site (Figure 3.2-4). The view from KOP 3 is to the north, toward the proposed project's solar arrays, BESS, substation, and gen-tie line. This viewpoint represents golfers and staff at Del Rio Country Club, where topography allows views of the project site, as well as views from the Union Pacific railway line. The view is characterized by flat, undeveloped land with sparse vegetation to the north and northeast, agricultural land to the east, and the

landscaped golf course to the west. The railroad tracks travel north through the middle of the view, with the Chocolate Mountain Range visible far off to the north. The view of the project site is unobstructed.

KOP 4 – View from State Route 111 and Andre Road. KOP 4 is located at the corner of SR 111 and Andre Road, along the gen-tie line route (Figure 3.2-5). The view from KOP 4 is to the east, toward the proposed project's gen-tie line, BESS, substation, and solar arrays. This viewpoint represents views from an identifiable point along a well-traveled roadway in the County, where topography allows visibility of the project site. The view is characterized by mainly flat agricultural land to the north and south. The City of Brawley Wastewater Treatment Plant is within the northern portion of the view and a dirt access road leads to an industrial dirt lot with pipelines directly east of the view. The Chocolate Mountain Range is visible far off to the east. The view of the project site is partially obstructed by the City of Brawley Wastewater Treatment Plant, utility poles, and small amounts of vegetation in the foreground.

