

4.13 RECREATION

This section of this EIR describes the current recreational uses on the proposed campus site and surrounding areas and describes ways in which development of the campus and supporting infrastructure would lead to physical deterioration of recreational facilities, or would result in creation or expansion of recreational facilities that might have a physical adverse effect on the environment.

Public comments received in response to the Notice of Preparation raised issues related to the impacts of increased demand for recreation and the need for the replacement or expansion of recreational facilities. The closure of the Merced Hills Golf Course, and the timing of that closure, were also specifically raised.

4.13.1 Summary of Site Selection EIR Impacts and Mitigation Measures

The SSEIR evaluated the potential for the selection and eventual development of a new campus to result in impacts on parks and recreation facilities, focusing specifically on the increased demand for parks and recreational facilities because of the population increase triggered by the new campus.

All impacts identified in the SSEIR relevant to the proposed project are presented in the following table. For all impacts, the level of significance before and after application of mitigation measures identified in the SSEIR is also presented in the table.

SITE SELECTION EIR IMPACTS	Level of Significance Prior to Mitigation	Level of Significance after/with Mitigation
Site selection could result in an on-campus student and faculty population who would require additional parks and recreational facilities.	LS	N/A
The selection of a site and development of a campus could result in an off-campus population who would require additional parks and recreation facilities.	S	SU ₂
Cumulative population growth would require the acquisition and development of additional parks and recreation facilities and services within the area.	S	SU ₂

PS=Potentially Significant; S=Significant; LS=Less than Significant; B=Beneficial; NI=No Impact; N/A=Not Applicable; SU₁=Impacts that cannot be mitigated, or for which it is not certain that mitigation could reduce the impact to a less-than-significant level; SU₂= Impacts that could reduce the impact to less-than-significant levels but require action by a jurisdiction other than the University; SU₃=Impacts that, even with mitigation, cannot, or might not, be reduced to a less-than-significant level, and for which mitigation would not be under the University's jurisdiction.

The SSEIR found that the off-campus population would create a demand for additional parks and recreational facilities that would result in a significant and unavoidable impact. The LRDP EIR finds that the recreational needs (in terms of neighborhood parks) of the off-campus population would be addressed by the parks included in the University Community and elsewhere in Merced

County. The LRDP EIR, however, finds that both the on-campus and the off-campus population would place an additional demand on the facilities at the Lake Yosemite Regional Park (which is a regional park rather than a neighborhood park), which could lead to a physical deterioration of the Lake Yosemite Regional Park facilities and therefore result in a significant impact.

As discussed in Section 2, the location of the proposed campus has been shifted to a more southerly location on the VST property compared to the original location. All other attributes of the proposed project, including campus population size and types of facilities and activities, are largely the same. The change in location would place the campus immediately adjacent to the Lake Yosemite Regional Park and would displace the Merced Hills Golf Course. The effects on these recreational facilities are addressed in the analysis that follows.

4.13.2 Environmental Setting

Lake Yosemite Regional Park. The site for the proposed UC campus is located alongside Lake Yosemite Regional Park, about four miles northeast of the City of Merced. The park is an important regional recreation facility and serves thousands of area residents. The Merced Irrigation District owns the 486-acre lake and the surrounding shoreline, which has been a regional recreational site since the late 1930s. Currently, the County operates the lake and the shoreline for recreational uses under a 50-year lease (1976 to 2026). The three land parcels that make up the park are about 260 acres. There is additional land acreage along the shoreline that is part of the 486-acre lake parcel. The developed portion of the park covers about 100 acres. The County also owns additional undeveloped land (described below), which is planned for park expansion. The County has not funded any capital improvements at the park since 1975.

