



## PRESS RELEASE

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### **5,030 ACRES IN EASTERN MERCED COUNTY PRESERVED**

*Newest conservation easement highlights partnership  
between UC Merced and The Nature Conservancy*

*Merced, CA* – The University of California, Merced and The Nature Conservancy have announced finalization of a conservation easement on 5,030 acres of the former Virginia Smith Trust (VST) property, located in the eastern portion of Merced County.

The generous gifts of \$12 million from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and \$2 million from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, made in 2001, facilitated the University's acquisition of the land from the VST.

The Packard gift also enabled UC to convey a conservation easement on the land to The Nature Conservancy. The Conservancy purchased the land as part of its on-going mission to protect suitable property from future development. The area is biologically rich with vernal pool-grasslands habitat and located northeast of the city of Merced.

"The entire conservation effort associated with the development of the UC Merced campus has to date preserved a 39-square mile area that truly showcases this beautiful eastern Merced County landscape," said UC Merced Chancellor Carol Tomlinson-Keasey. "The University is proud to announce this recent conservation easement that will help protect the area for California's future generations from future development. The preservation of this wonderful asset will also contribute to the University's educational and research activities."

The easement emphasizes maintenance of ranching and grazing in addition to scientific and other educational activities. The University will create a 750-acre natural reserve adjacent to its new campus where UC researchers may conduct scientific studies to help understand and preserve the complex vernal pool habitat.

"These activities will contribute to the preservation of the property's natural, hydrologic, biological, ecological and scientific values," said Tomlinson-Keasey.

Several years ago The Nature Conservancy planners identified the Merced grasslands as a top conservation priority. With California's population expected to grow by almost 50 percent over the next 25 years, development pressure is particularly strong in the Central Valley.

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“As history has shown, in areas of high anticipated growth, such as the San Joaquin Valley, land is quickly developed and not always in the wisest of ways,” explained Valerie Gordon, the Nature Conservancy’s project director for the Merced grasslands project. “Both animal and plant species are often negatively impacted by such development. We recognize that one of the most effective ways to conserve the precious vernal pool habitat is to protect it with conservation easements, that safeguard it from future development.”

The easement will ensure that the property be preserved in perpetuity by prohibiting subdivision, development, and agricultural conversion from ranching to orchards or row crops. The Conservancy will hold and monitor the easement as part of its ongoing mission to protect ecologically valuable habitat. The grasslands northeast of the city of Merced are rich in vernal pools that provide vital habitat for a number of threatened and endangered species.

Vernal “springtime” pools are small seasonal ponds that support a number of at-risk species such as fairy shrimp and rare wildflowers and attract numerous waterfowl and shorebirds in winter and spring. Vernal pools are one of California’s most threatened natural communities. Other features of the property include grasslands, mounds and swales, natural stream courses and waterways.

In 1999, Governor Davis and the State Legislature created a \$30 million fund to acquire and preserve habitat in eastern Merced County to compensate for the effects of the creation of the new UC Merced campus. As of today, the conservation program, co-directed by The Nature Conservancy and the California Wildlife Conservation Board, has already designated more than 31,000 acres for preservation.

The unprecedented conservation effort has been successful thanks to the work of California Governor Gray Davis, the California State Legislature, federal elected representatives, state and federal agencies, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, private conservation groups including The Nature Conservancy, and the University.

*UC Merced is the first American research university to be built in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and currently employs approximately 100 educators and professionals. The University is planned to eventually grow to 25,000 students at build-out in 2030. In addition to its main campus, UC Merced will utilize digital technology to create an educational network serving students and communities throughout the San Joaquin Valley. The University currently operates educational centers in Bakersfield, Fresno, and Merced. Another center is planned for Modesto.*

*The Nature Conservancy is an international non-profit membership organization whose mission is to preserve the plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. Founded in 1951, The Nature Conservancy and its 1,000,000 members nationwide have safeguarded more than 12 million acres in all 50 states and Canada. The Conservancy has also worked with the like-minded partner organizations to preserve more than 80 million acres in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Asia. California is the Conservancy’s largest state chapter and a leader in program development. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Nature Conservancy of California has 118,000 members and has protected more than one million acres in the state.*