

# U. C. Merced: A Consensus Planning Success Story?

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EDITORS' COMMENTS. The following abstract was used by Carol W. Witham for her oral presentation at the vernal pool conference in March 2010. Although she did not provide a manuscript, the editors have extracted information from her PowerPoint presentation for this book.

ABSTRACT. In October 2007, the University of California at Merced released information about a new, reduced footprint for the campus. At the same time, nine environmental organizations issued a press release tentatively supporting the new footprint. The press was unimpressed. The saga of UC Merced began with a site selection process in the 1980s when California had no money to invest in a new campus. The situation became more heated and adversarial in the early 2000s, when Gov. Davis wanted this campus as part of his anticipated presidential bid. The campus opened on a golf course and the UC then unsuccessfully tried to get the permits necessary to fill wetlands and kill endangered species in order to expand the campus beyond Phase I. During a three year period, members of the environmental community worked with UCM administration and the regulatory agencies to formulate a better plan that considered both the environment and the needs of the campus. VernalPools.org, CNPS and others were instrumental in bringing good science to the table during these discussions. This talk will briefly cover the history of the UCM project and highlight the substantial conservation benefits that the environmental community was able to achieve through a consensus planning process. For example, the new UC footprint will conserve an additional 120 acres of vernal pool wetlands and 70 vernal pools supporting Succulent Owl's Clover.

CITATION. Witham, C. W. 2011. U. C. Merced: A consensus planning success story? Pages 151-153 in D. G. Alexander and R. A. Schlising (Editors), Research and Recovery in Vernal Pool Landscapes. Studies from the Herbarium, Number 16. California State University, Chico, CA.

## SUMMARY COMMENTS

Table 1 provides a timeline for the establishment of the new University of California campus. Following this, there is a list of benefits resulting directly and indirectly from the cam-

pus planning compromise (Table 2). This summary ends with three selected maps that illustrate the actions discussed by Witham (Figures 1 and 2).

TABLE 1. Timeline: Proposal and Establishment of University of California, Merced campus.

1988	U. C. Regents' initial plan for a new UC campus focused on the San Joaquin Valley.
1988-1995	The site selection process considered 20 candidate sites that were reduced to 3 finalist sites. This selection process was never completely described.
1995	The Lake Yosemite site in Merced County was selected as the preferred location for the new U. C. campus. This site would have partnership with large trusts that would profit from the construction of a new town around the campus. State economic problems were such that the idea of constructing a new U. C. campus was not considered likely to happen.
2000	The establishment of the new campus was put on "fast track." At that time, serious environmental concerns were raised.
TABLE 1, continued on next page	

## Research and Recovery in Vernal Pool Landscapes

TABLE 1. Continued.

2000	VernalPools.org was established by Carol Witham to help counter the potential demise of an important vernal pool landscape as a result of the proposed campus and anticipated development of an adjacent city.
2001	The EIR released in December 2001 allowed only a minimum comment period in 2002.
2005	U. C. Merced opened the first phase of the campus on a former golf course, adjacent to a vernal pool landscape, with proposed campus expansion and development into adjacent vernal pool landscapes assumed to follow.
2007	The University of California at Merced announced a new, reduced campus area. Nine environmental groups tentatively supported this move.

TABLE 2. Some of the benefits Witham listed as resulting from cooperative interactions among the interested parties.

The new U. C. campus footprint was reduced and redirected, resulting in the conservation of 721 acres of vernal pool grasslands that will be protected in perpetuity. The protected area includes 120 wetted acres (vernal pool, swales and clay playas).
This vernal pool landscape provides habitat for many unique species, such as California tiger salamander, midvalley fairy shrimp, vernal pool fairy shrimp, and succulent owl's clover.
Eastern Merced County developed a strong conservation strategy.
The University of California and non-government organizations expanded their cooperation.
A new standard has been developed for clarity and readability of environmental documents, as well as allowing for early public input.

