

3.4 Recreation

3.4.1 Introduction

This section provides an overview of the recreational resources in the project area. This section also provides a discussion of the potential impacts to recreational resources from implementation of the conceptual water transaction program and demonstrates the effectiveness of the proposed project (i.e., the proposed General Plan policies and amendments) in reducing or mitigating environmental impacts of the program.

3.4.2 Scoping

No comments regarding impacts to recreational resources were received during the scoping process.

3.4.3 Existing Environment

Types of Recreational Facilities

Surface water resources in the County that support recreational activities include rivers, streams, and lakes (including reservoirs). These resources support recreational fishing and boating and comprise important components of the aesthetic landscape as viewed by recreationalists. The water levels in most of the reservoirs and lakes in the project area are dependent upon releases and consumption of water held by surface water rights holders. Fishing occurs on the East and West Walker Rivers. Recreational facilities in the project area are shown in Figure 3.4-1. The primary lakes and reservoirs in the project area include:

- Black Reservoir
- Bridgeport Reservoir
- Green Lakes
- Lobdell Lake
- Poore Lake
- Topaz Reservoir (California portion only)
- Twin Lakes

Antelope Valley

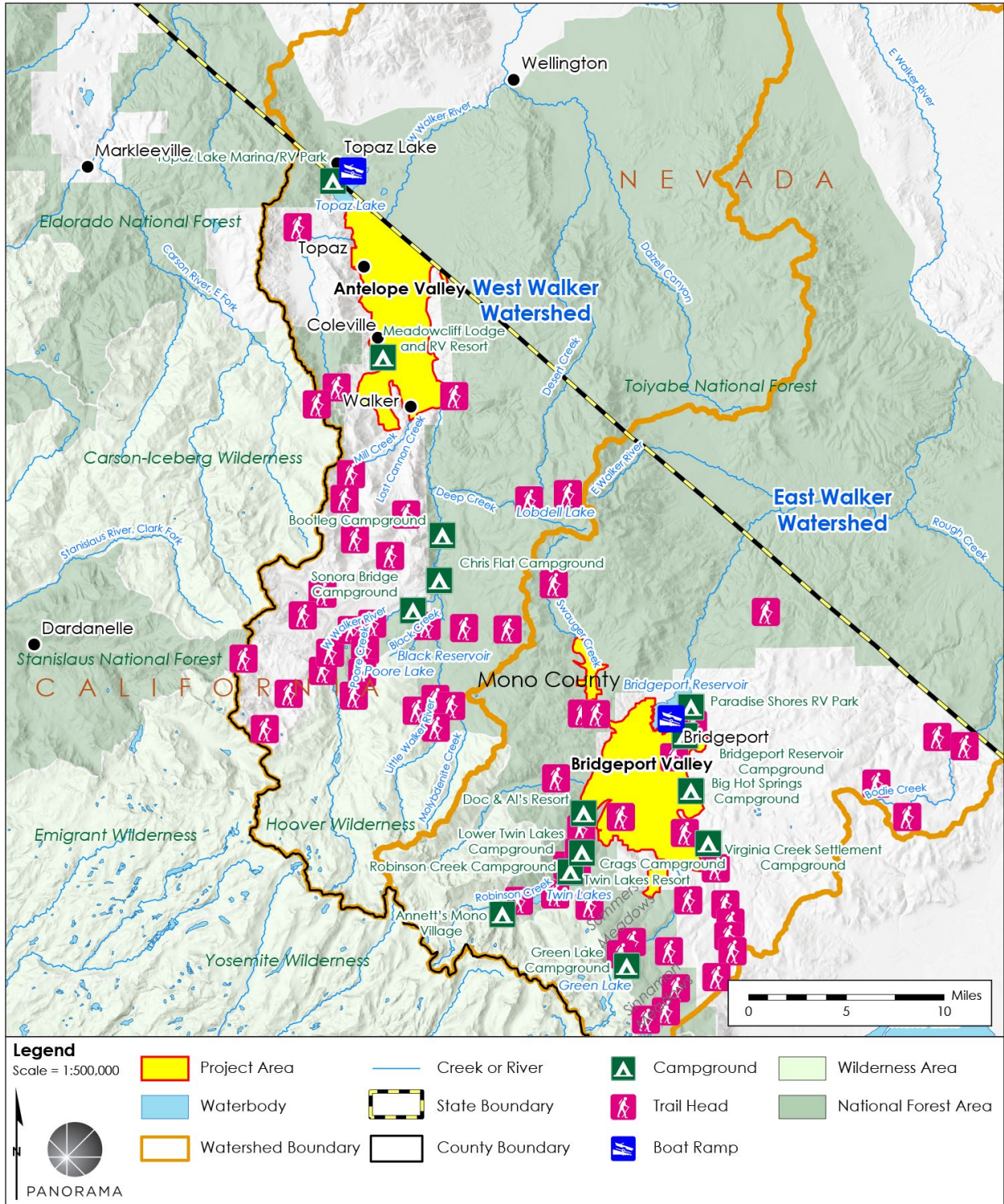
Upstream Reservoirs

Black Reservoir

The Black Reservoir is owned by the Bentley Family. This reservoir was established in 1905 to store and supply water for adjacent pasturelands in the Sonora Junction area, and has a water holding capacity of 185 acre-feet (Mono County and the Town of Mammoth Lakes, 2018; Mono County Community Development Department, 2007). No public recreational activities occur on Black Reservoir.

3.4 RECREATION

Figure 3.4-1 Primary Recreational Resources in the Project Area



Source: (USGS, 2013; USGS, 2016; Tele Atlas North America, Inc., 2018; Mono County GIS, 2019; Dave's Sierra Fishing, 2019)

3.4 RECREATION

Lobdell Lake

Lobdell Lake is a reservoir maintained by snowmelt from Deep Creek (California Natural Resources Agency, 2017). This reservoir was constructed in 1948, and the rancher who originally owned the adjacent land used the reservoir for irrigation (Mono County, 2017; California Natural Resources Agency, 2017). The reservoir is now privately owned by the Day and Weaver families, and is a major water storage facility