



EMC PLANNING GROUP INC.
A LAND USE PLANNING & DESIGN FIRM

Visual Resources Analysis

County of Mendocino Planning Commission | May 7, 2026



Purpose



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- **Baseline understanding of visual resources within the County**
- **Analysis to evaluate current policy effectiveness**
- **Recommend revisions to existing policies to better protect visual resources**

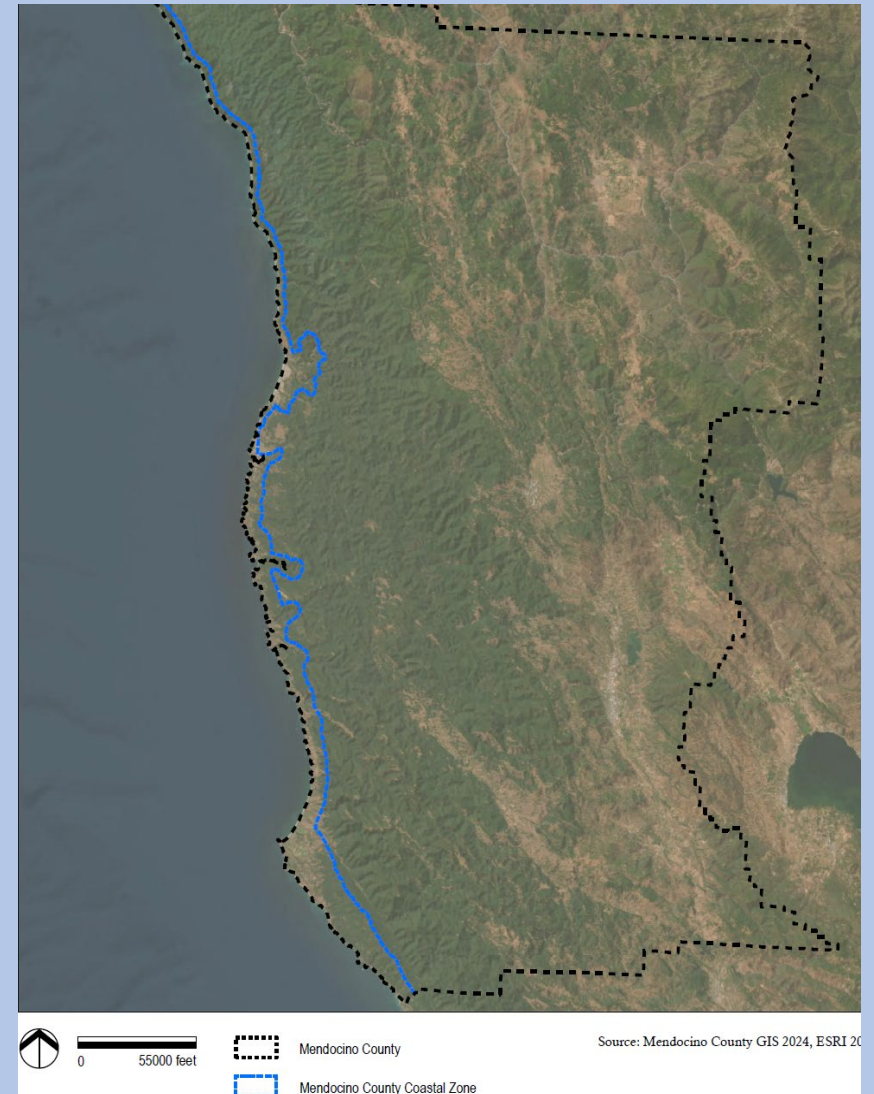


California Coastal Act



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- The entire Mendocino County coast is within the Coastal Zone.
- The coastal zone is .75 of a mile to 4 miles inland within the County
- These areas are governed by land use policies and regulations within the California Coastal Act
- Mendocino County's Local Coastal Program was adopted in 1991 allowing the County to impose regulations and policies within their coastal zone boundary.



Coastal Viewshed



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- Mendocino County has 131 miles of coastline.
- Expansive views of the Pacific Ocean framed by rugged and dramatic coastal mountains, rocky promontories, sea stacks, coastal bluffs, redwood forests, elfin forests, lagoons, river mouths, and sand dunes.
- Important to maintain the visual resources for the visitor-serving economy and quality of life for residents.



