

E N T R I X

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**SPECIAL-STATUS SPECIES INVENTORY AND
VISUAL RESOURCES ASSESSMENT
RINCON ONSHORE FACILITY**

Prepared for:
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Torch Operating Company proposes to install a new overhead transmission line at their Rincon Onshore Facility (ROSF). The proposed new transmission line would serve to supply power from the portion of their facilities that are located atop of a 600 foot bluff (the upper ROSF) to their facilities which are located below the bluff (the lower ROSF). This report evaluates the potential impacts to biological and visual resources that could occur as a result of the project. The evaluation of the biological resources is described first, followed by an evaluation of the visual resources.

2.0 BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Special-status terrestrial plant and animal species in the vicinity of the ROSF are identified in this report. A brief description of the project area, surrounding habitats, and associated special-status species are presented, followed by detailed descriptions of the special-status species and their occurrences in relation to the project area. Finally, potential impacts of construction and operation of the lines are described, along with recommended mitigation measures.

2.1 Definition of Special-Status Species

The federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) provides both for the conservation of species which face endangerment or extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range and for the conservation of the ecosystems on which they depend. "Species" is defined by the ESA to mean a species, a subspecies, or, for vertebrates only, a distinct population.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is the agency responsible for protecting species listed as threatened or endangered under the federal ESA. USFWS has jurisdiction over terrestrial and freshwater species. The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) is similarly responsible for all species listed under the California ESA.

Special-status animals include the following:

- federal threatened or endangered and candidate species (federal ESA),
 - California threatened or endangered species (California ESA),
 - California fully protected species (Section 3511 of the California Fish and Game Code), and
- California species of special concern (DFG's Special Animals List).

Special-status plants include the following:

federal threatened or endangered and candidate species (federal ESA),

- California threatened or endangered species (California ESA),
- California rare species (California Native Plant Protection Act), and
- species on Lists 1, 2, 3, or 4 of the California Native Plant Society (CNPS).

2.2 Methods

Information used in this assessment was collected from the California Department of Fish and Game's (DFG's) Natural Diversity Data Base (NDDB) and the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) Electronic Inventory. This assessment focused on those plant and animal species known to occur at or adjacent to the project area and those species with a high probability to occur within the project area. The species descriptions in this report include their conservation status and vicinity in relation to the project area. Fieldwork was conducted on June 7, 2000 to ascertain the presence of the listed species, and to determine the predominant habitat types.

2.3 Project Area Habitat Description

Proposed is the installation of new overhead transmission lines for delivery of power from the upper ROSF to the lower ROSF. The project area is a 195-acre parcel in coastal Ventura County, California, which lies east of Highway 101 and just north of the Seacliff off-ramp from Highway 101. The majority of the facilities are located at the upper ROSF, at an approximate elevation of 600 feet on the coastal bluff. The remainder of the facilities are located between the foot of the bluff and the railroad tracks at the lower ROSF. The native vegetative community within the project site is coastal sage scrub, dominated by coyote brush, and several species of sage. There are numerous landslides and slide escarpments, and the vegetative community in these areas has a high proportion of non-native species such as exotic grasses.

2.3.1 Facility Biological Communities

The proposed right-of-way for the transmission lines consists of three segments (Figure 1). Segment 1 runs from an existing transformer at the upper ROSF to the edge of the bluff. Segment 2 runs down a gully in the bluff. Segment 3 runs from the foot of the bluff to the transformer at the lower ROSF. The biota along each of the segments is described in the following paragraphs.

E N T R I X

Segment 1 of the proposed transmission corridor begins at an existing pole near the upper ROSF electrical substation and proceeds 500 feet southwest through disturbed habitat along a 15 foot wide dirt access path to a point at the edge of the bluff. Adjacent to the dirt path, some native vegetation grows alongside scattered exotic species. Large eucalyptus and ornamental trees growing along this upper segment provide partial canopy cover. Two additional poles are proposed for placement along this stretch.

Segment 2 of the pole line then follows the corridor of an existing buried pipeline 1400 feet down a gully to a road at the base of the bluff. Bluff vegetation is dominated by shrubs, primarily black sage (*Salvia mellifera*), coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*), California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), and exotic grasses. The steep south-southeast facing slope is exemplary of the coastal sage scrub community in this part of California. Although assessment of the gully did not indicate presence of water dependant vegetation, water may be carried by the gully in periods of high rainfall. A single new 50 foot three pole set will be installed approximately halfway down the bluff. The holes will be dug using a gas-powered hand auger and the pole is planned for placement in the ravine by helicopter. This approach to installation of the poles will serve to minimize impacts such as erosion and trampling of vegetation, which may otherwise be caused by cutting access routes to allow the use of heavy equipment.

