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## **SEEDS OF TROUBLE**

### **Airport landscaping project has environmental groups up in arms**

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Los Angeles World Airports failed to get a required state permit for a landscaping project and may have to rip out more than 90 palm trees that a contractor planted near an environmentally sensitive area.

The project involves planting vegetation and installing a walking path and irrigation along the border of the sand dunes at the airport's northwest corner. The airport undertook it after some nearby Playa del Rey residents pleaded with them to beautify the land, which was covered with weeds and scrub brush.

However, a local conservation group charged that some of the proposed plants and the irrigation would harm the adjacent dunes area, which is a designated recovery zone for the endangered El Segundo blue butterfly. Its members contacted the California Coastal Commission, which launched an investigation into the project.

Airport officials said a Coastal Commission planner told them they need to get a permit for the work, which will entail a public hearing. LAWA ordered its contractor to stop all planting until the matter is resolved. It's unclear whether the airport will have to rip out some or all of the completed work.

Airport staff believed the project didn't require a Coastal Development Permit because it didn't require a building permit from the City of Los Angeles, said Steve Crowther, LAWA's environmental manager.

"There was never any intention to put anything in there that's not in compliance" with state regulations, said Intissar Durham, director of LAWA's soundproofing bureau, which is supervising the landscaping. "We will do whatever it takes to satisfy coastal zone requirements."

The episode is turning into an embarrassment for airport officials, who believed the project would end nearby residents' complaints about the site's appearance.

It's playing out against the backdrop of a dispute over the palm trees themselves, with some people grouching that they block views and others embracing them as welcome additions to an otherwise Spartan landscape.

While conservationists accept the explanation that the failure to get a Coastal Development Permit was an innocent mistake, they say the oversight reflects a cavalier

attitude toward environmental issues and calls into question the airport's commitment to restoring the dunes area.

Airport officials counter that their commitment to the area is clear from the explosion in the butterfly population from 500 to more than 40,000. LAWA devotes two full-time workers to restoring the preserve and spends about \$500,000 a year on the efforts, Crowther said.

The "Waterview Improvement Project" began in late 1997 with nearby residents complaining about weeds and trash on the 30-foot ribbon of sand outside the fence encircling the butterfly recovery area, said Nancy Castles, LAWA's public relations director. The airport suggested landscaping the area and a project was developed with the neighbors' input, she said.

"It was really in response to most of the neighbors saying we'd prefer to see some sort of landscaping as opposed to the weeds that are here," Castles said.

The Board of Airport Commissioners last September voted to pay a contractor up to \$841,000 to plant vegetation and install meandering sidewalks, fencing and irrigation on the south sides of Waterview and Napoleon streets and Rindge Avenue. The contractor has planted 91 towering Mexican fan palms, laid the bed for the walking path and repaired some curbs.

The project site is north of the 200-acre El Segundo blue butterfly preserve. It lies in a zone that the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service designated as a recovery area for the insect, which the federal government lists as an endangered species.

Numerous other plants and insects are found only in the dunes, including the El Segundo scythrid moth, the El Segundo Jerusalem cricket and El Segundo dunes spineflower, said Travis Longcore, a biogeographer who helped write the butterfly recovery plan.

Longcore said he requested last fall, but never received, the project's proposed plant list to ensure that only native vegetation was put in. He said he was stunned to see the palm trees when he visited the dunes last month because they are not native and destroy other vegetation by spreading quickly. Other plants proposed for the site, including Hall's Honeysuckle, Lantanas and Pacificum, also are nonnative and invasive, said Longcore, an officer with The Urban Wildlands Group, a small local conservation organization.

Moreover, installing permanent irrigation could kill off indigenous insects by attracting aggressive insects such as Argentine ants, sow bugs and earwigs, said Longcore, who has a Ph.D. from UCLA in geography and specializes in ecological restoration and monitoring.

These problems would have surfaced if the airport simply had applied for a Coastal Development Permit, said Longcore, adding that attractive trees that are appropriate for the area could be planted.

“It would have been nice to evaluate the project before it got built,” Longcore said. “This is an internationally important dune system in terms of diversity.”

Several other conservation groups have joined the battle, including local Sierra Club and Audubon Society chapters, the Endangered Habitats League and the California Native Plants Society, said Catherine Rich, an attorney and executive officer of The Urban Wildlands Group.

Longcore and Crowther said Coastal Commission staff told them the Waterview project requires a state permit.

Jim Ryan, a Coastal Commission planner, said he could not discuss the project because his agency is investigating it. But he confirmed the site is in the Coastal Zone and said permits are required for work including roads, paths, grading and landscaping.

A public hearing will be organized if commission staff determine a permit is needed, which should happen within the next two weeks, Ryan said. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s view of the area as a butterfly recovery zone, while not legally binding on anyone, likely will carry weight with the commission, experts said.

The commission could do everything from ordering LAWA to tear out the palm trees and walk ing path to allowing the work to remain by granting a permit after the fact. It’s unclear whether the dispute will delay the project’s June completion date, said Castles, the airport spokeswoman.

One longtime Waterview resident said the palms block his view of the shimmering ocean and rolling dunes.

“I’d like to see them gone, period,” said the man, who asked not to be identified because the issue has generated so much controversy in his neighborhood.

Others see the trees as key to the project’s success.

“They’re fantastic,” said Ray Banks, 64, who lives a few doors north on Rindge Avenue. “They add value to everybody’s houses there.”