Figure 3.2-1. Key Observation Points

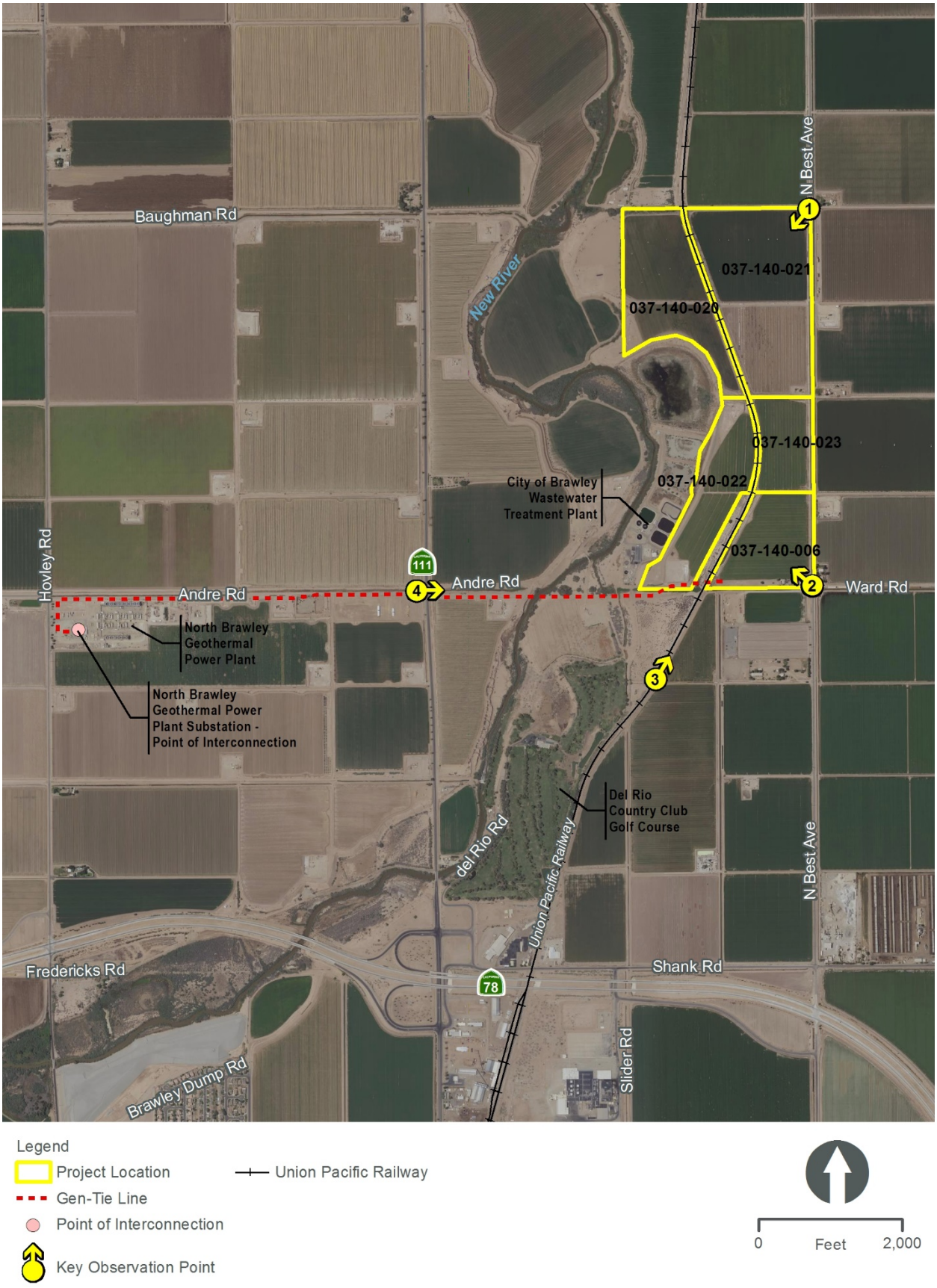

Figure 3.2-2. Existing Key Observation Point 1

Figure 3.2-4. Existing Key Observation Point 3

Scenic Vista

Scenic vistas are typically expansive views from elevated areas. They may or may not be part of a designated scenic overlook or other area providing a static vista view of a landscape. The project site is located in a rural portion of Imperial County and is not located within an area containing a scenic vista designated by the State or the County's General Plan.

Scenic Highways

According to the Conservation and Open Space Element, no State scenic highways have been designated in Imperial County (County of Imperial 2016). The project site is not located within a state scenic highway corridor, nor are there any state scenic highways located in proximity to the project site. The nearest road segment considered eligible for a State scenic highway designation is the portion of SR 111 from Bombay Beach to the County line. The project site is located approximately 25 miles south of Bombay Beach; therefore, it would not be visible from the location of the proposed projects.

Light, Glare, and Glint

Glare is considered a continuous source of brightness, relative to diffused light, whereas glint is a direct redirection of the sun beam in the surface of a PV solar module. Glint is highly directional, since its origin is purely reflective, whereas glare is the reflection of diffuse irradiance; it is not a direct reflection of the sun.

Because of the nature of the existing agricultural land uses and few residences, limited light is generated from within the project area. The majority of the light and glare in the project area is a result of motor vehicles traveling on surrounding roadways, airplanes, and farm equipment. Local roadways generate glare both during the night hours when cars travel with lights on, and during daytime hours because of the sun's reflection from cars and pavement surfaces. When light is not sufficiently screened and spills over into areas outside of a particular development area the effect is called "light trespassing."

3.2.2 Regulatory Setting

This section identifies and summarizes state and local laws, policies, and regulations that are applicable to the project.

State

California Department of Transportation

Caltrans manages the California Scenic Highway Program. The goal of the program is to preserve and protect scenic highway corridors from changes that would affect the aesthetic value of the land adjacent to the scenic corridor.

Local

Imperial County General Plan

The Imperial County General Plan contains policies for the protection and conservation of scenic resources and open spaces within the County. These policies also provide guidance for the design of

new development. The Conservation and Open Space Element of the General Plan provides specific goals and objectives for maintaining and protecting the aesthetic character of the region. Table 3.2-1 provides an analysis of the proposed project's consistency with the Conservation and Open Space Element Goal 5. Additionally, the Circulation and Scenic Highways Element of the General Plan provides policies for protecting and enhancing scenic resources within highway corridors in Imperial County, consistent with the Caltrans State Scenic Highway Program.

Table 3.2-1. Consistency with Applicable General Plan Conservation and Open Space Policies

General Plan Policies	Consistency with General Plan	Analysis
Goal 5: The aesthetic character of the region shall be protected and enhanced to provide a pleasing environment for residential, commercial, recreational, and tourist activity.	Consistent	The project would result in changes to the visual character of the project area, which is currently characterized as an agricultural landscape. As described in Section 3.2.1, the project site does not contain high levels of visual character or quality; therefore, the project would not result in a significant deterioration in the visual character of the project site or project area.
Objective 5.1: Encourage the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty of the desert and mountain landscape.	Consistent	The project site is located within an agricultural portion of the County and generally avoids both desert and mountain landscapes.

Source: County of Imperial 2016

County of Imperial Land Use Ordinance, Title 9

The County's Land Use Ordinance Code provides specific direction for lighting requirements.

Division 17: Renewable Energy Resources, Section 91702.00 – Specific Standards for All Renewable Energy Projects

(R) Lights should be directed or shielded to confine direct rays to the project site and muted to the maximum extent consistent with safety and operational necessity.

3.2.3 Impacts and Mitigation Measures

This section presents the significance criteria used for considering project impacts related to aesthetic and visual resources, the methodology employed for the evaluation, an impact evaluation, and mitigation requirements, if necessary.

