

Endangered Wallflowers Plucked

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Once again, a spread of endangered Ben Lomond wallflowers on the site of a proposed vineyard in Bonny Doon have been tampered with.

About 50 of 200 Ben Lomond wallflowers on the 525-acre site where Jim Beauregard plans a 175-acre vineyard were pulled out by the roots and removed from the site by vandals between Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, according to neighbors in the area.

The proposed vineyard site is located at the intersection of Ice Cream Grade and Martin Road.

The crime was verified by Steve Russell, a partner with Beauregard in the vineyard venture, and by Don Kelly, local warden for the state Department of Fish and Game.

Beauregard was unavailable for comment.

This isn't the first time the five-acre habitat of this endangered plant species has been tampered with.

County Environmental Coordinator Tom Burns said there have been several instances in the past when people have plucked the tops from the rare plants.

The most well-known case of tampering with the endangered plants occurred almost exactly a year ago when Gard Hellenthal, a former resident on the land, graded the area where the plants grow.

Hellenthal told county supervisors at the time he was grading the area to clear brush for firebreaks without permission from the property owner, Teachers Management and Investment.

In granting permits for Beauregard's vineyard, both the county Board of Supervisors and the state Coastal Commission conditioned

permits on Beauregard protecting rare and/or endangered plant species on the site.

Specific conditions were placed on the county use permit and the coastal permit to protect the five-acre habitat of the Ben Lomond Wallflower.

Tampering with an endangered species is against state law and the state Department of Fish and Game now is looking into the situation, according to Kelly.

Fish and Game is the enforcement agency for laws dealing with the protection of endangered plant and animal species, Kelly explained.

Kelly told The Sentinel he talked with neighbors in the area Thursday and while he didn't see the site where the plants were uprooted, he said he has every reason to believe it happened.

Kelly wouldn't reveal the name of the neighbor he spoke with, saying the neighbor wanted to remain anonymous for fear of repercussion.

But Marilyn Hummel, a neighbor of the proposed vineyard site, said that another neighbor, Ella Ella Allvisi, noticed the plants missing Wednesday morning.

Allvisi refused to talk to The Sentinel.

Kelly said there are no suspects and Tuesday night's rain covered any evidence as to how the crime may have been committed.

The tampering was brought up Wednesday during a meeting with Coastal Commission officials at the County Center and the Coastal Commission's legal staff now is looking into the situation, according to Coastal Planner Jeri Sheele.

While both the coastal permit and the county's use permit require the five-acre habitat of the Ben Lomond Wallflower must be

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protected, Burns said the removal of the plants probably isn't a violation of the use permit.

Since Beauregard hasn't yet begun his vineyard project, the use permit hasn't yet been exercised, Burns noted.

"At this point, it probably wouldn't be a violation of the county code, but a violation of the Fish and Game code," Burns said.

The county use permit requires Beauregard to protect the five-acre Ben Lomond Wallflower habitat until it can be shown that the plants can be grown successfully somewhere else on the property.

Once this is shown, Beauregard will be able to plant vines on the five-acre habitat site.

"I just think it's stupid," Russell said of the occurrence. "It makes us (the vineyard developers) look bad when someone else is doing this.

"It's common knowledge that there are some angry people up on the hill (over the vineyard project) . . . Like I said when the bulldozing incidence occurred last year, Jim has involved a lot of money in this and I have involved a lot of time and it doesn't make sense for us to do something stupid like that."

Besides, Russell pointed out, the removal of the plants just reduces the seed source he and Beauregard are going to need to try to grow the plants elsewhere.