for the south end of Smith Valley (Mono County, 2017; Mono County, 2015; Mono County Community Development Department, 2007). Lobdell Lake is 9,200 feet above sea level, and the high elevation of this reservoir facilitates the delivery of water down Desert Creek to Smith Valley (Mono County Community Development Department, 2007). This reservoir is a popular tourist destination within the County, and recreationalists drive to Lobdell Lake during summer and fall for views of the Sweetwater Mountains and the Sierra Nevada. Between mid- to late September, the area around Lobdell Lake is particularly scenic because of the fall leaves of the aspen groves that grow along the streambeds (Mono County, 2017). Lobdell Lake is the destination for one of the popular guided rides featured in California's only All-Terrain Vehicle/ Ultimate Terrain Vehicle (ATV/UTV) Jamboree held annually in the County (Northern Mono Chamber of Commerce, 2019). Lobdell Lake provides recreational fishing opportunities and contains rainbow trout and a population of self-sustaining Arctic grayling (*Thymallus arcticus*) (CDFW, 1997).

Poore Lake

Poore Lake is a reservoir fed by Poore Creek within Antelope Valley. This reservoir is owned by the Park Livestock Company and is managed for deer habitat and migration, fisheries habitat, and recreational angling (Mono County, 2015; Mono County Community Development Department, 2007). The stored water in Poore Reservoir is used in the Antelope Valley Area (California Department of Water Resources, 1992). Hiking trails lead to and around part of Poore Lake (Mono County, 2019). Poore Lake offers fishing opportunities for brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*) (California Natural Resources Agency).

Topaz Lake

Topaz Lake is downstream of the project area. Historically, this lake was a small, natural lake, but in 1921 the Topaz Canal was built to divert water from the West Walker River into the lake to store irrigation water (Mono County Community Development Department, 2007). Topaz Lake is part of the West Walker River drainage and is situated on the state line between Nevada and California. At full volume, the reservoir holds 60,200 acre-feet of water, but the usable storage capacity is 53,860 acre-feet (USGS, n.d.). Between January and July 2018, Topaz Lake held between 55,000 and 60,000 acre-feet of water. After July 2018, the amount of water within Topaz Lake declined until the lake reached a low in November holding 20,000 acre-feet of water (USGS, 2019).

