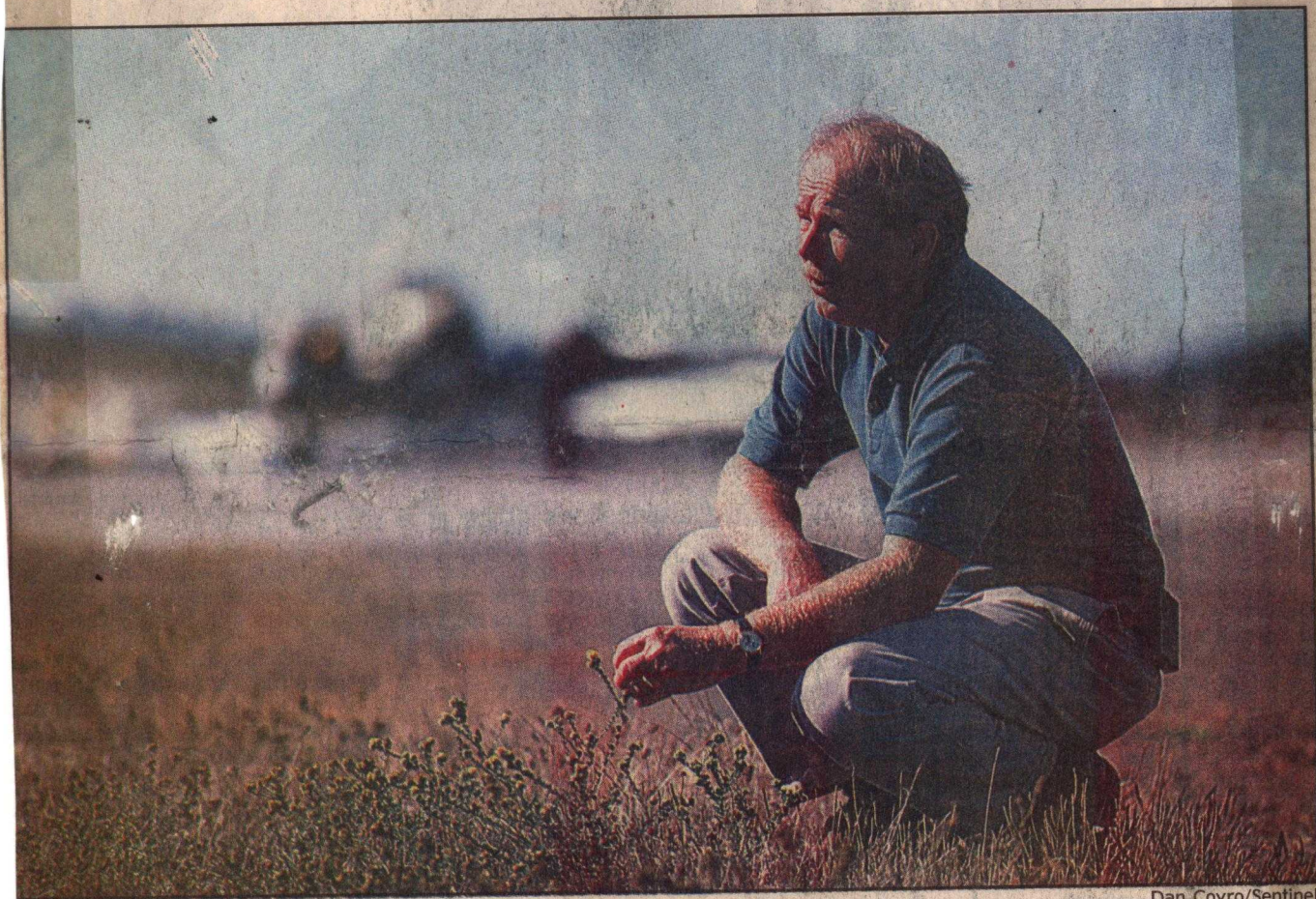


'We think this tarweed is being used  
as a tool to control growth. ...'

— Don French, Watsonville Airport manager



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Airport Manager Don French examines the weed, which covers deposits of clay that could be sold.

## Rare weed endangers airport growth

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**  
Sentinel staff writer

**WATSONVILLE** — The Santa Cruz tarplant — a 5-inch tall, scrubby weed with sticky yellow flowers — is thwarting plans to expand the Watsonville Municipal Airport and to mine valuable clay beneath it.

Though it's not known to provide food or shelter to any specific insect or other form of wildlife, the tarplant is important, say scientists, because it is a rare remnant of the county's original prairie habitat. The plant is also on the

state's endangered species list, and protected by the Department of Fish and Game.

But to airport managers and city planners, it's a real pain in the grass.

