

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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3.10	Visual/Scenic Resources .....	3.10-1
3.10.1	Visual/Scenic Quality.....	3.10-2
3.10.2	Visual/Scenic Sensitivity.....	3.10-2

## LIST OF FIGURES

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Figure 3.10-1a	View from center of Lost Creek Permit Area Facing North
Figure 3.10-1b	View from center of Lost Creek Permit Area Facing Northeast
Figure 3.10-1c	View from center of Lost Creek Permit Area Facing East
Figure 3.10-1d	View from center of Lost Creek Permit Area Facing Southeast
Figure 3.10-1e	View from center of Lost Creek Permit Area Facing South
Figure 3.10-1f	View from center of Lost Creek Permit Area Facing Southwest
Figure 3.10-1g	View from center of Lost Creek Permit Area Facing West
Figure 3.10-1h	View from center of Lost Creek Permit Area Facing Northwest

### 3.10 Visual/Scenic Resources

Visual resources consist of landforms, vegetation, rock and water features and cultural modifications that create the visual character and sensitivity of landscapes. Important visual resources are areas that have landscape qualities of unusual or intrinsic scenic value and areas of human and cultural use that are valued for their visual settings. Factors considered in evaluating the importance of visual resources include the following (BLM, 1984).

“Visual quality” is defined as the overall visual impression or attractiveness of an area, considering the variety, vividness, coherence, harmony or pattern of landscape features. Visual quality is defined according to three levels: distinctive resources that are unique or exemplary in quality; representative resources that are typical of the physiographic region and commonly encountered; and indistinctive resources that are landscape or cultural areas that either lack visual resource amenities or have been degraded.

“Visual sensitivity” is defined as a measure of an area’s potential sensitivity to visual change, considering types of viewers and viewer exposure. Visual sensitivity considers viewer types and numbers, as well as viewing distance zones. Areas and associated viewer types considered to be potentially sensitive to visual changes include: park, recreation and wilderness study areas, major travel routes, and residential areas.

Distance zones also influence the potential impact of scenery changes on receptors. Potentially sensitive view areas are discussed with respect to three distance zones: foreground (within 0.5 mile), middle-ground (0.5 to 2.0 miles) and background (beyond 2.0 miles).

The BLM Visual Resource Inventory process consists of a scenic quality evaluation, a sensitivity level analysis, and a delineation of distance zones. Together, these evaluations are used to group areas into Visual Resource Management (VRM) classes, which provide guidance for management decisions. Areas are classified on a four-level scale, with Class I being the most protective of visual and scenic resources, and Class IV being the least restrictive (BLM, 1984).

The objectives of each class are:

- Class I: to preserve the existing character of the landscape. The class provides for natural ecological changes. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be very low and must not attract attention.
- Class II: to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of visual change should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer.

- Class III: to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention, but should not dominate the view of the casual observer.
- Class IV: to provide for management activities that require major modification to the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape can be high.

### **3.10.1 Visual/Scenic Quality**

The study area for visual resources includes the Permit Area, access roads, and a two-mile buffer area outside of the Permit Area. Beyond this distance, any changes to the landscape would be in the background distance zone, and either unobtrusive or imperceptible to viewers.

The Permit Area is characterized by low-relief, sagebrush-dominated plains, dissected by small ephemeral drainage networks. The scenery is characteristic of surrounding areas in the Great Divide Basin, though less visually appealing than many other locations. Few intermittent meandering streams, creeks and associated riparian vegetation cross the open steppe, providing localized visual diversity to the otherwise homogeneous landscapes. More rugged mountainous landscapes can be seen in the background. Previous modifications to the natural environment of the Permit Area include fencing, power lines, and four-wheel drive roads. Drilling rigs can currently be seen in the Permit Area; and these impacts are temporary. The site scenery is characterized by **Figures 3.10-1 (a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h)**, which are photographs taken from the center of the Permit Area, facing eight compass directions. The scenic quality field inventory score according to BLM methodology was seven out of a possible 32. The associated scenic quality classification was “C”, the lowest possible.

### **3.10.2 Visual/Scenic Sensitivity**

Visually sensitive areas include: parks, recreation and natural areas; major travel routes; and residential areas within two miles of the Permit Area. Potentially sensitive areas located two miles or more from the Permit Area are not considered in this study since beyond this distance the Project changes would be indistinct compared to the existing conditions. The viewer groups and use areas described below are considered to be moderately or highly sensitive to visual impacts when in the foreground or middle-ground distance.

No developed parks or recreation areas are located within the visual resources study area. Travel routes in the visual resources study area include CR 63, CR 23N, and BLM 3215. The Permit Area cannot be seen from any of these transportation corridors from viewpoints within the visual resources study area. There are no residences within the visual resources study area.

The Project is approximately 30 miles from the Ferris Mountain Wilderness Study Area, but no Wilderness Areas or Areas of Critical Environmental Concern are located within the visual resources study area. The Permit Area is within proximity of recreation areas, but these activities, such as hiking, sight-seeing, antler collecting, OHV use, hunting, and wild horse viewing are dispersed.

The Permit Area is not visually pristine or of special visual interest. The sole visually sensitive receptors within the visual resources study area are a small number of dispersed recreationists. The Permit Area has been designated VRM Class III by the BLM (BLM, 2004c; Rau, P. Recreation Specialist, BLM Rawlins Field Office. Personal communication. 2007), and the Project would be compatible with this use.