

Tulare County Office of Education

Jim Vidak, County Superintendent of Schools

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For Immediate Release

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Tulare County Office of Education Announces:

Partnership formed with UC Merced to create field station at Circle J-Norris Ranch site

A Partnership for Scientific Research in the Sierra Nevada Foothills

The Tulare County Office of Education and the University of California, Merced, have partnered to create a new field research station in the foothills of Tulare County.

Named the UC Merced/SCICON Field Station, the project is envisioned as a site for UC scientists to study the unique ecological issues of the San Joaquin Valley – a critical and understudied region in California for environmental research.

The project will also foster opportunities for Tulare County students and educators to participate in and contribute to research involving water, pollution, land use and conservation, and plant and animal life.

The field station is the vision of Tulare County Superintendent of Schools Jim Vidak. Several years before the university opened its campus in 2005, Vidak saw the potential in connecting UC Merced's School of Natural Sciences and the [Sierra Nevada Research Institute](#) (SNRI) with the Tulare County Office of Education's internationally known SCICON outdoor education program.

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“I hoped that the university would see the benefits of partnering with a well-established outdoor education program attended by thousands of students every year,” he said. “Through SCICON, we offer the university a broad range of research opportunities, housing, conference facilities and classrooms on two distinct sites – SCICON’s mountainous 1,100-acre campus and the lower-elevation Circle J-Norris Ranch, with 630 acres of range land.”

This week, Vidak’s long-held dream is becoming a reality. Construction is beginning on the new UC Merced/SCICON Field Station located on a recently acquired 8-acre property contiguous to SCICON’s Circle J-Norris Ranch field study site.

The property already has a modern two-story house and a separate four-car garage with an apartment above it. The garage will be converted into a laboratory for UC researchers. The 1,000 square-foot lab will allow researchers to dry or freeze samples collected in the field for transportation and analysis in laboratories at any UC campus.

Once complete, the field station will be home to dozens of UC Merced researchers who are affiliated with SNRI. For more than 10 years, UC Merced has had partnerships with Yosemite and Sequoia-Kings Canyon national parks and has field stations in both.

For more than 20 years, students from elementary grades to the community college level have come to the Circle J-Norris Ranch to participate in hands-on lessons, and often return numerous times during each year for ongoing research projects. Each year, Circle J invites high school students and their teachers to work alongside naturalists and scientists during the Field Science Weekend and BioBlitz events.

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The partnership between the university and the Tulare County Office of Education came together earlier this year with the support of UC Merced Chancellor Dorothy Leland and the enthusiasm of faculty members of the School of Natural Sciences and SNRI. The development of the field station at the Circle J-Norris Ranch will provide UC researchers opportunities to study the Sierra Nevada foothills' environmental systems, gaining insights into issues that affect the quality of life for Central Valley residents.

“The Sierra Nevada are already a valuable living laboratory for a vast array of important research addressing some of the state’s — and the world’s — most pressing challenges, such as water supplies for California and climate change,” Leland said. “UC Merced is excited to work with the Tulare County Office of Education to expand into the future of research, and to introduce the next generations of scientists to the Sierra, through this valuable partnership.”

In addition to SNRI, the university will encourage the participation of other faculty and students conducting pertinent natural science, engineering, education, social science, management, policy and humanities research. Institutes including [CalTeach](#), [UC Water](#), [The Center for the Humanities](#) and the [Health Sciences Research Institute](#) may lead initiatives with a focus on the environment, people the and future of the Sierra Nevada and the San Joaquin Valley.

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A celebration of science and service

To celebrate the creation of the UC Merced/SCICON Field Station, the Tulare County Office of Education will host a fundraising event Saturday, Nov. 17. The event will also serve to honor Vidak for his vision to create the field station and to celebrate his career as an educator. Vidak is serving the final year of his seventh term – making him Tulare County’s longest-serving county superintendent. In total, Vidak has served 28 years as Tulare County superintendent of schools, as part of a 57-year career as a teacher, principal, SCICON director and Visalia Unified administrator.

Information on tickets to the dinner event, entitled *The Vision & the Visionary: A Night to Celebrate Science & Service*, is available at tcoe.org/FieldStation.

The event will be held at the International Agri-Center in Tulare and will feature a social hour with farm-to-fork hors d’oeuvres from UC Merced Executive Chef Mitch Vanagten, a hearty dinner, a chance raffle and live entertainment. The event will also include a live auction featuring a seven-day stay at a beautiful Maui condo, four collectible cars and more. All proceeds from the event will benefit the UC Merced/SCICON Field Station.

For more information, visit tcoe.org/FieldStation or call 559-733-6302.

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