

4.15 POPULATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND HOUSING**4.15.A Data and Forecasts**

This response addresses comment O13-8, which suggests that California Department of Finance (CDOF) population statistics be updated and provides other clarifications about the dates and areas covered by certain population data.

Both the LRDP Draft EIR and the UCP Draft EIR are based on source materials (e.g., the Economic Background Report) that used statistical information available in 1999 and 2000. These utilized CDOF population projections derived from the 1990 Census, which is noted in Table 3-1 of the Draft EIR, where the column heading states that the CDOF projections are extrapolated from the 1990 Census. Census data for 2000 are reported in Volume 2, Section 7, and are close to the CDOF projections.

As suggested by the commenter, the fact that the MCAG column in Table 3-1 refers to populations within each city's growth area boundary and not population with the city limits has been noted in the Final EIR. Clarifications about the growth projection methodology that MCAG uses have also been made (Volume 2, Section 7).

4.15.B Housing Effects

This response addresses comments LA6-16 and I34-1a, which relate to impacts on housing resources and costs. The commenter notes that in planning for the University Community, it was assumed that only 32 percent of the students would live on campus, although it is a goal of the LRDP Draft EIR that 50 percent of students live on campus. The commenter goes on to indicate that the city is likely to be the first option for off-campus student and staff housing, which would result in a rise in rents, due to the currently low vacancy rates in the Merced area housing market. The commenter suggests the University increase efforts to provide on-campus housing. The second commenter expresses concern that the proposed project would increase cost of housing in the region.

Financial considerations like the cost of housing are not CEQA issues. According to CEQA Guidelines Section 15358(b), to be analyzed under CEQA, effects must be related to a physical change in the environment. Economic impacts such as the effect on housing prices and the demand for housing need not be considered unless they would lead to an environmental effect.

As Section 3.1.2.2 of the LRDP Draft EIR explains, at full development, the LRDP plans for housing 50 percent of the student population on campus. Moreover, as planned, the Community will have enough housing to accommodate 58 percent of the student population, with 10 percent of the students projected to live in existing housing (e.g., with their parents). If all this housing is provided, then more than sufficient housing would be available for students, and an increased demand for housing in the Merced area would not occur. The LRDP Draft EIR acknowledges that UC Merced cannot ensure that it would be able to attain its 50 percent on-campus student housing goal and during the early years of campus development, the adjacent University Community would not be developed. However, the demand for off-campus housing during these early years would create a less-than-significant impact on the regional housing resources for the following reasons:

- Several major specific plans and master plan developments have been approved or are in the process of being approved in the Merced area, and these developments are large enough together to provide housing for all of the campus-related direct and induced population growth in the near term.
- Although Merced currently has a vacancy rate close to what is deemed optimal (i.e., 5 percent), nearby Atwater has a higher vacancy rate of from 10.7 to 14.19 percent (according to the 2000 Census, and the CDOF (2000), respectively).
- During Phase 1, the number of students that would seek housing in the region is relatively small. The student body in 2004/05 (Phase 1) is projected to be 1,004. Of these, 10 percent would be commuting students, living with their families in existing housing. In Phase 1 the Campus would provide housing for 590 students. The remaining 314 students would seek housing off campus. Many of them would be expected to live together. The number of faculty and staff at the Campus in 2004/05 would be about 500 persons. Some of these persons would be local hires living in existing housing in the area. Assuming 2.5 students per housing unit and 1.1 faculty/staff per housing unit, the off-campus population in 2004/05 would require approximately 580 units in the county. Sufficient housing units in the Merced area would be available to accommodate the new population.