Lake Yosemite Regional Park provides a variety of passive and active recreational facilities, including swimming, power boat and sailboat facilities, and a boat ramp. Water skis and jet skis are allowed, and there is no maximum engine size or noise restrictions on boat motors or jet skis. Park facilities include the following:

- Picnic tables and barbecue pits;
- Paved trails for bicycling and walking;
- Two beach areas for swimming;
- Two boat launching ramps;
- Sixty sailboat slips;
- Mooring slips for daily powerboat use;
- Two recreational baseball fields;
- Fishing of rainbow trout (stocked by the California Department of Fish and Game) from the lakeshore and the Irrigation District dam;
- Three playgrounds for children;
- Volleyball courts;
- Rental facilities including picnic sites, a campsite, and a building for indoor activities;
- Support facilities including first aid, food concession, restrooms, water wells and parking.

The park is open from 7:30 a.m. till sundown in the winter months, and 7:30 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. during the rest of the year (Rodrigues, 2001). There are 2,500 to 3,000 paved and unpaved parking spaces. During peak use times, the park is closed to additional users, since additional parking is unavailable. Lake Yosemite Regional Park is extensively used. Approximately 85 percent of park users live in the Merced and Atwater areas. The peak period begins on Easter Sunday and continues until mid-October. Annual usage is 300,000 visits, with peak daily weekend usage being 8,000 to 10,000 people. On warm weekdays as many as 6,000 people may use the park.

Almost all park facilities that are available by reservation for rental are at capacity:

- The Fish and Game building, which holds 315 people standing and 160 seated, is booked for approximately 95 percent of weekends throughout the year;
- Scout Island, the youth camping facility, is booked for 100 percent of weekends from May to September;
- The three fee picnic areas, with kitchen facilities, restrooms, recreational facilities, and seating for a total of 372 people, are reserved for 100 percent of peak-season weekends (Merced County, 2001).

The County purchased 260 acres to expand Lake Yosemite Regional Park. In 1969, approximately 55 acres were purchased with federal Land and Water Conservation Funds. Five years later, State bond monies were used to purchase 205 acres for recreational use. The grant applications did not specify the kind of recreational uses for which the land was to be acquired, and the County has not adopted a master plan for the park or the expansion area. However, the County Parks and Recreation Department envisions active recreational uses like ball fields, picnicking, trails, and an RV park for the expansion area (Rodrigues, 2001). About 30 acres of the expansion property is located in the developed portion of the Park. Approximately 200 acres are located on the campus site.

The County maintains the North Lake Road bikeway, which extends from the park down Lake Road to Yosemite Avenue. The City of Merced plans to extend its existing 14-mile Class I bikeway from McKee Road to the County's bicycle route.

Bikeways. The Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG) Regional Bicycle Plan (1998) is a component of the 1990 Merced County General Plan and the 1998 Regional Transportation Plan Update. The MCAG Plan outlines planning and funding for regional bikeways. It addresses existing bikeway conditions, proposes new facilities, and prioritizes future projects and funding from a regional perspective. The priority projects list includes a connection to the UC Merced campus. The document references Merced County General Plan Circulation Element policies T-2.4, T-2.5, T-2.6, which support alternative transportation.

MCAG's Merced and Atwater Bicycle Plan, adopted November 1999, was created as an extension of Merced's and Atwater's General Plans, the Regional Bicycle Plan, and the Regional Transportation Plan. There is currently only one regional bikeway—a two-mile path along Lake Road from Yosemite Avenue in Merced to Lake Yosemite Regional Park at the entrance to the proposed University Community. The Plan proposes a regional bikeway system connecting Merced and Atwater with the University of California, Merced campus and UCP area, while completing and interconnecting bikeways within the two cities. The Plan also proposes specific bikeway connections from the City of Merced to the campus using creek ways, various canals,

and transmission line rights of way to connect to the existing Lake Road path, the Campus Parkway, or Bellevue Road.

The City of Merced, with an investment of \$4 million over the past 25 years, has completed over 45 miles of bike routes ending at McKee Road. The City currently has a funding application before Caltrans for an extension of the City's bikeway system to within one-half mile of a future connection with the two-mile regional bikeway that runs along Lake Road to the west of the UCP area.