Thresholds of Significance

Based on CEQA Guidelines Appendix G, project impacts related to aesthetics are considered significant if any of the following occur:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista
- Substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway
- In non-urbanized areas, substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of public views of the site and its surroundings? (Public views are those that are experienced from

publicly accessible vantage points). If the project is in an urbanized area, would the project conflict with applicable zoning and other regulations governing scenic quality

- Create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area

Methodology

This visual impact analysis is based on field observations conducted in March 2021, as well as a review of maps and aerial photographs for the project area. A representative subset of photographed viewpoints was selected as KOPs, which collectively serve as the basis for this assessment. This selection was done in coordination with ORNI and the County. Assessments of existing visual conditions were made based on professional judgment that took into consideration sensitive receptors and sensitive viewing areas in the project area. The locations of the four KOPs in relation to the project site are presented in Figure 3.2-1 above.

The site photos were used to generate a rendering of the existing conditions and a proposed visualization of the implemented project. The visual simulations, as provided below, provide clear before-and-after images of the location, scale, and visual appearance of the features affected by and associated with the project. Design data — consisting of engineering drawings, elevations, site and topographical contour plans, concept diagrams, and reference pictures — were used as a platform from which digital models were created. In cases where detailed design data were unavailable, more general descriptions about alternative facilities and their locations were used to prepare the digital models.

Impact Analysis

Impact 3.2-1 Would the project have a substantial adverse effect on a scenic vista?

Scenic vistas are typically expansive views from elevated areas that may or may not be part of a designated scenic overlook or other area providing a static view of a landscape. During construction, the use of standard construction equipment including, but not limited to, trucks, cranes, and tractors would be required. The presence of this equipment within the project site during construction would alter views of the area from undeveloped and agricultural land to a construction site. However, the views of construction activity from the surrounding vicinity would be temporary and would not involve any designated scenic vistas as there are no designated scenic vistas in the project vicinity. According to the Imperial County General Plan, the closest scenic resource is the Salton Sea approximately 11 miles northwest of the project site (County of Imperial 2016).

Views from elevated areas near the project site could be considered scenic vistas given the expansiveness of the views and distance one can see under favorable conditions. However, as described further below for the view of the project from all KOPs, the project would not have a substantial adverse effect on such views. Rather, it would be absorbed into the natural and built features that comprise the existing landscape and would not substantially obstruct existing views. Therefore, less than significant impacts to scenic vistas would occur.

Mitigation Measure(s)

No mitigation measures are required.

Impact 3.2-2 Would the project substantially damage scenic resources, including, but not limited to, trees, rock outcroppings, and historic buildings within a state scenic highway?

There are no designated or eligible state scenic highways in the project vicinity. The nearest road segment among those identified by Imperial County as "having potential as state-designated scenic highways" is the portion of SR 111 from Bombay Beach to the Imperial County/Riverside County boundary. The project site is approximately 25 miles south of Bombay Beach. Therefore, no impacts to scenic resources within any state scenic highways would occur.

Mitigation Measure(s)

No mitigation measures are required.

Impact 3.2-3 In non-urbanized areas, would the project substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of public views of the site and its surroundings? (Public views are those that are experienced from publicly accessible vantage points). If the project is in an urbanized area, would the project conflict with applicable zoning and other regulations governing scenic quality?

The existing visual character in views of the project (Figure 3.2-2 through Figure 3.2-5) would not be substantially altered based primarily on the proximity of viewpoints to the project site. Short-term visual impacts would occur in association with construction activities, including introducing heavy equipment (e.g., cranes), staging and materials storage areas and potential dust and exhaust to the project area. While construction equipment and activity may present a visual nuisance, it would be temporary (approximately 6-9 months) and would not represent a permanent change in views. Therefore, impacts associated with degrading the existing visual character or quality of the project site during construction are considered less than significant. The potential impacts on these KVs are discussed below.

KOP 1 – View from North Best Avenue. Viewpoint 1 shows the view from KOP 1 with the proposed project simulated (Figure 3.2-6). The solar arrays and the security fencing would be the most prominently visible portion of the project from this location. As conceptually shown in the simulation, the project would appear as a comparatively dark, horizontal bar across the majority of the view. The overall effect shown in Viewpoint 1 is the relatively small degree of contrast the project would have with its broader surroundings, which includes views of the Coyote Mountains and Fish Creek Mountains. Solar arrays would not substantially obscure the mountain skyline from this vantage point.

KOP 2 – View from North Best Avenue and Ward Road. Viewpoint 2 shows the view from KOP 2 with the proposed project simulated (Figure 3.2-7). The solar arrays and the security fencing would be the most prominently visible portion of the project from this location. With demolition of the abandoned residence and corral, the project's BESS and substation would also be visible from KOP 2 to the west. As conceptually shown in the simulation, the project would appear as a generally uniform dark line across the view. The overall effect shown in Viewpoint 2 is the relatively small degree of contrast the project would have with its broader surroundings, which include views of the Chocolate Mountains. The BESS, substation, and solar arrays would not substantially obscure the mountain skyline from this vantage point.

