

# Here comes UC Merced,

Even the nation's highest-ranking environmentalist, Al Gore, is exerting political pressure to get UC-Merced on the fast track — regardless of the threat campus construction poses to pristine wetlands.

By William Fulton  
and Paul Shigley



ice presidents don't turn up in Merced County very often, but on a Tuesday in early April Al Gore's plane hit the tarmac at Castle Air Force Base in Atwater just before noon. Gore was an hour late because of developments in Kosovo, but his tardiness didn't dampen Merced's enthusiasm for him — nor, apparently, did it dampen his enthusiasm for Merced.

The reason was simple: Although Gore arrived at a stark symbol of the Central Valley's current economic problems — Castle closed in 1995 — he was there to learn about the project that most observers believe is the Valley's best bet for future prosperity: the coming University of California campus at Merced.

After being greeted by the Golden Valley High School Band, Gore spent four hours meeting with local farmers, political leaders, students and teachers, listening to ambitious plans for the long-anticipated University of California campus.

Local leaders boasted about the digital technology and environmental research planned for UC Merced and asked for Gore's support in moving along construction of the campus, which is scheduled for ground breaking in about two years.

Then, flanked by two of the Valley's leading Democratic politicians — U.S. Representative Gary Condit (D-Modesto) and Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante — Gore declared his enthusiastic support for the whole UC-Merced effort. "I'm very impressed with what you guys are doing," he gushed.



# ready or not



Then he pledged to create a task force to expedite federal environmental review of campus development.

Gore's visit was gratifying for both Condit and Bustamante, who have pushed hard for speedy construction of the Merced campus. In fact, Gore's visit came only three weeks after a UC Regents meeting in which Bustamante pressed University of California officials to start sooner rather than later. Concerned that compliance with California's environmental laws would delay things, he suggested he would back special legislation, if necessary, to expedite environmental review.



## Look out, fairy shrimp

But it's ironic that Gore — the likely “smart growth” candidate for president next year — is willing to use his influence to hasten environmental review of the Merced campus. The 17-square-mile tract of land outside Merced where the campus will be built is one of the Valley's most environmentally sensitive locations. The campus and a proposed “university community” surrounding it would



rise on the western edge of “probably the largest unfragmented vernal pool grassland environment left anywhere in the world,” notes Steven Johnson, director of stewardship and science for The Nature Conservancy’s California office.

Vernal pools — small depressions in the earth that become wetlands during the rainy season — are the Valley’s largest environmental resource and its largest environmental headache. They usually provide habitat for fairy shrimp, which is listed as an endangered species under federal law.

And the choices confronting UC and Merced officials in planning the campus show how difficult it will be to balance new development, farmland, and natural resources as the Valley’s population growth accelerates during the next several decades. University planners chose unirrigated rangeland — not prime farmland — for the campus and the surrounding community, which could together contain more than 50,000 people. But trying to minimize impacts on vernal pools has pushed growth to the eastern edge of the property — far from the City of Merced’s existing urban infrastructure.

Already, both Merced County and the City of Merced have altered their urban growth designations to accommodate this new university community.

## First in 30 years

Yet putting the campus so far to the east could increase the cost of infrastructure and threaten prime farmland next to Merced and the campus with suburban sprawl. “The implications go far beyond Merced County or the San Joaquin Valley or even the state, as agricultural production in this valley is so important to the nation,” says Marsh Pitman, local Sierra Club conservation chair.

UC-Merced will be built on two adjacent tracts of land near Lake Yosemite, six miles northeast of Merced — a location UC Regents chose in 1995 over competing “greenfield” sites in Madera and Fresno counties. The Lake Yosemite site’s relative proximity to urban areas, the availability of water, and the location in depressed Merced County worked in its favor — as did the willingness of the property owners to donate 2,000 acres to UC for the campus itself. The campus has become a major symbol of hope in Merced, where, without UC, local planners otherwise expect a doubling of the population during the next 20 years with little prospect for high-paying jobs.

UC-Merced will be the first University of California campus built from scratch in more than 30 years — meaning it will be the first new campus subject to the California Environmental Quality Act, the federal Endangered Species Act, and a whole raft of other environmental laws that have come to play an important role in shaping California’s urban growth patterns.

UC has gained experience in dealing with CEQA and other environmental laws in recent years, largely as the result of hard-fought battles over “long-range development plans” to allow expansion of Berkeley, Davis, UCLA and other campuses. “I really want to get away from any

thoughts that we want to get around the system, because that is not our strategy,” says Roger Samuelsen, UC-Merced’s chief of staff and director of administration. “Our approach is to work within the regulatory environment and go about this in the most responsible, environmentally sensitive, and economical way.” UC-Merced already has established “green” credentials by creating the Sierra Nevada Research Institute, which will tie to Yosemite, Kings Canyon and Sequoia national parks, and plans to incorporate nearby wetlands into academic programs.