- Mendocino County’s LCP does not currently include a specific definition or list of criteria for what qualifies an area as Highly Scenic. The California Coastal Commission’s 2013 Local Coastal Program Update Guide provides the following guidance on what scenic resources should be considered “Highly Scenic”:
 - Rocky promontories and headlands;
 - Rocky shorelines;
 - Sandy beaches;
 - Coastal bluffs;
 - Coastal lagoons and marshlands;
 - Rural farmlands and pasturelands;
 - Open or forested slopes, hillsides, ridgelines and mountain tops;
 - Harbors, marinas and waterfront areas; and
 - Cultural features set in scenic areas and other historic or natural points of interest visible from public viewing areas or scenic corridors may also be considered scenic resources.

The guidance recommends LCP updates include policies which address protection of scenic views; signs and billboard regulations; lighting restrictions; Design Review process considerations; grading regulations; measures to permanently protect significant views; and highway and roadway corridor design standards (i.e., bridge rails; landscaping standards).

HIGHLY SCENIC AREAS – Coastal LUP



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- **Chapter 3.5 of the County’s Coastal Land Use Plan:**
Mendocino County’s Land Use Plan (LUP) states that Highly Scenic Area’s include:
 - Areas identified on the Land Use Maps as they are adopted;
 - Other scenic areas and historical districts as designated by the county; and
 - Landscape preservation projects designated by the State Department of Parks and Recreation in the California Coastline Preservation and Recreation Plan of 1971 as amended.
- **Based upon the language contained on the Land Use Maps, County staff created a GIS layer that designates Highly Scenic Areas and Conditionally Highly Scenic Areas. Conditionally Highly Scenic Areas refer to areas that are noted on the Land Use Maps as only be subject to Highly Scenic Area policies if visible from a certain vantage point (typically State Route 1).**
- **The existing LUP does not have a term for “Conditionally Highly Scenic Areas” and are subject to field inspection per project.**

Recommendation: Define the Conditionally Highly Scenic Area in the LCP. Include clear Highly Scenic Area and Conditionally Highly Scenic Area maps in the LCP and as layers on the County’s GIS webpage. Include a general scenic protection policy that applies to the entire coastal zone.

HIGHLY SCENIC AREAS Coastal Implementation Plan



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Development within Highly Scenic Areas is subject to the following regulations, as set forth in Chapter 20.504.015 (B) of the Implementation Plan:

- **The Coastal Permit Administrator reviews all incoming Coastal Development projects to determine if the project is within an HSA**
- **If there is a disagreement if the project is within an HSA, such disagreements shall be investigated by an on-site inspection by the landowner and/or agents, county staff member and representatives from the Coastal Commission.**
- **After the site inspection, if all members/representatives agree the HSA boundaries for the project should be adjusted, such development shall be approved only upon specific findings listed in the Implementation Plan that the scenic resource as identified will not be significantly degraded by the proposed development.**

SPECIAL COMMUNITIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS



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Special Communities and Neighborhoods:

Development within special communities and neighborhoods is subject to Chapter 3.5 of the Land Use Plan and Chapter 20.504 of the Implementation Plan.

- **The Town of Mendocino is the only recognized special community in the Coastal Element. Division III of Title 20 provides specific criteria for new development in Mendocino.**
- **The communities and service centers, designated as CRV or CFV1, of Westport, Caspar, Albion, Elk and Manchester, and the additional areas of Little River, Anchor Bay and Gualala, has special protection as set forth in Section 20.504.020(C) of the LUP.**

(C) Development Criteria.

- (1) The scale of new development (building height and bulk) shall be within the scope and character of existing development in the surrounding neighborhood.**
- (2) New development shall be sited such that public coastal views are protected.**
- (3) The location and scale of a proposed structure will not have an adverse effect on nearby historic structures greater than an alternative design providing the same floor area...**
- (4) Building materials and exterior colors shall be compatible with those of existing structures.**

SPECIAL TREATMENT AREAS



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- **Special Treatment Areas are defined by the Coastal Act as an identifiable and geographically bounded forested area within the coastal zone that constitutes a significant habitat area, area of special scenic significance, and any land where logging activities could adversely affect public recreation area or the biological productivity of any wetland, estuary, or stream especially valuable because of its role in a coastal ecosystem. Development within a Special Treatment Area is subject to Chapter 3.5 of the Land Use Plan and Chapter 20.504 of the Implementation Plan.**
- **Special Treatment Area buffer zones were also located adjacent to all publicly owned preserves and recreation areas, including national, state, regional, county and municipal parks. These buffer zones include those forested areas within the coastal zone within two hundred (200) feet of all such publicly owned preserves and recreation areas.**
- **It is the intent of timber harvesting regulations within the Special Treatment Areas to minimize the visual effect of timber harvesting in order to protect the area's special scenic and natural qualities.**

- **Highly Scenic Area and Conditionally Highly Scenic Area Boundary:**

Based on a full review, it has been determined that the existing Highly Scenic Area and Conditionally Highly Scenic Area designations are appropriately protecting significant visual resources. However, it is recommended that adding the northern bank of the Big River estuary within Mendocino Headlands State Park into the Conditionally HSA mapped area.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



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The following policy recommendations are included to streamline permit processing, protect and enhance scenic viewsheds, encourage non-native vegetation removal, and encourage and streamline bridge and road repairs.

