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Plant ruled not sparse enough for protection Desert cymopterus not endangered, says Fish and Wildlife Service

by CHUCK MUELLER

BARSTOW - A carrot-like Mojave Desert plant is more abundant than previously believed, and therefore does not qualify for protection as an endangered species, a federal agency has ruled.

The announcement by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Tuesday shot a hole in a claim that Army activity at Fort Irwin posed a threat to the desert cymopterus, a member of the carrot family with small purple flowers.

If the plant had been listed as endangered, it could have thrown another hurdle toward development throughout much of the desert.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the California Native Plant Society filed a petition in March 2002 to protect the plant. The petition claimed it was threatened because of military activities, off-road vehicle use, grazing and lack of conservation measures.

Recent surveys show, though, 105 clusters of desert cymopterus exist in the desert areas of San Bernardino, Kern and Los Angeles counties, disqualifying it for

protection under the Endangered Species Act, agency spokeswoman Lois Grunwald said.

She said a survey by the Army at Fort Irwin found more than 900 individual plants in the Superior Dry Lake basin. A 2001 report that found only 40 plants in the area.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management also found more desert cymopterus in the Cuddleback Dry Lake basin, southeast of Randsburg, than had been documented earlier.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said expansion of Fort Irwin, north of Barstow, would have threatened three clusters of the plant, but the Army has erected fences to protect them.

The military has taken conservation measures at Edwards Air Force Base, where 87percent of the desert cymopterus exists, to protect the plant. The measures include limiting off-road vehicle activities and livestock grazing.