The recreational opportunities available at Topaz Lake include fishing, sailing, and camping. There are 25 miles of shoreline and 2,500 acres of surface water available for recreational use. Topaz Lake does not freeze over in winter, and offers recreational opportunities during the months when most other waterbodies in the project area are frozen over (Mono County, 2019). The NDOW and the CDFW have established a major fishery in Topaz Lake for sport fishing.

3.4 RECREATION

The earliest record of stocking by Nevada was in 1930 with black bass. Since then, the lake has been stocked with rainbow trout, brown trout, kokanee salmon, Lahontan cutthroat trout, cutbows, tiger trout, brook trout, and black bullheads (NDOW, 2019; Mono County Community Development Department, 2007). Fishing is allowed from January 1 through September 30 and California or Nevada fishing licenses are good throughout the lake.

WRID manages the recreational resources and water storage of Topaz Lake, while the NDOW and CDFW jointly manage the fishery (Mono County, 2015; NDOW, 2019). Topaz Lake recreation operates in accordance with the WRID Operation Manual and follows past patterns of use. WRID is currently working with other agencies to develop a recreation management plan for Topaz Lake (Mono County, 2015).

The Topaz Lake Lodge and RV Park, in California, offers full RV hookups, a boat launch, and boat docks from March to October (Mono County, 2019).

Rivers and Creeks

Rivers and creeks in Antelope Valley provide recreational opportunities for the public including fishing and wildlife viewing. Mill Creek and Virginia Creek are stocked by CDFW for fishing (CDFW, 2019).

The West Walker River flows roughly adjacent to Highway 395 in Antelope Valley and flows from the Sierra Nevada mountains in the south to Topaz Lake at the north end of the valley. The river offers fishing opportunities for brown and rainbow trout. Between Walker and Coleville, the Meadowcliff lodge, restaurant, and RV park offer accommodations for fishermen. Campgrounds are also found along the West Walker River, including Chris Flat Campground, which has 15 camping sites and Bootleg Campground, which has 63 camping sites. Shingle Mill Flat provides picnic tables at a day use area (Dave's Sierra Fishing, 2019).

Bridgeport Valley

Upstream Reservoirs

Green Lake

The only access to Green Lake is through the Green Creek trail (Mono County, 2019). Fishing is the main recreational activity, and those wishing to fish at Green Lake must backpack 2.5 miles from Highway 395 (Dave's Sierra Fishing, 2017). Green Creek Campground is located approximately 2 miles northeast of Green Lake, and includes two group campsites that can accommodate between 25 and 30 people (USFS, 2019). Several backpacking campsites surround Green Lake (Mono County, 2019; Dave's Sierra Fishing, 2017).

Twin Lakes

The Twin Lakes consist of two alpine lakes called Upper and Lower Twin Lakes that are owned by the USFS (Mono County, 2019; Mono County, 2015). A dam was constructed at Twin Lakes in 1879 to supply hydro-mechanical power to the growing population. The Twin Lakes are supplied by Robinson Creek. On average, the Lower Twin Lake contains 4,011 acre-feet and the Upper Twin Lake holds 2,070 acre-feet of water (USGS, 2019). In 2018, the amount of water

3.4 RECREATION

within Lower Twin Lake was highest in June at 4,900 acre-feet, and lowest in October at 2,000 acre-feet and within Upper Twin Lake water levels were highest in June at 2,600 acre-feet and lowest in May at 2,100 acre-feet (USGS, 2019).

Recreational activities offered at Twin Lakes include hiking, camping, fishing, boating, kayaking, and canoeing. Boat docks are available in both lakes. Twin Lakes is also a popular destination for cyclists who travel to the reservoirs on Twin Lakes Road for the scenic views of the lakes and area. The largest campground in the County is located at Upper Twin Lake and offers 400 campsites (Mono County, 2015). The USFS manages an additional 92 campground sites, and Annett's Mono Village and the Twin Lakes Resort offer cabins and campgrounds sites (Mono County, 2010). The two lakes are stocked by CDFW with Kokanee salmon, rainbow trout, and brown trout for recreational fishing.