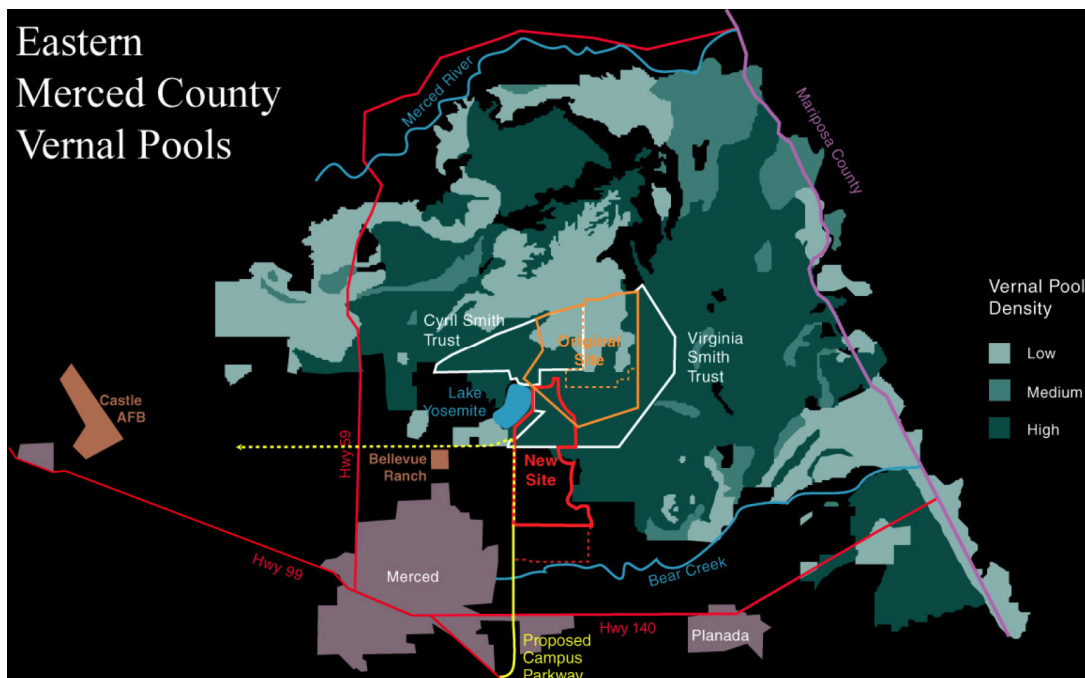


FIGURE 1. Area of vernal pool grasslands, distinguished by low, medium and high density of vernal pools, in portions of the land surrounding the new University of California, Merced campus. The original proposed campus site (light orange outline) is north of the final campus site (red-orange, south and southeast of Lake Yosemite). Figure 2 shows an enlarged version of the central area of this figure.

## Witham: A Consensus Planning Success Story?

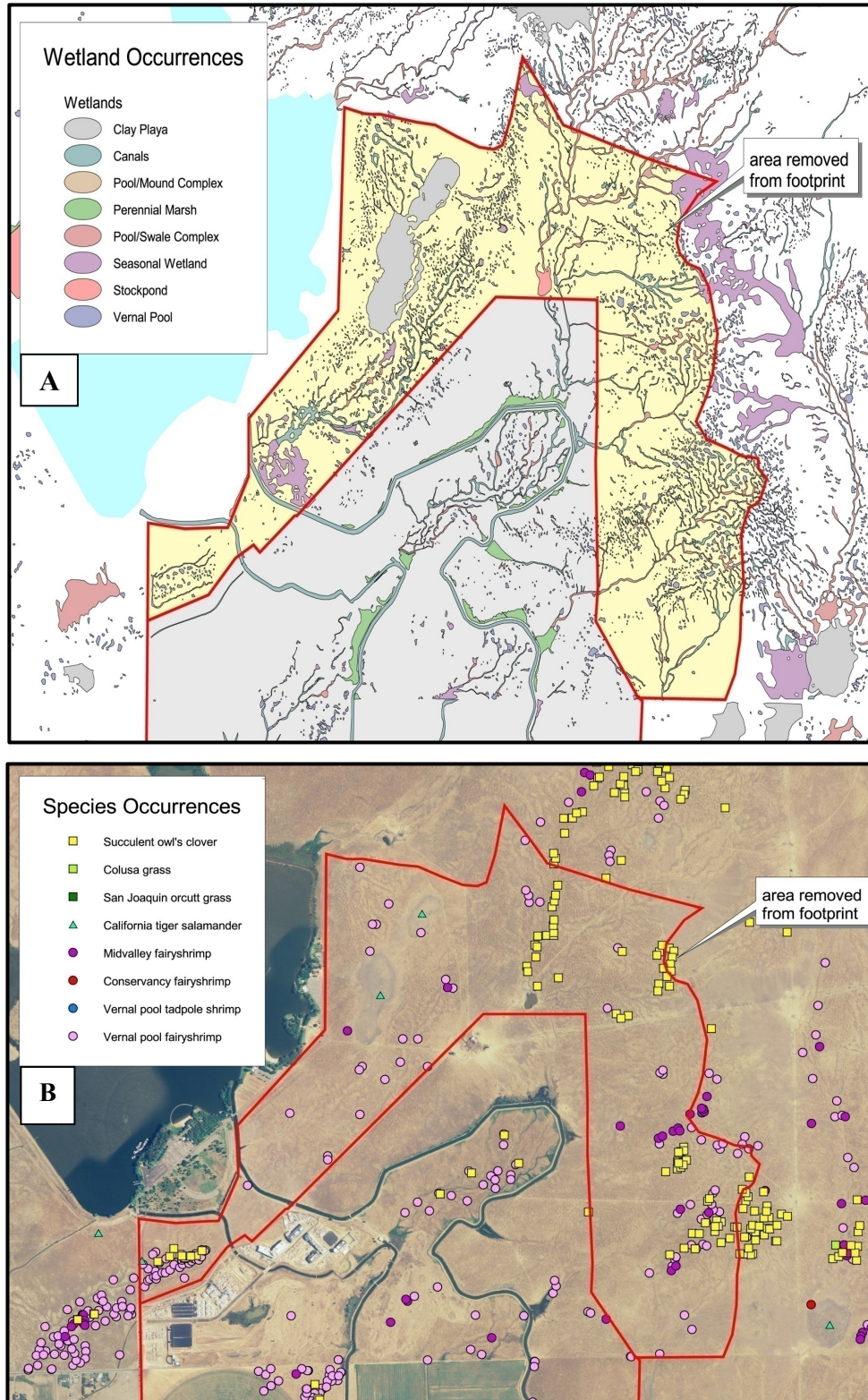


FIGURE 2. Enlarged maps of region including U. C. Merced campus, with area removed from footprint indicated. A. Wetland areas. B. Vernal pool species occurrences.

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