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UC MERCED, MERCED COUNTY REPORTS DETAIL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Merced, CA – The development of the new University of California, Merced campus and adjacent University Community will over time result in various environmental impacts that range from negligible to significant, according to the draft Environmental Impact Reports [EIRs] released today by The University of California, Merced and Merced County. Through the reports, both the University and the County propose mitigation measures to reduce or eliminate many of the projects' significant environmental impacts.

The EIRs were made available to the public and forwarded to various federal and state regulatory agencies for review. In addition, the EIRs were also made available to the public at repositories in Sacramento, Merced, and Los Banos, and the documents were made available on CD-ROM to interested parties. The documents will be posted on the web site <http://www.ucmercedplanning.net> within a few days.

The California Environmental Quality Act requires public review of the EIRs for a 45-day period.

UC Draft EIR

The draft EIR for the proposed UC Merced campus assesses the potential environmental effects of the campus, identifies means to eliminate or reduce potential adverse impacts, and evaluates reasonable alternatives to the proposed project. Such issues as aesthetics, agricultural resources, air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, geology, hazardous materials, hydrology, land use/planning, population increases, public services, recreation, traffic, and utilities are described in great detail in the document.

Following are some of the findings of the UC Merced draft EIR:

Agricultural Resources

- Implementation of the UC Merced Long Range Development Plan [LRDP] would result in the conversion of about 684 acres of grazing land to non-agricultural uses. This is not a significant environmental impact, concluded the report. However, because the County's proposed University Community would result in conversion of prime farmland, and other farmland of statewide significance, the two projects together would result in a significant impact to agricultural resources. Mitigation measures proposed by the County would include: protection of comparable quantity and quality farmland through purchase of voluntary farmland conservation easements.

Biological Resources

- Development of the campus under the LRDP would result in the loss of 78 acres of vernal pools, clay playas, and other wetlands. These wetlands provide important habitat for protected and special status species, including the vernal pool fairy shrimp and several special status plant species. Accordingly, the University

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has proposed an extensive resource mitigation program. The University will ensure no net loss of wetland functions by implementing a program of wetland preservation, enhancement, and creation. The Resource Mitigation Program will result in the acquisition and preservation of substantial acreages of vernal pool-dominated grassland habitat and other wetland resources throughout eastern Merced County and the restoration, enhancement or creation of wetland resources within these preserved areas. The Resource Mitigation Program will be designed to address impacts on wetlands and associated upland habitat and the special status species that depend upon those habitats. Areas to be preserved under the Resource Mitigation Program will be protected in perpetuity by conservation easements.

- Other potential impacts of the campus development to biological resources include: loss of nesting habitat for resident and migratory avian species of special concern and raptors known to breed in the project vicinity, and indirect impacts to wetlands and uplands adjacent to the campus site. A variety of mitigation measures are proposed to address these impacts, including such activities as: surveys of special status avian species and creation of buffer zones as necessary to protect active nests from construction, channeling of storm water runoff to the University storm water collection system, and creation of a 250-foot wide monitoring area between all developed areas and the adjacent Campus Land Reserve.

Hydrology and Water Quality

- Another potential impact studied by the EIR was the effect on groundwater supply. The report concludes that the potable water needs of the campus were taken into account in the 1995 Water Supply Plan prepared by the City of Merced and the Merced Irrigation District. The campus will not adversely affect groundwater supplies.

University Community Plan Draft EIR

The draft EIR for the proposed University Community to the south of the future UC campus assesses the potential environmental effects of the Community, identifies means to eliminate or reduce potential adverse impacts, and evaluates reasonable alternatives to the proposed project. Such issues as aesthetics, agricultural resources, air quality, biological resources, cultural resources, geology, hazardous materials, hydrology, land use/planning, population increases, public services, recreation, traffic, and utilities are evaluated in the document.

Some of the key issues addressed in the Draft EIR include:

Agriculture

- The University Community Plan area designated for development is approximately 2,130 acres to the south of the University site. Of this total acreage, the Community site contains approximately 1,420 acres of state-designated important farmlands.
- Development of the University Community could result in the conversion of important productive farmlands. Mitigation measures proposed by the County would include: protection of comparable quantity and quality farmland through purchase of voluntary farmland conservation easements.
- Development of the Community could expose future residents to nuisances associated with agricultural operation and could expose farmers to nuisances associated with urban uses. Mitigation measures would include creation of buffer zones between developed areas and actively farmed areas, and special notices to future residents of the proximity to agricultural operations and concomitant effects.

Biological Resources

- The proposed Community would result in the direct loss of individuals or occupied habitat of endangered, threatened, or rare wildlife and plant species. Mitigation measures to reduce potential impacts to wildlife

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would include: environmentally sensitive design, protection of on-site and adjacent off-site habitats where feasible, implementation of compensatory mitigation and monitoring plans, and incorporation of open space corridors within the Community to allow wildlife movement.

- Jurisdictional waters of the United States: The County draft EIR finds that there are 58 acres of jurisdictional waters within the University Community Plan area; and a maximum of 36 acres are expected to be filled and graded as a result of the project. Fill of these wetlands would be only possible through securing of permits from federal and state agencies charged with protecting these resources. In addition, mitigation measures to be adopted for the Community would include a requirement that there be no net loss of wetland functions and values, protection of avoided on-site wetlands and offsite adjacent wetlands, plus habitat mitigation plans that preserve habitat for acreage destroyed.

Hydrology and Water Quality

- Potable Water Supply: It is anticipated that water for the Community would be supplied by groundwater; to meet fluctuations in potable water demands, water storage tanks would be constructed. Although the draft EIR finds that development of the University Community would increase demand for potable water, a variety of mitigation measures would suffice to provide ample water supply. The projected potable water demand of the Community is substantially less than the amount assumed in the Water Supply Plan created in 1995 by the City of Merced and Merced Irrigation District. In addition, recycled wastewater is proposed for landscape irrigation purposes in portions of the Community in order to reduce new demand for groundwater. Further, current agricultural use of water on the area of the development would be phased out at the same time that the Community demand would increase, decreasing the net effect of the proposed Community.
- New impervious surfaces associated with development of the proposed Community could affect groundwater recharge potential. This potential impact was considered less than significant because the existing soils within the Community area contain substantial clay content, and localized clay hardpan areas, and currently provide low potential for groundwater recharge.
- Development of the Community would alter local drainage patterns and could increase the rate and volume of stormwater runoff, resulting in localized flooding. Mitigation measures include the creation of effective stormwater drainage systems and controls.

Public Comment, Hearings

The release of the permitting documents by UC Merced and Merced County will be followed by several opportunities for public comment. Individuals and groups wishing to review the documents are asked to visit the public repositories, view the web site postings, and/or request individual CD-ROM copies of the documents. Those wishing to submit written comments on the LRDP or LRDP EIR may submit them to UC Merced, and those wishing to submit written comments on the University Community Plan or UCP EIR may submit them to Merced County. In addition, public workshops and hearings are planned, starting with presentations of the University Community Plan and EIR on August 21 and 22. For more information, please visit the project web site:

<http://www.ucmercedplanning.net>.

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