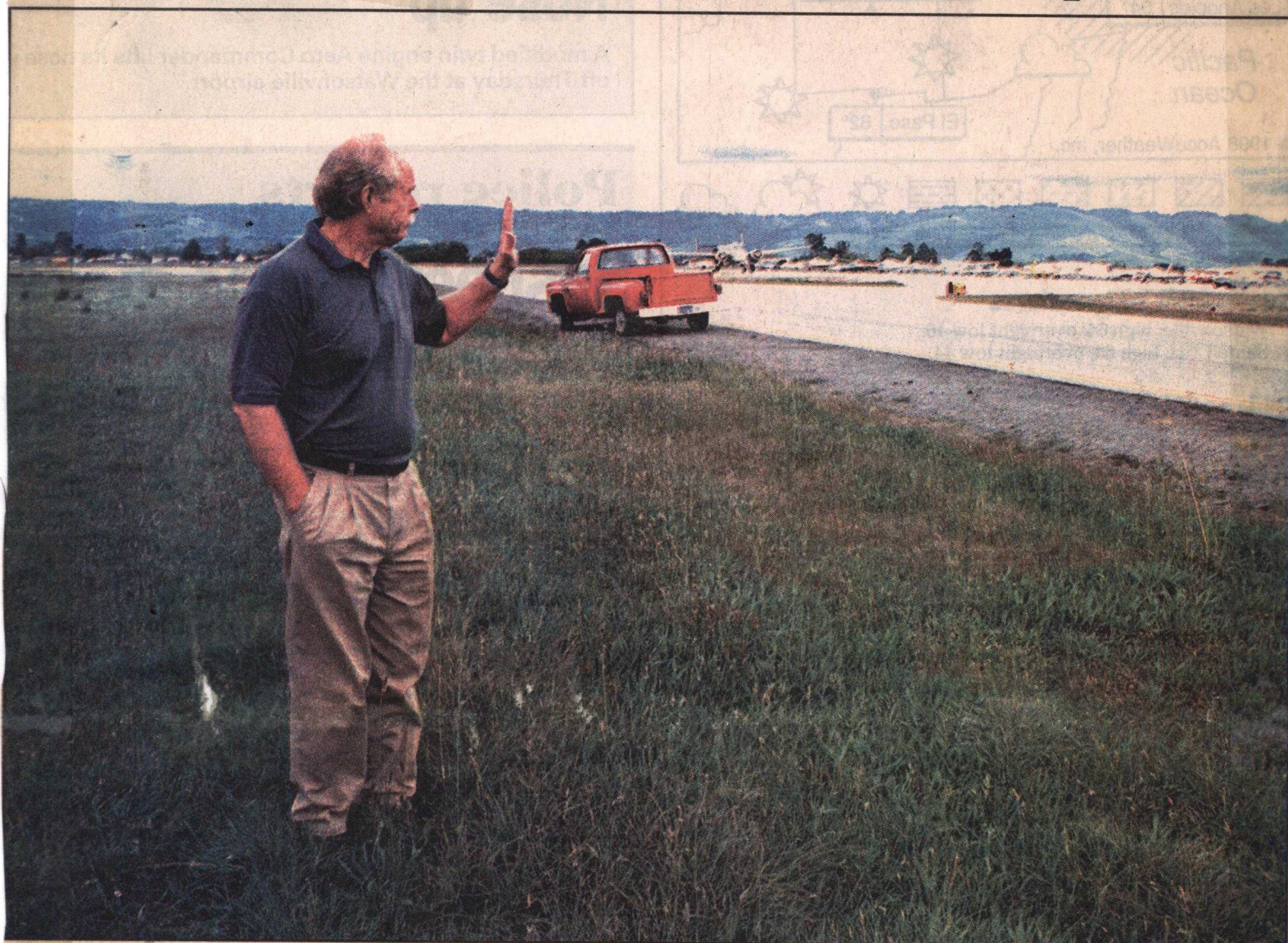


Airport proves to be successful incubator for endangered plant



Tarmo Hannula

Watsonville Municipal Airport Manager Don French waves to a pilot during take-off as he examines a field at the airport for tar plant Thursday.

Officials transplant rare tar plant to make way for development

By DICK LITTLE

CORRESPONDENT

WATSONVILLE — If you like trivia, try this: where is the largest quantity of the rare and endangered tar plant on the Central Coast? If you said the Watsonville Airport, you would be right. It seems the weed is reproducing like crazy, with the help of the city of Watsonville.

The plant is being considered for federal protection as a threatened species under the endangered species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced

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March 30. The public comment period on the issue ends May 29, and citizens are invited to submit letters to the Field Supervisor, Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, 2493 Portola Road, Suite B, Ventura, Calif., 93003.

The city wants to expand the airport's runways so more business jets can land at the facility. They say having an airport that can better accommodate executive aircraft will

enhance the city's ability to attract industry. In order to do that, the city must deal with the tar weed, which has been growing on the site for years.

Airport Manager Don French says the plant has set the expansion project back a number of years — he could not estimate how many. French obtained permission four years ago from the State Department of Fish and Game to see if the plant can grow in other areas near the airport. The city must prove conclusively they can move the plants and still have it survive.

Not only has French proved it, but he has astounded a lot of people by finding areas where the rare and endangered weed flourishes. So far, 400,000 tar weed plants have multiplied to more than a million, making Watsonville Airport the tar weed capital of the Central Coast.

The plants are cut down and moved after they germinate. French said it will take a week to finish the job. The project so far has taken three years. "We've tested several methods

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and we've been successful," he said.

Now that the tar plant problem is almost solved — the state must approve the final location of the weeds — French hopes the city's mitigation plan can be approved later this year. Once the mitigation plan is approved, the environmental impact report will follow along with the new Airport Master Plan. If all of that paper work is approved by a variety of agencies, it will be turned over to the Federal Aviation Agency.

The F.A.A. is helping to fund the airport expansion, according to French, and even if they approve the project, the city will have to wait at least two years before it can get the money because of the slow federal budget process.

What the city wants to do is to extend one runway and have new and sophisticated instruments installed so airplanes can land in the fog. As it now stands, pilots looking to land at Watsonville must have visibility from 600 feet to set down. French said the eventual goal for the airport expansion is for business jets to be able to take off with a "90 percent load" of passengers and fuel.

French said the costs of working out the tar plant program has been small. As for the delays caused by the program, "it's just a few hours of labor," he said.

Some residents in the surrounding area have expressed concerns about larger passenger jets and propeller-driven commercial aircraft deciding to take on passengers at the airport, but French says, "it's not feasible" because of economics. With the San Jose and Monterey airports utilized by airline traffic, having another commercial landing site in the region simply would not produce enough passengers to make it worthwhile.