Other Recreational Facilities. In addition to Lake Yosemite Regional Park, other recreational areas administered by the County include the following:

- Houlihan Park, about 12 miles north of the project site, in Planada;
- Henderson Park, approximately 15 miles north of the project site, near Snelling. This park provides 35 developed acres of facilities for fishing, picnicking, and softball fields and includes an 800-square-foot clubhouse with outdoor picnic shelter available by reservation; and
- Hagaman Park, located approximately 25 miles from the project site, three miles south of Hilmar on the Merced River, a 16-acre park with fishing and picnicking facilities.

Other nearby recreational facilities are community and neighborhood parks operated by the City of Merced. They include Fahrens Park, Santa Fe Park, Rahilly Park, and Burbank Park.

There are also state and federal recreational opportunities in the vicinity. These include 11 different state recreation and fish and game sites, providing a total of 65,735 acres of public open space (Merced County, 2001). Two national wildlife refuges provide public access to 34,574 acres of bird-watching and other, passive recreational opportunities.

Merced Hills Golf Course and Other Golfing Facilities. Although much of the proposed campus is currently used for grazing, approximately 200 acres of the site is occupied by the Merced Hills Golf Course, a public 18-hole par-72 course. The Merced Hills Golf Course is owned by the Virginia Smith Trust, and its revenues are used to fund higher education scholarships for young people living in Merced County. The course is located approximately one-half mile to the south of Lake Yosemite Regional Park. Over 47,000 rounds were played in the most recent year for which records are available, with the number of rounds having increased over 40 percent in the past three seasons (Merced County, 2001). Sixty-five percent of players are from the Merced area, 25 percent from Atwater, 5 percent from other areas of the county and 5 percent from outside the county. It is estimated that if the course were to be closed, approximately 40 percent would play in Atwater, ten percent in Madera, 40 percent in Chowchilla, 5 percent in Santa Nella, and 5 percent at Stevinson Ranch (Bates, 2001).

In addition to this public facility, the Merced Golf and Country Club is located near the campus site. The latter is also an 18-hole golf course but is private, open only to members and guests from reciprocal facilities.

There are other golfing opportunities nearby, including the following:

- Turlock Golf & Country Club, adjacent to the Merced/Stanislaus County line (18 holes, private);
- Rancho Del Rey Golf Club, located in Atwater (18 holes, semiprivate);

- Forebay Golf Course, Santa Nella (9-hole, public);
- Meadowland Golf Course, between Merced and Hilmar (9-hole, public);
- Stevinson Ranch (near Hilmar) (18-hole, public);
- Madera Municipal (18-hole, public);
- Pheasant Run, Chowchilla (18-hole, public).

About half of these golf courses were developed in the last 5 years. In addition, the County of Merced has approved a golf course as part of a 400-dwelling-unit development to be located southwest of Los Banos. This has not been constructed. With the exception of Rancho Del Rey Golf Club in Atwater, use levels of nearby golf courses are currently under capacity. For example, the Stevinson Ranch facility, a public course, has an annual capacity of 90,000 rounds; last year, only 38,000 rounds were played (Kelley, 2001). Other public and private golf courses are also operating below capacity, including Meadowland (Greenhill, 2001), Madera Municipal (Catanesi, 2001), and Pheasant Run, which alone would have sufficient capacity to accept all persons who currently golf at Merced Hills Golf Course (Rotan, 2001).

4.13.3 Impacts and Mitigation

4.13.3.1 *Standards of Significance*

The following standards of significance are based on Appendix G of the CEQA Guidelines. For the purposes of this EIR, an impact to recreation would be considered significant if the proposed project would

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

4.13.3.2 *Analytical Method*

The County has established a minimum standard of 2.5 acres of neighborhood parks for each 1,000 inhabitants. However, no standards exist for regional parks or golf courses. To determine whether increased demand from campus-related population increases would lead to physical deterioration of neighborhood park facilities, the EIR uses the County's minimum standard for neighborhood parks. To determine whether increased demand from campus-related population increases would lead to physical deterioration of Lake Yosemite Regional Park, the EIR compares current ratios of population to regional park square footage with projected ratios of population to regional park square footage at full development of the LRDP. With respect to golf courses, the EIR evaluates capacity of existing golf courses in the vicinity in order to evaluate whether closure of the Merced Hills Golf Course will lead to construction of a replacement golf course which might have adverse physical impacts on the environment.