- Clarify the definition of Conditionally Highly Scenic Area and the process for determining if Highly Scenic policies apply to proposed development in Conditionally Highly Scenic Areas;
- Include a general scenic protection policy that applies to the entire coastal zone;
- Encourage siting low-impact recreation, such as public trails, in Highly Scenic Areas;
- Expand definition of viewshed to include areas visible from vista points, beaches, and public trails west of State Route 1;
- Amend existing Policy 3.5-6, as it creates ambiguity by making the Highly Scenic Area designation subjective, leading to uncertainty for Applicants and difficulty for County staff to administer regulations;
- Consider amending vegetation removal policies in Highly Scenic Areas to open up viewshed;

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS, Cont'd



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- *Continued....*
- **Allow removal of non-native vegetation without CDP**
- **Recommend Biological Resources consultant reviews definition of Major Vegetation**
- **Include design standards for Vista Points;**
- **Include policy that identifies when story poles or visual simulations/renderings are required and allow visual simulations/renderings in-lieu of story pole placement;**
- **Include policy to recognize visual qualities of California Coastal National Monument;**
- **Include policies which support Caltrans road-widening and bridge repair and replacement projects; Identify accepted guardrails and colors**
- **Develop policy which specifically applies to Special Treatment Areas; and**
- **It is recommended that 'CRV' and 'CFV' are corrected to 'RV' (Rural Village) and 'FV' (Fishing Village), respectively.**

MAPPING RECOMMENDATIONS



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- **Mapping Recommendations**

It is recommended that the following figures are included in the LUP:

- **Highly Scenic Area and Conditionally Highly Scenic Area Map;**
- **Vista Points Map;**
- **Special Treatment Areas Map; and**
- **A Map showing the areas subject to special protections as described in IP Chapter 20.504.020 (B) - Special Communities and Neighborhoods.**

The Visual Resources Analysis for the County of Mendocino conclusions:

- **Protecting visual resources supports tourism and quality of life and maintains Mendocino's coastal character**
- **Improvements to policies to streamline permit processing, protect and enhance scenic viewsheds, encourage non-native vegetation removal, and encourage and streamline bridge and road repairs are recommended.**
- **Providing maps of HSA's and other visual resource areas will remove ambiguity.**

VIEWSHEDS – only if needed



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Policy Recommendations:

- Recommend that public access policies are updated to encourage low impact public access within Highly Scenic Areas.
- Expand the definition of viewshed to include areas visible from vista points, beaches, and public trails west of State Route 1. Include policies that protect and enhance viewsheds as a recreational resource.
- Expand the Conditionally Highly Scenic Area to include the northern bank of the Big River estuary within Mendocino Headlands State Park
- Consider amending vegetation removal policies in Highly Scenic Areas to open up the viewshed. Allow removal of non-native vegetation without a Coastal Development Permit. It is recommended that the Biological Resource consultant reviews the definition of Major Vegetation.
- Include policy to ensure vista points are unobtrusive and subordinate to scenic views. Include design standards for vista points. Include policy recognizing that vista points are within the Cal Trans right-of-way. Encourage Cal Trans to develop design standards for State Route 1 right-of-way improvements.
- Include policy to recognize visual qualities of California Coastal National Monument. Update LUP to list and protect visual qualities of significant natural landforms.
- Include policies which support Caltrans road-widening and bridge repair and replacement projects and list pre-approved guardrails and colors to provide “flickering views” and protect scenic qualities of Highly Scenic Areas.

VIEWSHEDS – Only if needed



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‘Viewsheds’ are defined by Mendocino County’s Land Use Plan as the boundaries of the area visible from State Route 1. It is recommended that the definition of viewshed is expanded to include areas visible from vista points, beaches, and public trails west of State Route 1, as well.

California Coastal Commission guidance identifies the following types of viewsheds as having exceptional scenic resource value, and these types of viewsheds are the basis for the Highly Scenic designation.

- **Scenic View Corridors**
- **Rocky Shorelines**
- **Coastal Lagoons and Estuaries**
- **Rural Farmland and Pastureland**
- **Vista Points**
- **Natural Significant Land Forms**
- **Significant Structures**