

## 4.5 AESTHETICS

### 4.5.A Views from Lake Yosemite Regional Park

This response addresses comments LA9-8, LA9-10, and other similar comments, which raise concerns about the level of significance of impacts and the extent of the buffer between the University and Lake Yosemite Regional Park, given the extent and size of university buildings.

The term “low density” was used in the Draft EIR to contrast single- and two-story buildings with medium-density (generally considered to be four to six stories) and high-density (i.e., eight stories or taller) construction. No campus structures would be placed adjacent to Lake Yosemite Regional Park. In no case would buildings be constructed within 100 feet of the park. In fact, along most of the park boundary, the buffer would be at least 200 feet wide, and with the revision to the campus Land Use Diagram (see Section 3 and revised Figure 2-4), this buffer is even wider along the central portion of the park. In addition to the linear distance from the park created by this buffer, trees and other campus landscaping, together with existing trees in the park, would provide supplemental visual screening. As shown in Figure 2-4, one or several different visual elements would be between most parts of the park and on-campus buildings, including:

- Open space for passive and active recreational use extending between 70 and 300 feet in width
- Portions of Fairfield Canal and Le Grand Canal
- Lakeshore Drive
- Campus Land Reserve

The Draft EIR includes mitigation measures designed to reduce the visual impact of the campus development to the extent possible while still meeting the project objectives. Despite these mitigation measures, or any other measures (e.g., enlarging the buffer), a currently rural, open landscape would become developed. This impact would be accumulative with similar visual effects of the University Community and the Campus Parkway. This impact was identified as significant and unavoidable.

### 4.5.B Cumulative Effect of Urbanization

This response addresses comments O21-4, O21-5, O21-6, O28-100, O31-55, O28-100, and other similar comments, which deal with the aesthetic consequences of urbanizing an existing rural setting. Clarification of the difference between cumulative effects on visual “character” as compared to “visual quality” was requested as was information about the methodology used to make a determination regarding the cumulative urbanizing effect of the LRDP, the University Community, and the Campus Parkway on visual character. One commenter claims that campus development will degrade scenic vistas from the Valley floor.

In addition to Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines, the determination of visual impacts was based on several factors, including:

- A review of overall, architectural and site design goals and policies of the LRDP and the UCP
- Field surveys of the proposed sites of the campus and community and of the surrounding area
- Review of the Merced County and Merced City General Plans, particularly the sections related to visual character

The Draft EIR considers *visual character* to include the different elements of the rural landscape that are currently visible. They include cows, rustic structures, grassy areas, and the expanse of land open to the horizon. In contrast, *visual quality* means the valuation or judgement ascribed to the appearance of a structure, area, or object. As explained in the Draft EIR, the determination of the significance of visual quality impacts is subjective and some observers may view the change as a negative change in visual quality, while others may not. However, each of the projects would change the elements that make up the visual setting, i.e., the visual character of the area, they would not necessarily negatively change the visual quality of the setting.

The development of the Campus would change the rural character of the area to an urban character. This impact was considered significant and unavoidable. Although no computer visual simulation was prepared, the Draft EIR includes an artist's rendering of the Campus that shows the manner in which the visual character of the area would change. Meaningful visual simulations can be prepared only when more specific details of the project are available. The full development under the LRDP is at this time understood only at a conceptual level. The Draft EIR nevertheless finds that the visual character would be significantly affected because most of the different elements of the rural landscape would no longer be present. Thus, the statement by one commenter that the EIR found the cumulative effect of urbanization that would result in a change in a visual character insignificant is incorrect; the Draft EIR found this impact significant.

In terms of *visual quality*, however, the Draft EIR concludes that change would not be a significant adverse impact because policies related to design and aesthetics contained in the LRDP and the UCP would result in construction sited and designed so as to be of high visual quality. Therefore, the impact to visual quality would be less than significant.

With regard to scenic vistas, both the LRDP and the UCP contain policies to reduce impacts. The LRDP Draft EIR found the impact to scenic vistas to be less than significant because of LRDP policies, and because the project buildings, estimated to vary from one to four stories in height, would be screened by existing trees and new landscaping and would be sited and designed to minimize intrusion. When viewed from more distant areas such as from within the City of Merced (approximately 2 miles away), major traffic arteries such as Highway 99 (more than 5 miles away), and surrounding areas, the visual intrusion attributable to campus development would be quite small and would not adversely affect scenic vistas. As the Draft EIR noted, the campus site is not designated a scenic area by the County or other agency. However, the UCP Draft EIR did find the Community's impacts to view corridors and scenic resources to be significant and unavoidable.

For effects of the urbanization associated with the campus and the adjacent community on wildlife species, including light and noise impacts, see Section 4.8.C.