4.13.3.3 *Project Impacts and Mitigation*

4.13-1 **Implementation of the LRDP would increase the area population and result in an increased demand for recreational facilities, which could cause a deterioration of the facilities. This impact is considered *potentially significant*.**

Neighborhood Parks. At full development, the UC Merced campus will house 16,150 on-campus residents. This new population would not place a substantial demand on neighborhood parks and other similar recreational facilities according to County standards. As explained previously, the County has established a minimum standard of 2.5 acres of neighborhood parks for each 1,000 inhabitants. The campus would provide approximately 250 acres of open space and recreational facilities, including most of the standard athletic and recreation facilities of a university campus. There would be about 116 acres of recreational facilities, which is the minimum required to meet Division I NCAA requirements; the remaining 134 acres would be open space. This would mean that the campus would include more than 8 acres of recreation and open space per 1,000 on-campus residents. In addition, many of these facilities, including trails and bicycle paths, would be available to the general population of the surrounding area. The on-campus residents would be likely to use the recreational facilities that would be part of the project. Since the project would include the addition of substantial amounts of recreational facilities and areas, it would not result in substantial deterioration of neighborhood parks and other similar recreational facilities.

Lake Yosemite Regional Park. Because of the campus's proximity of Lake Yosemite Regional Park and the fact that the park offers unique recreational facilities (water-related recreation) which would not be available on campus, use of the Lake Yosemite Regional Park could increase due to the on-campus residents. Certain park facilities are at capacity on summer weekends. Therefore, an increase in use of the park by on-campus residents could lead to a physical deterioration of on-site facilities.

As explained under the Analytical Method section, there is no measure available to assess the magnitude of impacts related to the physical deterioration of regional recreational facilities from increased use. Although a ratio of residents to acres of regional parkland is not necessarily an indicator of physical deterioration, absent any other measure, this EIR uses the ratio of county residents to acres of existing regional parkland to present the magnitude of this impact. If the ratio of existing county residents to acres of regional parkland is used as an indicator of physical deterioration (currently estimated at 0.88 acres per 1,000 residents), the addition of 16,150 persons (on-campus residents at full campus development) to the County resident population would cause this ratio to decline to 0.82 acres per 1,000 residents, a decline of about 6.8 percent. It should be noted, however, that the campus itself would provide significant additional recreational space.

Although this change is small, the impact is considered potentially significant because Lake Yosemite Regional Park currently experiences congestion on weekends and the proposed project could exacerbate the congested conditions, and resulting physical deterioration of park facilities. Furthermore, the campus will be constructed on approximately 208 acres of land originally purchased by the County of Merced for possible park expansion. Thus, this potential expansion site will not be available to reduce impacts from increased demand.

Mitigation Measures

Implementation of the following mitigation measure would reduce this impact to a *less-than-significant* level:

- 4.13-1(a) *Work with the County to develop a program for joint use of on-campus recreational, parking and sports facilities.*
- 4.13-1(b) *Prior to transfer of title of any land that is currently or planned to be part of the Lake Yosemite Regional Park, work with the County to develop appropriate mechanisms for acquiring additional property to replace that potential parkland lost to conversion to non-open space campus uses.*
- 4.13-1(c) *Work with the County to expand Lake Yosemite Regional Park in response to impacts associated with the development of the University Community, UC Merced and other growth in the north Merced region.*
- 4.13-1(d) *Work with the County to monitor use of Lake Yosemite Regional Park. If park use increases due to development of the campus and University Community such that substantial physical deterioration of park facilities occurs, then the University will negotiate with the County to offset increased costs to the County for maintenance of park facilities.*

Impacts of Mitigation Measures

Using current ratios of regional parkland to county population as a guide, the County may choose to add 14.2 acres to Lake Yosemite Regional Park to accommodate the resident population of the campus. The County may choose to add as much as 55.5 acres of parkland to Lake Yosemite Regional Park in order to provide additional open space and park facilities to accommodate demand from campus and community residents combined. Finally, using the same ratio, the County might choose to add about 161.2 acres of regional parkland to Lake Yosemite Regional Park or other regional parks to serve the increased county population from the campus and community plus the regional population increase that is expected to occur regardless of whether the campus and community are developed.