Bridgeport Reservoir

Bridgeport Reservoir is downstream of the project area. The reservoir was created in 1924 and is owned by the WRID (Mono County, 2015). WRID manages the recreational resources of Bridgeport Reservoir in accordance with the WRID Operation Manual and follows past patterns of use.

The reservoir is primarily used for water storage and recreation and is maintained by snowmelt. At full volume, Bridgeport Reservoir can hold 42,460 acre-feet of water, however the reservoir has a usable storage capacity of 36,760 acre-feet. The amount of water within the reservoir changes depending on the season, and is highest in the winter and spring and lowest in the summer (USGS, 2019). Between January and June of 2018, there was approximately 40,000 acre-feet of water within the reservoir. This amount steadily dropped throughout the summer months to a low of 12,500 acre-feet between September and November of 2018 (USGS, 2019).

Bridgeport Reservoir provides an array of recreational opportunities including fishing, boating, sailing, water skiing, kayaking, tubing, and camping (Mono County, 2019). The Bridgeport Reservoir RV Park and Marina, and the Paradise Shores RV Park offer camp sites and trailer hookups. CDFW stocks Bridgeport Reservoir six times a year with rainbow trout, brown trout, brook trout, and Sacramento perch to keep up with the fishing demand (CDFW, 2019).

Rivers and Creeks

Rivers and creeks provide recreational opportunities including hiking, wildlife viewing, fishing, and hunting. Robinson Creek, Buckeye Creek, and Rock Creek are stocked by CDFW for fishing with brook, rainbow, and brown trout (CDFW, 2019). Campgrounds are present at Green Creek, Robinson Creek, and Buckeye Creek. Hiking trails are located along Robinson Creek. Duck hunting occurs along the East Walker River in the project area. The East Walker River draws fishermen from all over the country. Each year, many anglers report having 20 to 40 fishing days on the East Walker River, and many of the fish caught are in the 18 to 24-inch range. The river provides adequate food for trout to live on including 8 or 10 different types of forage fish as well as many different types of insects.

3.4 RECREATION

Bridgeport Reservoir aids in controlling the flow of water from heavy snowmelt and runoff into the river. Bridgeport Reservoir is relatively shallow. The lake tends to result in warming of the water during the hot summer months prior to flow of water into the East Walker River. The mixture of cold and hot water helps with the overall chemistry of the water. More insects and baitfish, including chubs and dace minnows, are present below the dam than above the reservoir. Baitfish are very plentiful and grow fast, which is the primary factor for the growth rate of trout which results in the presence of large trout in the river. The release of water from the Bridgeport Lake into the river makes it possible for fly fishing at any time of the year. Springtime is more difficult due to high flows. Summer fishing is marginal as the flows fluctuate up and down but are generally high. Fall is generally the best time, as water levels drop, and fishermen can wade. Winter fishing is mostly limited to the Nevada side of the East Walker River.

3.4.4 Regulatory Setting

Federal, State, and Regional

No federal, state, or regional regulations related to recreation apply to the WBRP water transaction program.

Local

Mono County General Plan Land Use Element

The following General Plan Land Use policies pertain to recreation in the project area and potential WBRP water transactions (Mono County, 2018):

- Policy 4.B.3.** Work with appropriate agencies to manage water resources in a manner that protects natural, agricultural, and recreational resources in Antelope Valley.
- Policy 4.C.1.** Work with appropriate agencies to maintain or improve natural resource base needed for recreational opportunities in the Antelope Valley and vicinity.
- Policy 7.C.1.** Work with appropriate agencies to manage Bridgeport Reservoir in a manner that protects the natural resources in the area and provides additional recreational opportunities.

