

Wildflower's kin found

Environmentalists lose round in spineflower skirmish

By MARIA GAURA
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SCOTTS VALLEY — Environmentalists fighting to protect the Hartweg's Spineflower suffered a setback last week, when the California Fish and Game Commission refused to consider the plant for a place on the state's endangered species list.

Local botanists say Hartweg's Spineflower grows only in three Scotts Valley fields — all three now slated for development. But testimony offered to the Fish and Game Commission Aug. 31 asserted that the flowers have been found as far away as Fort Ord in Monterey County, and may simply be a different-colored relative of a more widespread flower.

If the flower were declared endangered it could severely restrict development plans.

Douglas Aikins, an attorney for developers of the Polo Ranch housing project, claims the commission's decision "put(s) an

end to the dispute over whether the "Scotts Valley Spineflower" should be recognized as an endangered species." Many of the plants have been found on the Polo Ranch property.

But in fact, debate over the status of the spineflower is far from over.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering the Hartweg's Spineflower for the federal endangered species list, and a "finding of substantiality" could be announced as soon as next week. That finding could be the first step in declaring the plant a rare or endangered species.

"The federal process (for endangered species listing) works independently of the state," said FWS spokeswoman Connie Rutherford. "We are proceeding within our guidelines."

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Spineflower

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In addition, state Fish and Game staff may submit a new petition to the Fish and Game Commission asking that the entire spineflower species, *Chorizanthe robusta*, be considered an endangered species.

"We believe that *Robusta* meets the criteria for (endangered species) listing," said Ken Berg, coordinator of Fish and Game's endangered plant program. "We have no plans at this time... (but) we are evaluating what route we are going to take."

The strategic locations of Scotts Valley's spineflower colonies have made the plant the focus of controversy. The flowers grow in abundance on three sites in north Scotts Valley where developers have proposed building an 18-hole golf course and a total of 439 new homes.

Environmentalists have been accused of inflating the importance of the flower in an attempt to stop the two developments. Debate over protecting the flowers has delayed work on the proposed Polo Ranch development and the Glenwood Estates golf course and subdivision. Both developers are now drawing up plans to protect the flowers.

"There is no scientific evidence that the (Hartweg's Spineflower) is a separate variety, much less a distinct species," said Jerry Switch, spokesman for the Polo Ranch project. "We've patiently waited through this, and now it turns out its not endangered after all. It seems only fair that they stop talking about it as an issue."

Attorney Aikins called the attempt to classify the plant endangered "a subtle and elegant misuse of the scientific process." He also slammed activists' attempts to rename the plant the "Scotts Valley Spineflower."

"The local activists have discovered they can ... create a highly localized and thus highly rare plant



Hartweg spineflower.

just by changing the name. If you create a definition of a plant that only lives, say, on one beach in Santa Cruz, then by definition it's rare even if it's identical to other related plants," he said. "The localized name is pure public relations."

Botanist and Stanford professor John Hunter Thomas says he has found specimens of *Chorizanthe Hartwegii* at the Fort Ord military base in Monterey, and he believes the plant is not nearly as rare as local activists say. He also suspects the pink-flowered *Hartwegii* is not nearly as different from the white-flowered *Robusta* as some people say.

"From historical records we know that *Chorizanthe's* range once went from Alameda County to Monterey County," Thomas said. "Of course there's been a great deal of development in those areas, but nobody's been looking for (the plants). I've found plants in Monterey County, and I wouldn't be surprised if it appears in other places as well."

"For whatever reason, the folks in Santa Cruz County want to say the plant can't possibly be in Monterey, and why they're not happy to find it occurs elsewhere I don't know," he said.

Thomas, who has worked as a

botanical consultant for the city of Scotts Valley, conceded that species *Robusta* as a whole is "on the rare side." But he said it is not nearly as scarce as local botanists say.

Steve McCabe, president of the Santa Cruz County Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, says accusations of anti-development fervor are "patently false." He also disputed Thomas' claims regarding the spineflower, saying that only six colonies of the plant are known to exist, all of them in Santa Cruz County.

McCabe criticized the Fish and Game Commission, saying the group is composed of five appointees of Governor George Deukmejian who are not trained botanists.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service is going to convene a panel of true experts," he said. "We feel we'll get a fair hearing."

Ongoing debate over the spineflower's status will not necessarily change the pace of development in Scotts Valley. Developers of both projects will still be required to protect the flower colonies, according to Scotts Valley Mayor Michael Caffrey. Environmental reports from both projects are still being prepared, and there will be public hearings before building plans are accepted by the city.

Flora

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