Tarplant Hill celebrated

Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

ABOVE: Watsonville Wetlands Watch President Bob Culbertson (left) presents a new garden trowel to Santa Cruz County Treasurer Fred Keeley Saturday during a ceremony to celebrate the acquisition of Tarplant Hill, a six-acre uplands habitat parcel on Ohlone Parkway. BELOW: County and city officials join community members on a tour of Tarplant Hill.

Endangered species RP 5.14.07

2006 land acquisition serves as critical six-acre upland habitat

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An informal celebration took place Saturday to recognize the acquisition of Tarplant Hill on Ohlone Parkway. As one of the last remaining upland habitats in the area, the six-acre parcel is home to a number of threatened species including the Santa Cruz tar plant.

Watsonville Wetlands Watch acquired the property, which rests between Struve Slough and Watsonville Slough, in January 2006 for $475,000.

Key players in heading up the acquisition move include Santa Cruz County Treasurer Fred Keeley and Assemblyman John Laird, as well as a host of Wetlands Watch members. Several leaders on the

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A tar plant seedling is shown.

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city and county level were present for the upbeat ceremony.

Saturday's event included guided tours to help community members identify native plants — including the tar plant — and learn about methods to restore the land to its native standing.

"We're here to protect and preserve this land," Bob Culbertson, president of WWW, told the group of about 40 people who gathered on the rising chunk of land near Landmark Elementary School.

Jim Van Houten, chairman of planning and conservation committee of WWW, told the crowd of the lengthy process involved in saving the land.

"I can't even begin to tell you how long this took," he said. "The process went on for years. The main thing we want to do now is tell the neighbors about this treasure right here in the neighborhood. It takes a vested interest in protecting this land. We want to get the message out that we need help to take care of this valuable property."

The habitat also supports the California red-legged frog, the burrowing owl and a variety of native grasses. WWW members also noted that other species likely to frequent the land include northern harriers, nesting cinnamon teals, peregrine falcons and short-eared owls.

Tarplant Hill borders part of the Watsonville Slough system, which consists of 800 acres of prime freshwater wetlands. Once thought to be extinct, tar plant was discovered on the property in the early 1970s. Of the 45 colonies eventually found, all but about a dozen have been completely removed or destroyed, according to the WWW.

Tarplant Hill was originally part of the property that became the Bay Breeze subdivision, the first major residential development in the immediate vicinity of the Watsonville slough system. After a victory in court to acquire the land and assistance from Fred Keeley and John Laird, WWW purchased the property in 2006.