

California Native Plant Society

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September 19, 2000

Dear UC Regent,

I am writing on behalf of California Native Plant Society (CNPS) to urge you and other Regents to reexamine the decision to build a 10th campus of the University of California and a new community on the Lake Yosemite site north of Merced.

I hope you will read some of the enclosed material which provides scientific information on vernal pools and helps explain why CNPS has taken a position against the University of California's plan to develop the Lake Yosemite site.

The California Native Plant Society is a statewide, nonprofit organization of over 10,000 scientists, educators, and lay people dedicated to the appreciation, understanding and conservation of California's native flora. The Society is well known for its science-based approach to native plant conservation, and has produced definitive books such as the *Inventory of Rare and Endangered Vascular Plants of California* and *A Manual of California Vegetation*.

CNPS has a long history of interest in vernal pools and their associated plant and animal species, many of which are unique to this habitat. Vernal pools are one of the most imperiled ecosystems in the state. Because they occur in relatively flat terrain, they have been particularly vulnerable to destruction from urban development and conversion of land to agricultural use. In fact, most of California's vernal pools have already succumbed to the development that has taken place since California's statehood 150 years ago.

Our concern over this resource and our desire to promote the understanding of their biology resulted in a 1996 conference featuring many prominent scientists and conservation advocates. I enclose a copy of *Vernal Pool Ecosystems*, the proceedings of this conference, for your interest and education.

Also enclosed are copies of the October 1976 and January 2000 issues of the CNPS journal *Fremontia*. The earlier issue provides a more general overview of vernal pools, and demonstrates our long-standing interest in vernal pool communities. The recent issue gives a more detailed explanation of our current understanding of vernal pool biology and conservation, and includes an article by Robert Holland which describes the vernal pools of Eastern Merced County. Since the 1976 issue was published, the numbers of vernal pools in California have steadily decreased, and many of the remaining pools have been damaged.

The vernal pools of eastern Merced County represent the largest remaining vernal pool complex in California. The proposed siting of the University of California campus at the Lake Yosemite site has therefore become an important issue to our organization. While the direct footprint of the campus might be manipulated to destroy relatively few vernal pools by direct construction impact, it is clear that the campus will impact much land surrounding this site. The campus will require construction of a community of significant size in the adjacent vernal pool landscape. Together with new highway links, infrastructure pipelines and sewers, and all the attendant commercial development and roads to serve the inevitable suburban expansion, the campus' impact on surrounding habitat will be substantial. Any development will fragment the intact habitat and will have negative impacts on the sensitive hydrology of the area, introduce exotic organisms to the pools, and generate disturbance of the unique and very ancient soil profiles that define these pools.

The pools on the Lake Yosemite site proposed for development of a new campus and community are among the finest in the State, and therefore in the World. CNPS feels that it would be a disservice to future generations of Californians to destroy this important and beautiful ecosystem, especially if this destruction is in the name of higher education.

The University of California is widely regarded as one of the finest public university systems in the world. As such, it should be devoted to high ideals, intellectual honesty, the search for scientific truth and the appreciation of higher ethical and esthetic values. We applaud the University's interest in building a center for the study and conservation of the resources of the Sierra Nevada, and in making U.C. Merced a leader in conservation biology. However, we feel that the University's decision to build a campus and new town on some of the valuable and irreplaceable natural resources it will study represents an essential and unpalatable contradiction to the overall mission of the University and its prominent place in the intellectual community. We believe that environmental review of the Lake Yosemite site has been inadequate, and that other sites in Merced County have been prematurely excluded without due consideration of the issues.

CNPS strongly urges the Regents of the University of California and Governor Davis to build the campus in a less environmentally sensitive location, and to conserve this unique and irreplaceable resource for future U.C. Merced students, Merced County residents and other Californians. We support a U.C. campus in Merced County, and recognize the enrichment that such a campus would bring the community, but it need not and should not be at great cost to a globally significant resource.

Sincerely,

Allen Barnes
Executive Director

Enclosures: Vernal Pool Ecosystems
October 1976 issue of *Fremontia*
January 2000 issue of *Fremontia*