"I believe we should protect the environment because it's our world, but when you weigh all the factors I think the human species should be given some kind of priority," said Airport Manager Don French.

"We think this tarweed is being used as a tool to control growth in this county," French said.

But scientists said the plant acts as

an important environmental gauge.

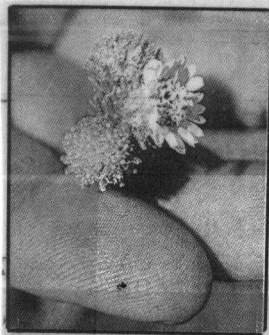
"Essentially this plant is a member of a plant community that has almost been wiped out in Santa Cruz County," said Deborah Hillyard, plant ecologist for state Department of Fish and Game. "Its function is to tell you when there's something wrong with the entire ecosystem."

Over the next decade, airport officials plan to build an additional 150 hangars on airport property for planes that are currently parked outdoors.

Please see **TARPLANT** — A4



# Local plants, animals that have restricted development



**Tarplant**

Sentinel staff report

**WATSONVILLE** — The unattractive plant that threatens to halt city airport expansion may not look daunting, but the Santa Cruz tarplant has won past turf battles with the city.

In 1990, a housing development called The Villages was challenged because it was planned on a tarplant colony between Highway 1 and Harkins Slough Road.

Environmentalists argued that develop-

ment would destroy the tarplant population and interrupt the slough system. The developer canceled the 900-unit project.

Other species of native plants and wildlife that have curtailed development in the county:

● **Long-toed salamander:** The federally protected amphibians were believed to live in Pajaro River banks, and state Fish and Game officials halted plans to bulldoze thick riverbed vegetation in 1988. A later study found

the salamanders did not live in the river bed, and clearing by hand was allowed.

The endangered salamanders live in other parts of Santa Cruz County, including Rio del Mar in Aptos. Development on those sites has been restricted for two decades.

● **Hartweg's spineflower:** This native wildflower halted development of two major housing developments in Scotts Valley. Colo-

nies are found on the proposed Glenwood Estates and Golf Club site, a 276-unit housing complex and golf course. The city approved the project last year, but it was rejected by the county.

The wildflower also stalled plans to build a major Scotts Valley housing development called Polo Ranch, until the land was bought two years ago by Borland International for future expansion.

## Tarplant

Continued from Page A1

But tarweed surrounds most of the vacant airport land, and threatens to severely limit the expansion French and others say is vital to the landing strip's future success.

The tarweed also covers most of the ground that hides a rich clay coveted for use as lining in landfills. The clay commands a nice price from communities who use it for state-mandated groundwater protection.

Removal of the clay would also save the city money, French said. It retains water and converts much of the land around the airstrip into a shallow pond during the winter, French said. The removal of the clay would save the city an estimated \$200,000 in drainage costs.

Imported clay is three times as expensive as locally mined clay, said Patrick Mathews, the county's solid waste engineering manager.

An estimated 300,000 cubic square feet of clay near the airport could be mined and sold for between \$3-\$8 a cubic square foot, French said.

"The advantage is that the county and cities can buy the clay locally. It was a win-win situation until the tarweed came up," said French.

The city discovered the airport was covered with the plant when it was required to study the environmental impacts of mining. Botanists counted nearly 460,000 plants.

"We have the largest population of tarweed known to exist in the world," said French.

It's ironic, he pointed out, that mowing fields for the annual air show actually helped the species thrive by ridding the area of competing weeds.

City officials and environmentalists believe a compromise can be worked out that would allow for airport expansion and preserva-

tion of the plant. In the next 12 months, the city will spend about \$25,000 on an environmental impact report that will outline that compromise.

"In this particular case it should be easy to work something out because the two goals are not mutually exclusive," said Hillyard, who added that the airport property is a large piece of land. "I don't like hearing this plant is stopping development, because I don't think it is."

But under state endangered species standards, the city's plan would mean no loss of the plant, Hillyard said.

Possible remedies suggested by airport officials are to plant new seeds in mile-long stretches between airstrips that now have no tarweed, and to immediately replant the tarweed after clay has been mined.

"With the numbers of plants we have, we felt they'd let some of the areas be disturbed," said Watsonville's Planning Director Maureen Owens.

Ecologists, on the other hand, argue that removing the clay might inhibit the plant's regrowth.

"If they did replant the same area there's no way of knowing whether they'd survive," said botanist Randall Morgan, who studied the airport's tarweed population.

The Department of Fish and Game has suggested limiting airport expansion and clay removal to the few areas that have no tarweed.

While it's too late to use city clay for the county's Buena Vista Landfill in Watsonville — which could have netted Watsonville between \$75,000 and \$200,000 — the clay could be used when the county landfill expands again in five years.