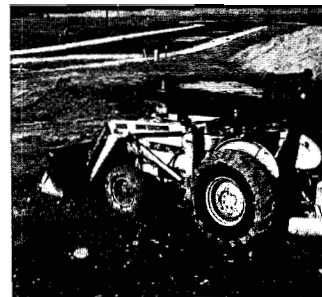
## Fast track tricky

But to stay on schedule — the campus is supposed to begin classes for 5,000 students in the fall of 2005 — UC will have to submit to fast-track planning and environmental review over the next two years. And that may be tricky. For the past year, planning has been shaped by a group of “stakeholders,” including UC, the city and county of Merced, the Merced Irrigation District, and the two trusts that own the land. (The Virginia Smith Trust and the Cyril Smith Trust, educational charities that provide scholarships to high school students in Merced and college students at Marquette University, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, own different pieces of the 10,400-acre tract that comprises the campus site and the larger community.)

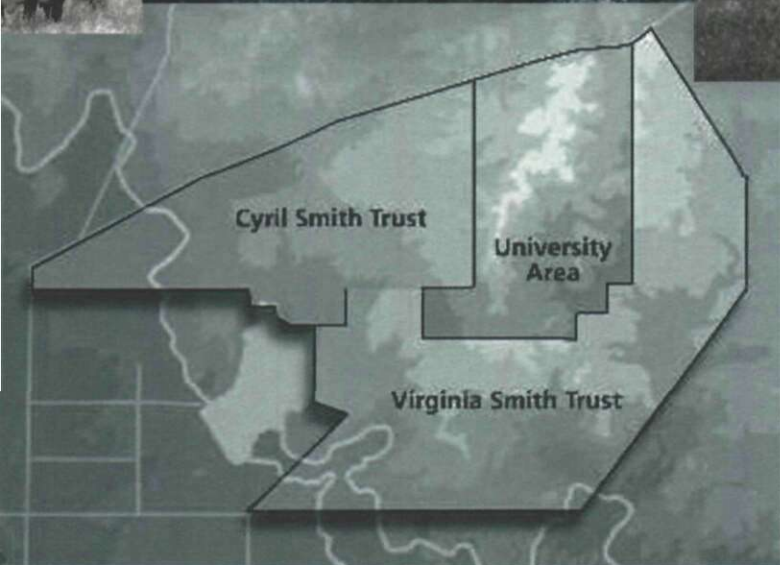
After a year of work, this planning group settled on fundamental issues. Their concept plan calls for a “core campus” on 200 acres on the eastern edge of the site, surrounded by an ancillary campus of 1,800 acres that would accommodate up to 25,000 students and 6,600 faculty and staff members.

West and south of the campus would be a university community with 31,500 residents and 8,500 jobs, covering another 3,000 acres. That would leave 5,400 acres — about half the site of the whole campus and community — for open space, parks and environmental mitigation. “It has been truly collaborative in the best sense of that word,” says Trudis Heinecke, UC’s director of physical planning. “The county, the city and the water district, for that matter, have very high-quality planning staff.... I think we all worked very hard at making it work.”

Now, Merced County is moving forward on a “specific plan” for the private areas, while UC is creating a long-range development plan for the campus itself. But two major issues remain. The first is how to relate the project effectively to the City of Merced without creating suburban sprawl in the rich farming areas nearby. The second is how to create an environmental mitigation plan — especially for the vernal pools — that will meet both state and federal muster.







U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, which administers the Endangered Species Act.

"We do not want to cut corners in this process," says Samuelsen. But the process of obtaining federal permits could be time-consuming. Under the Endangered Species Act, the Fish & Wildlife Service can issue "take" permits — allowing the university to de-

stroy vernal pools — only if UC prepares a broad-ranging plan for preservation of vernal pools in Merced County that will benefit the fairy shrimp in the long run. Such plans,

known as "habitat conservation plans," have become common elsewhere in the state, especially Southern California.

This requirement has led both UC and environmental groups to examine the adjacent Flying M Ranch, a 13,500-acre property in private ownership that contains much of the area's remaining stock of vernal pools. The Nature Conservancy owns a conservation easement on 5,000 acres of Flying M, but the rest is theoretically vulnerable to environmental degradation. In all probability, UC will seek to work with The Nature Conservancy and the landowner on a conservation plan that would lock down an easement on the rest of Flying M in exchange for permission to build the campus and the adjacent community.

