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Humble weed forces reevaluation of airport projects

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The recent discovery at Watsonville Airport of the world's largest stand of an endangered plant will require that a comprehensive environmental review covering a variety of airport projects be prepared.

A list of airport projects planned into the next five years is being compiled so that the EIR will be

able to address all of them, said Maureen Owens, city planning director.

"The number of plants found there gives us a lot of opportunity to really study this plant and get some mitigation measures," Owens said, adding that, "It's not stopping any development."

One of the most potentially lucrative plans is the removal and sale to the county of high-quality

clay deposits around the airport. New regulations require that landfills be sealed, and the clay is ideal for use as a sealant. Removal of the clay would also help correct a serious drainage problem at the airport.

The sales had the potential for netting the city \$640,000 over the next five years.

But it was discovered last month that the airport is rich not

only with the valuable clay, but is home to an abundant growth of *holocarpha macradenia*, otherwise known as tarplant.

The plant species is indigenous to Santa Cruz County and is included on the state's endangered list.

Botanist Randall Morgan surveyed the airport again this month and reported his findings to the city.

A total of 459,000 plants were counted, "although the actual count may be much higher," Morgan said, due in part to "intentional conservatism" in making estimates and in part to the difficulty of counting closely-mowed stands.

Populations in the other county stands number about 10,000 to 20,000 plants, Morgan said. "(The airport stand) is the largest known,

stand of the plant anywhere, larger than all known stands combined," he said.

His report indicates that colonies of airport tarplant occupy roughly 25 percent of the unpaved land on the property, and are mostly concentrated on the western half. Some stands are as dense as 500 plants per square

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meter, and some plants are almost three feet wide.

Deborah Hillyard, a plant ecologist with the state Department of Fish & Game, who has also surveyed the airport's tarplant, said the city will probably be able to "substantially avoid the populations" by redesigning or relocating some projects.

"I don't think they're going to be able to extract as much clay as they'd like to," she said. But with an EIR, the city will be able to proceed on such undertakings as runways and new hangars, she said.

Owens said some of the badly needed T-hangars will be able to be built, but that a portion of the areas where clay is deposited will be affected. "(But) we're confident we can come up with some mitigation measures."

Tarplant is a hardy weed, but urban development has encroached on its habitats. Of 12 known sites in the county, four are no longer viable, and four more are threatened by proposed development, according to Hillyard.

While the humble weed may not have any intrinsic value, Hillyard said the tarplant serves the same purpose as the canary in a coal mine.

Tarplant thrives in scenic, coastal environments that are also favored by humans. "Tarplant is an indicator that eco-systems are declining," she said.

An environmental impact review prepared just on the clay mining concluded that the project would have no significant impact on the environment. A Negative Declaration was proposed, including measures to mitigate such other problems as noise, air quality and traffic. But the review made no mention of potential damage to flora.

Two days after the negative declaration was submitted, the Planning Department received a letter from the Fish & Game Department, indicating that the tarplant was growing on several sites around the airport and that further review was necessary.