

Groups sue to protect SC tarplant

Lawsuit also seeks endangered status for nine other plants

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SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz tarplant, once ubiquitous on coastal grasslands but now found in only a dozen places in the county, has languished for more than 23 years awaiting needed federal protection, according to a lawsuit filed by environmentalists.

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The tarplant and nine other plants are the subject of a lawsuit filed Friday by the California Native Plant Society and the Southwest Center for Biological Diversity. The lawsuit seeks to have the plants added to the federal Endangered Species Act.

An annual aromatic herb in the aster family, the Santa Cruz tarplant is protected under state and

county laws.

It was proposed for federal protection by the Smithsonian Institution in 1975. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acknowledged that the plant should be protected, but did not take final action to add the species to the protected list, according to the lawsuit.

Since then, the tarplant has continued to decline, primarily as a result of urban development, invasive plant species such as French broom and overgrazing of cattle, Galvin said.

The plant has disappeared from Alameda and Marin counties, where it once grew extensively. Since 1979, it has also disappeared from nine locations in Monterey County, he said.

The Santa Cruz tarplant is now thought to occur in only 18 places around Santa Cruz, Watsonville and in the Wildcat Canyon Regional Park in Contra Costa County, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife survey.

Of the 18 places, a dozen are remaining native populations, and six are a result of experimental seedings, the survey found. Half of the native populations live around Santa Cruz and the other half are around Watsonville.

Efforts to protect and restore tarplant locally are had mixed results.

Arana Gulch, greenbelt property on the city's eastern edge, supported a healthy population of about 100,000 tarplants in the late 1980s. When cattle grazing was stopped on the land in 1988, the tarplant population went into decline and non-native grass crowded in. In 1994, after the city of Santa Cruz purchased the property hoping to protect the tarplant, no plants were seen.

The following year, the city started raking, mowing and hoeing in a effort to disturb the soil — and stimulate the tarplant.

The plant rebounded on the mowed ground. However, the highest density came back on an area of the gulch that had accidentally burned, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service document.

The largest tarplant population around Watsonville is near the Watsonville Airport, owned by the city of Santa Cruz. Plants there, in decline in the early 1990s, also have benefited from some grazing and mowing, which reduces competition from non-native plants, according to the federal report.

If the lawsuit is successful, Galvin said "it will be a question of what permit the government is granting that threatens the species."