3.4.5 Significance Standards and Methodology

Significance Criteria

For the purposes of this EIR and consistent with Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, the conceptual water transaction program is considered to have a significant impact on recreation if it would:

- a. 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;

3.4 RECREATION

- b. Include recreational facilities or require the construction or expansion of recreational facilities which might have an adverse physical effect on the environment;

In addition, for purposes of this analysis, the conceptual water transaction program would be considered to have a significant impact if it would:

- c. Restrict recreational opportunities, alter recreational areas, or substantially degrade the recreational experience.

Significance criterion c is based on the County's policies which promote the recreational enjoyment of the natural resources available in the County while protecting biological resources. This threshold is applicable to the conceptual water transaction program and, as such, is used to determine if there would be significant impacts with regards to recreational experiences.

Implementation of the conceptual water transaction program would not increase the use of existing neighborhood and regional parks or other recreational activities, nor would it include recreational facilities or require the construction or expansion of recreational facilities, as discussed in the EIR. Therefore, significance criteria a and b are not discussed further.

Approach to Analysis

The environmental impact analysis presented below was performed using qualitative and comparative methods that involved identifying potential for various water transaction types to restrict recreational opportunities, alter recreational areas, and/or change the quality of the recreation experience. The primary focus is on changes that could affect fishing opportunities along the Walker River, or that could affect recreational activities at various reservoirs. Temporary leasing of water rights for a year would mimic drought conditions in agricultural areas because the water would be reapplied to the site the subsequent year. Temporary leasing of water would therefore not have a significant effect on recreational resources. The impact analysis below focuses on permanent acquisition of decreed or storage water rights only. The maximum potential water transfer under permanent water transaction scenarios is presented in Section 2.7.4 of the Project Description. In all cases, it is assumed that a water transaction would only transfer 53 percent of the water from any parcel that is involved in the transaction due to the decision made by the SWRCB and the Nevada State Engineer that the NFWF's exercise of those rights is limited to the consumptive use portion of the rights (approximately 53 percent). Water transactions of storage water rights could transfer 100 percent of the water right that is held in storage.

3.4 RECREATION

3.4.6 Impact Discussion

Impact Recreation-1: Would a water transaction program restrict recreational opportunities, alter recreational, areas or substantially degrade recreational experiences? (Criterion c, based on County Policy)	Significance Determination of Proposed Project (GP Policies)	Significance Determination of Conceptual Water Transaction Program
	No Impact	Potentially Significant

Permanent or Long-Term Acquisition of Decreed Water Rights

Reservoirs

Water levels in upstream reservoirs would not be altered by permanent or long-term acquisition of decreed water rights because upstream reservoirs are supplied by snowmelt and are upstream of the project area. Transfer of water from irrigated lands to in-stream flow and Walker Lake would nominally increase water levels at the two downstream reservoirs, Topaz Lake and Bridgeport Reservoir at certain times of the year, such as springtime when diversions from the river for agricultural consumption would normally occur. The volume of water within each reservoir could increase, prior to release prior to release of water from Bridgeport and Topaz Reservoir to Walker River downstream¹. Water levels are managed by WRID in both Bridgeport and Topaz Reservoirs. The small change in water levels as a result of transfer of water to Walker Lake would not cause any recreational amenities, such as boat ramps, to become inaccessible. Fish stocks and wildlife would not be affected. The impact on recreationalists using reservoirs would be less than significant.

Rivers and Creeks

Reduced irrigation diversion on the Walker River could increase Walker River flows during periods when water is normally diverted for agricultural use, particularly in the spring and summer. Under existing conditions, springtime flows are high making fishing more difficult but good for experienced fishermen. Flows peak in the summer make fishing marginal. Fall is the best time for fishing when water levels typically drop.

On average, flows on the East Walker River downstream of Bridgeport Reservoir were around 100 to 250 cfs in late March through late May, with an increase to approximately 310 cfs in mid-June and a steady decrease throughout the rest of the year. The river has experienced peaks ranging from 800 to 1,000 cfs in June and July. Fall flow rates are typically below 150 or 100 cfs. Monthly mean flows have differed dramatically year to year (USGS, 2019). Flows could increase

¹ Assuming an average, maximum delivery of 24 acre-feet to Topaz Reservoir and 32 acre-feet to Bridgeport Reservoir on any given day.