## A suburban blob?

Having upped its own population projections to accommodate plans for the campus, the city clearly has its eye on annexing at least part of the developing community. (Indeed, Merced's "sphere of influence" boundary — covering the area the city is likely to annex sooner or later — reaches out dramatically to grab the campus.) Yet the county and local environmental groups are concerned about making this connection in a way that does not create an auto-oriented suburban blob in the middle.

Merced County Planning Director Robert E. Smith says the county is trying to create regulatory mechanisms to ensure the county can resist "potentially incompatible speculative proposals" in the corridor between the city and the campus. And Samuelsen says the university will work with the county to create open-space corridors that will prevent sprawl. "Growth-inducement is a major concern for us," he concedes. The environmental issues are likely to be even more difficult to overcome. The presence of vernal pools means that the university must deal not only with CEQA — a process UC can somewhat control — but will have to obtain wetland fill permits from the Army Corps of Engineers and special "incidental take" permits from the

## Wetlands: pop. 35,000

The Nature Conservancy's Johnson said it is possible to plan a fully environmentally integrated campus. "Sure, it's a wetlands site," Johnson said. "But, on the other hand, if you were going to build a new town for 35,000 people anywhere in the state, you would be hard-pressed to find a site without environmental constraints." The question is whether a deal can be put together quickly enough to maintain the current timetable. The Fish & Wildlife Service seldom issues permits quickly when the environmental stakes are high.

While mainstream environmentalists believe UC has good intentions, the political pressure to build the campus quickly is strong, and that urge could conflict with typical project review timelines. But developers who routinely wait years for regulatory approval do not have the vice president and lieutenant governor doing their bidding. UC Merced planners may already be providing a case study for future environmental science students. 🏛️

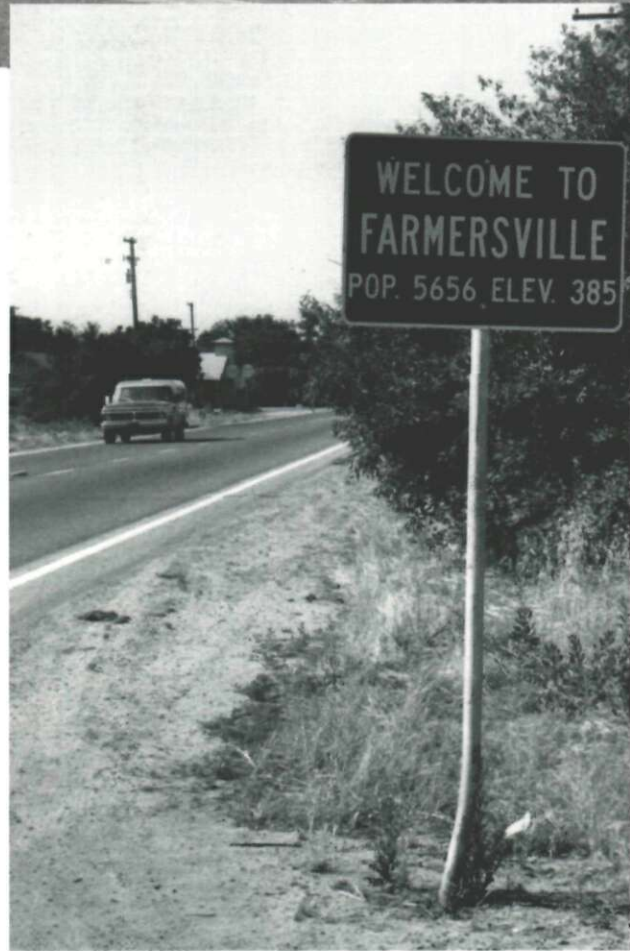
*William Fulton is editor and publisher of California Planning & Development Report, a statewide newsletter based in Ventura, and the author of "California, Land and Legacy," published by Westcliffe Publishers in 1998. Paul Shigley is managing editor of CP&DR.*



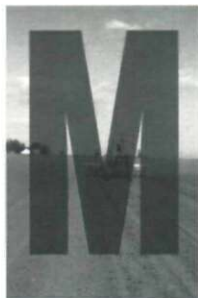
# Preserving the Valley's farm



Efforts to save the small family farm in ag-rich San Joaquin Valley encompass everything from providing advice and tutoring to Hmong refugees to running a youth-targeted publicity campaign on how grains and veggies are grown for pizzas.



By Cynthia H. Craft



Maybe someday, the doomsday scenarios go, California's Central Valley will stand stripped of its stoic armies of orchards, its orderly platoons of row crops, its scattered battalions of bent field-pickers and its lumbering squadrons of large farm machinery.

Maybe someday, in place of farmland, landscapes of asphalt will sprout, foliated with more commercial signage than the eye can absorb, with row upon row of uniform tract-house rooftops filling vistas where once the rule of agriculture reigned.

By then, one occupation of the Valley will have ended and ceded territory to its rival.