Any expansion area for Lake Yosemite Regional Park likely would be adjacent to Lake Yosemite. All or part of the expansion area may remain as open space. However, the County may choose to develop a portion of the expansion park property with park facilities. The environmental impacts from the development of expansion park property cannot be evaluated because no specific site has been identified and no facilities have been proposed. There are no additional lands around Lake Yosemite that are under public ownership. One parcel adjacent to Lake Yosemite is currently the subject of a development proposal, the Lake Yosemite Estates project. An EIR is currently under preparation for this development project. A portion of that parcel or other lands on the north side of Lake Yosemite may be candidates for additional park facilities. However, those areas also contain wetland habitat areas including vernal pools. The impacts from the development of those areas would be very similar to impacts that would have resulted if the displaced potential parklands on the campus site were to be developed.

Development of park uses in the vicinity of Lake Yosemite also could require access on existing roads in the area, such as Golf Road and/or Old Lake Road. As a result, increased traffic, particularly on weekends and on summer weekdays, could result in higher levels of congestion and traffic-related noise on small, residential streets. It would be speculative for this EIR to

further characterize the impacts of park expansion based on the limited information that is available at this time. Impacts of the park expansion would be fully evaluated and analyzed during the environmental review for the expansion project.

4.13-2 Implementation of the LRDP would not require the construction of replacement golf course facilities. This impact is considered *less than significant*.

On-Campus Recreational Facilities. As noted above, the campus would provide about 116 acres of recreational facilities. Environmental effects from the construction of the recreational facilities included in the LRDP as part of the campus are analyzed throughout this EIR. Where appropriate, including in the section related to biological resources, mitigation measures are proposed to reduce adverse physical effects on the environment.

Merced Hills Golf Course. The project would result in the closure of the Merced Hills Golf Course. As discussed in the Environmental Setting section, due to recent expansions of golf course facilities in the region, other golf courses are currently operating below capacity and could absorb the demand for golf facilities that would be displaced by the campus. The displaced golfers would have to travel longer distances to use the other golf courses and may have to pay increased fees at these facilities. This will be inconvenient for the current users of the Merced Hills Golf Course and will constitute a real loss for those affected. While these effects are of great importance to the community, and are substantial economic and social effects, they are not physical effects on the environment. Under the Standard of Significance used in this EIR, the question is whether closure of this golf course would result in construction of a replacement golf course, which in turn would have adverse environmental effects. Because sufficient capacity exists at other golf courses in the area, the closure of this golf course would not directly lead to the construction of a replacement golf course elsewhere. Therefore, the project would not result in adverse environmental effects due to the need to build a replacement golf course.

Nevertheless, the University will compensate the Virginia Smith Trust for the full market value of the golf course, including the memberships. If the Trust chooses to use those proceeds to build a new golf course elsewhere, it could do so. It is possible that others also may choose to build a new golf course, although the University is unaware of any proposals to do so at the present time. Golf courses are private enterprises and new golf facilities would be added by private investment at any time that market demand is sufficiently high. However, it would be speculative to attempt to characterize the environmental impacts of the development of a replacement golf course, since its location and size cannot be determined at this time.

Although the University recognizes the importance of the golf course to those who use the facility, based on the CEQA standard of significance and the information provided above, this EIR determines that the impact from the removal of Merced Hills Golf Course would be *less than significant*.