3.4 RECREATION

by up to 5 to 10 percent² in the East and West Walker River as a result of WBRP water transactions, depending on the time of year.

As discussed in Section 3.1, Impact Hydrology-3, the maximum increase in flow from WBRP water transactions would be 28 cfs. An increase in flow of up to 28 cfs would be within the normal range of river flows on the East and West Walker River. The nominal increase in river flow under a conceptual water transaction program should not have a substantial effect on recreational fishing or the fishing economy of the County.

Fish and other wildlife may also benefit from increased water in the Walker River, particularly during droughts or later times of the year when water levels are naturally lower. The slight increases in river flow as a result of the WBRP water transactions could improve water quality and forage during the fall. Impacts would be less than significant.

Permanent or Long-Term Acquisition of Storage Water Rights

Reservoirs

Permanent or long-term acquisition of storage water rights would result in increased release of stored water from upstream reservoirs with greater frequency of release. Due to the small size of several reservoirs, the allocation of flow downstream could noticeably lower water levels, particularly during drought years. Release of water from storage would typically occur late in the season (fall). Upstream reservoir levels are subject to fluctuation as a result of drought and seasonal drying under existing conditions. For example, Upper and Lower Twin Lakes water levels decrease by more than 50 percent from June peak periods to the lowest water level periods in October (USGS, 2019; USGS, n.d.). Recreational amenities such as hiking trails and camp sites would not be impacted by lower water levels because these resources are outside of the area that would be subject to changing water use. The water transactions could cause water elevations within upstream reservoirs to drop below typical low water levels and affect boating access and fishing. The acquisition of storage water rights would have a significant impact if it resulted in reduced reservoir levels that caused boat docks to become inaccessible. The proposed General Plan policy Action 4.B.2.e requires monitoring of lake levels and management of storage releases to ensure accessibility of boat docks. The proposed General Plan policy would avoid or mitigate potential significant impacts of WBRP water transactions.

Reduced water levels in upstream reservoirs as a result of increased release of storage water could result in declines in water quality within the reservoirs, including increasing water temperatures, lowered oxygen levels, and increases in algae. Stocked fish may not survive in these environments, which would impact recreational fishing opportunities. Algae blooms can cause malodorous smells, which may dissuade recreationalists from visiting. Indirect impacts on recreationalists who use the upstream reservoirs could occur, resulting in potentially

² Assuming an average, maximum net new flow rate of 28 cfs.

3.4 RECREATION

significant impacts. The proposed General Plan policy Action 4.B.2.e is intended to address potential impacts on recreation and requires a monitoring program of reservoirs affected by flow diversions to ensure that water quality is not diminished to a level that would cause harm to fish as a result of the conceptual water transaction program. If diversions are found to reduce water quality to inhospitable levels, the diversions would be altered, and monitoring continued until the water quality returns to acceptable levels. The proposed General Plan policy would avoid or mitigate potentially significant impacts of WBRP water transactions.

Rivers and Creeks

Permanent or long-term transfer of storage rights would be expected to increase flows within Walker River in the late-season due to increased release of water from storage. The increased flow within Walker River in the late fall could benefit fish populations. Late-season flow increases can occur naturally from storm precipitation. The late-season flows bring a flush of cool water and a spike in food availability for fish. Short-duration flow increases from upstream storage of less than a week would likely have a similar effect to a natural late-season flow and would not have a substantial effect on recreational fishing. Long-duration, late-season releases, however, could benefit overall recreational fish populations and associated recreational fishing by increasing availability of water and food sources for trout and other recreational fisheries in the East and West Walker Rivers. Impacts on recreational fishing in the East and West Walker Rivers would be potentially beneficial.

Proposed Project

The proposed project (i.e., General Plan policies and amendments) would not adversely affect recreational opportunities, recreational areas, or the recreational experience. The proposed project would have a potentially beneficial impact on recreation because it would avoid or mitigate impacts of future water transactions on recreational opportunities and the recreational experience in upstream reservoirs. The proposed project would have no adverse effects.

3.4.7 References

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