Segment 3 of the alignment runs from the base of the bluff along the west side of an oilfield access road for 1,100 feet where it joins with an existing pole at the lower ROSF transformer. Vegetation along this lower segment is similar to and contiguous with that of the bluff vegetation. In Segment 3, several species of sage dominate the plant community and vegetation comes to within several feet of the edge of the road pavement. A stand of exotic palm and eucalyptus trees exists between 20 and 50 feet west of the road, behind the lower ROSF office. No other habitat exists near the terminus of the project alignment at the transformer.

California Sagebrush Series Sage scrub habitat occurs throughout the project site at the upper area, on the bluffs, and at the lower area. Dominant vegetation is black sage (*Salvia mellifera*) but coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*), California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), purple sage (*Salvia leucophylla*), and white sage (*Salvia apiana*) also occur throughout the site. This plant community occurs on south-facing, steep slopes with shallow soils.

2.3.2 Project Area Special-Status Species Listed by the NDDB

Special-Status Plants. The following four special-status plants have been observed in the coastal habitats described near the facility and are listed in the NDDB:

Southern tarplant (*Hemazonia parrayi* spp *australis*)

Southern tarplant is an annual herb which occurs on the CNPS List 1B and is a federal candidate for listing. This plant occurs in estuary margins, seasonally moist grasslands, and vernal pools. Its blooming season is June through November. Habitat for the southern tarplant does not occur within the project corridor.

Ventura marsh milk-vetch (*Astragalus pycnostachyus* var *lanosissimus*)

Ventura marsh milk-vetch is a perennial herb which occurs on the CNPS List 1A, and is a federal candidate for listing. This plant occurs in coastal salt marsh in Ventura County and blooms from July through October. Habitat for Ventura marsh milk-vetch does not occur within the project corridor.

Late-flowered Mariposa lily (*Calochortus weedi* var *vestus*)

Late-flowered Mariposa lily is a perennial herb which occurs on CNPS List 1B and is a federal candidate for listing. Formed from a bulb, this plant occurs in chaparral and cismontane woodlands and blooms from June through August. Habitat for the late-flowered Mariposa lily does not occur within the project corridor.

Ojai fritillary (*Fritillaria ojaiensis*)

Ojai fritillary is a perennial herb which occurs on CNPS List 1B and is a federal candidate for listing. Formed from a bulb, this plant occurs in chaparral, lower montane coniferous forests, and broadleaved upland forests. The species blooms from March through May. Habitat for the Ojai fritillary does not occur within the project corridor.

Special-Status Animals. The coastal habitats described above are known to support several populations of special-status animals. A search of the NDDDB revealed two reported occurrences of special-status animal species. These species include San Diego desert woodrat and monarch butterfly. These species are described in detail below. There are no species-status, reptile, fish, or bird species occurring in the NDDDB within or adjacent to the project area.

San Diego desert woodrat (*Neotoma lepida intermedia*)

The San Diego desert woodrat is listed as a state species of special concern. This species ranges from San Luis Obispo county in the north to San Diego county in the south. This woodrat is abundant in rock outcrops and rocky cliffs and slopes as well as in coastal dune scrub communities. Moderate to dense canopy is preferred. No habitat for the San Diego desert woodrat exists within the project corridor.

Monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*)

The monarch butterfly is a state species of special concern. The monarch utilizes winter roost sites along the coast from northern Mendocino county to Baja California, Mexico. The species roosts in wind-protected tree groves, primarily of eucalyptus, Monterey pine, and cypress. Roosting season in California usually occurs from August through December. Several stands of eucalyptus trees exist within the project corridor, primarily with Segments 1 and 3.

Potential Impacts of Construction and Operation

Monarch Butterflies

Eucalyptus trees exist at the top of the bluff near the upper ROSF office and at the base of the bluff near the lower ROSF office. Monarch butterflies may use eucalyptus and other trees found on the project site during the roosting season. During this time it is essential that the roost trees are left undisturbed. Disturbance such as trimming back of trees or noise from heavy equipment may cause the butterflies to abandon their roosts. For this reason, construction in the areas described above should occur outside of the roosting season (August through February) for monarch butterflies. If construction does not occur outside of the roosting season, a qualified biological monitor is required to be on site to identify any possible roosts. All trees containing roosts shall be flagged for avoidance. The monitor will ensure that these eucalyptus trees are avoided and that construction equipment is kept at a sufficient distance from the trees so as not to create impacts to the resource.