KOP 3 – View from north end of Del Rio Country Club and Golf Course. KOP 3 shows the view from KOP 3 with the proposed project simulated (Figure 3.2-8). The gen-tie structures would be the most

prominently visible portion of the project from this location. As conceptually shown in the simulation, the gen-tie structures would be visible in the center of the view, traveling from east to west approximately 1.75 miles. While appearing as new and highly visible features, the transmission structures would relate to the numerous lines visible throughout the landscape. They would also occupy a relatively narrow portion of the view to the north from KOP 3.

The substation for the proposed project has not yet been designed. However, the facility shown in KOP 3 is an approximation based on representative examples of substations of similar size and in similar environments. As simulated, the substation would be partially visible in views from KOP 3, alongside the solar arrays, which would appear as a comparatively dark, horizontal bar across a portion of the view's middle ground. Aside from the relatively narrow gen-tie structures, no project component would substantially obscure or appear above the mountain skyline from this vantage point.

KOP 4 – View from State Route 111 and Andre Road. Viewpoint 4 shows the view from KOP 4 with the proposed project simulated (Figure 3.2-9). The gen-tie structures would be the most prominently visible portion of the project from this location. As conceptually shown in the simulation, the gen-tie structures would be visible in the southern portion of the view, traveling from east to west approximately 0.5 mile. While appearing as new and highly visible features, the transmission structures would relate to the numerous lines visible throughout the landscape. They would also occupy a relatively narrow portion of the view to the south from KOP 4.

As simulated, views of the substation and BESS would be visible in the distance from KOP 4. These structures would relate to the nearby industrial features in the landscape, including the nearby pipelines. The solar arrays would appear as a comparatively dark, horizontal bar across the remainder of the view. No project component would substantially obscure or appear above the mountain skyline from this vantage point.

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Figure 3.2-6. Proposed Key Observation Point 1

Figure 3.2-7. Proposed Key Observation Point 2

Figure 3.2-8. Proposed Key Observation Point 3

Figure 3.2-9. Proposed Key Observation Point 4

Conclusion

The views from KOPs 1 and 2 show the project's solar arrays and the security fencing most prominently, which would appear as a comparatively dark, horizontal bar across the view. The overall effect of the project from these KOPs is relatively small degree of contrast the project would have with its broader surroundings and a small interruption of views of the surrounding mountains.

In the view from KOPs 3 and 4, new transmission structures that would be part of the project's interconnection would appear large in scale; however, the structures would be comparable in size and appearance to other structures visible throughout the surrounding landscape, including multiple existing transmission lines. As previously described, the project would not substantially degrade the existing visual character or quality of views from this distance; rather it would appear absorbed into the broader landscape that already includes agricultural development, electricity transmission, geothermal power plants, and the City of Brawley Wastewater Treatment Plant. These effects would be less than significant.

Mitigation Measure(s)

No mitigation measures are required.

Impact 3.2-4 Would the project create a new source of substantial light or glare which would adversely affect day or nighttime views in the area?

The project would not include any source of nighttime lighting and therefore would not be a source of substantial light in the area outside of the project site. If constructed, lighting would be provided on the microwave tower. A glare hazard analysis was also prepared for the project (Appendix B of this EIR). It concluded that sensitive viewers near the project, including residences, a nearby golf course, major roadways, and approach slopes associated with the Brawley Municipal Airport, would not experience glare effects from the project. These effects would be less than significant.

Mitigation Measure(s)

No mitigation measures are required.

3.2.4 Decommissioning/Restoration and Residual Impacts

Decommissioning/Restoration

If at the end of the PPA term, no contract extension is available for a power purchaser, no other buyer of the energy emerges, or there is no further funding of the proposed project, the proposed project will be decommissioned and dismantled. No grading or significant landform modifications would be required during decommissioning activities upon site restoration in the future. Although the project site would be visually disrupted in the short-term during decommissioning activities, because extensive grading is not required and these activities would be temporary, the visual character of the project site would not be substantially degraded in the short-term and related impacts would be less than significant.

Residual

Impacts related to glare and glint impacts to roadway travelers, nearby residences, or flights would be less than significant and no additional mitigation measures are required. Changes to visual character of the project area would be less than significant and would be transitioned back to their prior (pre-solar project) conditions following site decommissioning. Based on these conclusions, implementation of the proposed project would not result in residual significant unmitigable impacts to the visual character of the project site or add substantial amounts of light and glare.