The University understands that the University Community Plan EIR prepared by the County utilizes a local standard of significance and concludes that the impact from loss of the Merced Hills Golf Course would be significant under that standard. Under CEQA, it is appropriate for local lead agencies to devise standards of significance particular to the concerns of their constituents. However, CEQA does not require the University to adopt the County's standard. Based upon its independent judgment, and that of its consultants, the University has determined

that the standard in Appendix G to the CEQA Guidelines is the appropriate standard to determine the effects on the environment resulting from loss of the existing golf course on the campus site.

Mitigation Measures

No mitigation required.

4.13.3.4 Cumulative Impacts

4.13-3 Cumulative growth in area population will result in an increased demand for recreational facilities, which could cause a deterioration of the facilities. This impact is considered significant.

Neighborhood Parks

Campus, University Community, and Campus Parkway. The University Community will include neighborhood parks sufficient to accommodate the needs of its residents. As explained above, the campus also includes open space and recreational facilities at a ratio surpassing the requirements of the local communities. In addition, campus recreational facilities likely would be used by students, faculty and staff living in the University Community, as well as others living in the community. It is general University policy to provide some access to the general public to the types of recreational facilities planned for the campus. The Campus Parkway project would not create an increased demand for recreational facilities.

Other Cumulative Development. Both the City of Merced and the County have in place programs to require new residential development to either dedicate land or to provide funds for the acquisition of land for park development. Consequently, new residential construction would be provided with parkland at a ratio determined by the particular municipality, i.e., 1.5 acres of community parks, 3.5 acres of neighborhood parks within the City of Merced, and 2.5 acres of parkland for development within the County. Therefore, increased population in the region will not result in substantial deterioration of existing park and recreational facilities.

Lake Yosemite Regional Park

Campus, University Community, and Campus Parkway. As discussed under Impact 4.13-1, Lake Yosemite Regional Park currently operates at capacity on summer weekends and this condition could be exacerbated due to increases in population associated with the campus and University Community. If the ratio of existing county residents to acres of regional parkland is used as an indicator of physical deterioration (currently estimated at 0.88 acres per 1,000 residents), the addition of 46,932 persons (on-campus residents at full campus development plus community residents at full University Community Development) to the County resident population would cause this ratio to decline to 0.72 acres per 1,000 residents. As a result of heavy use, park facilities could physically deteriorate triggering the need for more maintenance. This cumulative impact is *potentially significant*.

Other Cumulative Development. Other development in Merced County also would contribute to growth in population, which in turn could lead to physical deterioration of regional park facilities. County population is projected to grow from 215,256 in 2001 to 351,488 in 2025 (without the campus and the University Community). If the total on-and off-campus population growth associated with the campus is added to the projected increases in regional population without the new campus, the total county population is estimated to increase by 398,420 persons

by 2025. The ratio of residents to regional park acreage would decline to 0.48. In order to maintain the same availability of regional parklands to the future County populations as exist today, about 161.2 acres of parkland would need to be added to Lake Yosemite Regional Park or other regional parks to serve the increased county population. This ratio is a rough approximation of use levels that will trigger deterioration. Monitoring at Lake Yosemite Regional Park, as well as other regional parks, will determine the extent that expansion is needed to prevent physical deterioration of park facilities or whether other types of maintenance activities can adequately prevent substantial deterioration. This cumulative impact is *significant and unavoidable*.

4.13-4 Cumulative development would not require the construction of replacement golf course facilities. This impact is considered *less than significant*.

Campus and University Community. The campus would result in loss of approximately 200 acres of the Merced Hills Golf Course. The campus and University Community combined would eliminate the entire golf course. Nevertheless, as discussed above, the loss of this golf course would not directly result in construction of a replacement golf course which would have adverse physical effects on the environment. The cumulative environmental impact is *less than significant*.

Other Cumulative Development. No other projects in the region would result in the closure of the Merced Hills Golf Course. As discussed in the Environmental Setting section, a new golf course has been approved elsewhere in the county. However, that golf course was approved independent of this project.

REFERENCES

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