Discouragement of Nesting Raptors

The proposed project involves the installation of overhead transmission lines throughout the corridor. Raptors and other birds often perch on power poles of this sort while foraging or nesting. Birds can be injured or killed by electrocution if they make a connection between power lines. Sufficient distance between power lines is required so that perching birds are not harmed. If birds begin to nest on transmission equipment, bird screens or guards should be installed on problem poles to discourage this activity. Raptor nests should not be removed from February to June. Eagle nests should not be removed at any time of the year. If a nest is discovered during the February to June period that presents hazardous situation for the continued safe operation of the line, field personnel should first try to trim the nest. If the nest must be removed, necessary CDFG permits must first be obtained.

3.0 VISUAL RESOURCES ASSESSMENT

On June 7, 2000, a visual resources assessment was performed to determine the aesthetic quality of the ROSF as it currently exists. The baseline scenic values were then used to determine if the project would impact the aesthetic resources of the environment. The visual impact evaluation is detailed below.

3.1 General Visual Setting

The Rincon Onshore facility is located on a coastal bluff in Ventura county, near its boundary with Santa Barbara county. The visual character of the region is dominated by coastal scrub vegetated mountains, coastline, oilfield development infrastructure, and several power lines. Two major roads and one railroad traverse the general area. Highway 101 runs closest to the coastline, while parallel to this on the northeast is Highway 1 (Old Rincon Highway). The Southern Pacific railroad runs parallel to the highways on the northeast side of Highway 1. Aside from these, the ROSF and a small coastal housing community to the southeast, the area is fairly undeveloped. The Santa Ynez mountains form a visually pleasing backdrop to the north, northwest and northeast, forming bluffs coastward. The mountains and bluffs are scenic with sage and other scrub vegetation dominating. A relatively narrow corridor of the oilfield development infrastructure, highways and railroad forms the transition to the visually appealing Pacific coastline to the southwest.

3.2 Observation Points

From several places within the general location of the project, the proposed overhead transmission lines would be visible. Two criteria for determining points from which to analyze visual impacts were chosen. First, points were chosen from which the project *may* be seen, but only in passing and for a short duration. Secondly, a point was selected from which a permanent view of the project site might repeatedly be had. The following describes the extent of the potential visual impacts from the project at these vantage points.

3.2.1 Highway 1

The middleground along this viewshed contains five to six existing poles belonging to Southern California Edison and to Vintage Oil Company, ROSF's immediate neighbor. The foreground has low scenic value, consisting of a brick retaining wall alongside Highway 1, with a large rusting metal tank and power lines beyond. The new transmission lines and poles are visible for approximately 0.2 mile as one travels along Highway 1, a state scenic highway. The view is depicted in Figure 2.

The view of the general project area for drivers on Highway 1, will not be significantly impacted by the addition of the proposed transmission lines. The new pole midway down the

bluff will not be visible within the background of mountains and bluffs as it will be located in the ravine, hiding it from view. The tops of one or two new poles which will run alongside the existing oilfield access road will likely be visible in the middleground. In the middleground, the surrounding dark vegetation has a high capacity for absorbing the visual impact. As such, the lines will not be intrusive. Similarly, the existing power lines and tank in the foreground and middleground dominate this viewshed.

3.2.2 Highway 101

The view of the general project area for drivers along Highway 101 will be of a longer duration, but of a higher scenic value than that from Highway 1 (see Figure 3). The new transmission lines and poles are visible for approximately 0.9 mile as one travels along Highway 101. The view in the background is of the visually pleasing mountains and accompanying scrub habitat, with the gully (of Segment 2) visible.

The project will be visible only in the background view. The top of the three pole set to be placed midway down the gully may be slightly visible, however the absorptive nature of the background makes it unlikely that the lines themselves will be visible or that the overall impact of this segment will be substantial. The existing Edison line, parallel to the project line and similarly located in the background, is barely visible from this viewshed. Accordingly, the visual impact will be less than significant from this viewshed. The middleground will be a view of trees and the mostly abandoned neighboring oil company facilities. Here, eucalyptus and other trees block the potential view of the power lines. Looking from Highway 101, a passing driver sees disturbed land in the foreground, consisting of an oil company access road and the Southern Pacific railroad with associated ruderal habitat. The poles and lines are not visible in the foreground.

3.2.3 Residences/ Parks

A small residential area and adjacent trailer park exists on the southwest side of Highway 101, just south of the Seacliff highway exit. This represents the only residential/ recreational zone in the broad geographic area of the project which would be more sensitive to visual change because any unpleasing view would be frequent and inescapable to the residents or visitors. From this location there is no view of the project corridor. Only Highway 101 and the highest of the Santa Ynez mountains is observed from this area when looking north.

3.3 Impact Summary

Policy 1.7.2.4 of the County General Plan states that a project would have a significant impact if it would “degrade visual resources or significantly alter or obscure public views.” The potential visual impacts of the project, described in the preceding paragraphs were evaluated using these significance criteria.