

Miramar's Ecological Price Tag

By ROB DAVIS Voice Staff Writer

With a wave of his arm, Dave Boyer points to one of the region's last stretches of undeveloped coastal sage scrub, a place that one biologist calls "San Diego's version of the Galapagos."

This shrub-covered terrain at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar is rolling, vacant, expansive -- and a hotspot of biological diversity. On this land, silence can either be broken by a western meadowlark's gurgling warble or an F-18 Hornet's screaming engines.

Seven endangered or threatened plant and animal species call this stretch of the base home. Bobcats, mountain lions and mule deer use a canyon through this scrub as a transit corridor connecting Torrey Pines State Reserve and Soledad Canyon with Mission Trails Regional Park.

According to the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority, this is also the best place to put a new international airport. Its board decided earlier this month to ask voters whether the authority should work to obtain part of the base to build an airport to replace Lindbergh Field. The decision culminated the authority's three-year search to address projections that Lindbergh will reach capacity sometime after 2015.

Boyer, a civilian who directs the military base's natural resources division, is just one of many voices on the 23,000-acre training base who protests the decision.

He's joined by environmentalists and biologists, who say building a terminal and two new runways at Miramar would destroy Southern California's largest remaining swath of a rare wetlands habitat called a vernal pool, which allows those seven rare species to persist amidst San Diego's urban development.

A vernal pool is a non-tidal wetland, a depression in the ground with a hard rock surface beneath it that prevents rainwater from seeping out. The pools are typically found only during the rainy season. A host of rare species live in and around them: San Diego fairy shrimp, San Diego mesa mint, San Diego button celery, California Orcutt grass, Riverside fairy shrimp and Spreading navarretia. Coastal California gnatcatchers also live in the scrub where pools exist.

Building atop Miramar's pools would slowly drive those flora and fauna to extinction, environmentalists say.

"You cannot deal with this," said David Hogan, director of the Urban Wildlands Program at the Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity. "This project will result in the extinction of seven species -- off the face of the planet. They're gone. They're dead."

As part of its decision-making process, the authority produced a 104-page report examining impacts to Miramar's endangered and threatened species. Mitigating those impacts, it concluded, is "feasible with issues." It also found that mitigating damage to those rare species "may be very difficult to achieve" and said the airport may reduce the species' "survivability potential."

The authority expects to spend between \$112 million and \$854 million to alleviate impacts to many types of affected habitats at Miramar. But that figure does not include the cost of mitigating the destruction of vernal pools. The authority's report acknowledges the pools' presence, but says a precise acreage wasn't available.

Joe Huy, director of Ricondo & Associates, the authority's Chicago-based consulting team, said the authority didn't include vernal pools in its analysis because no "publicly available documentation" exists detailing their acreage. Consultants did not survey Miramar or send biologists into the field, Huy said.

"That's not to say that that's being neglected," he said. "That's just to say that information wasn't available."

But environmentalists contend the airport authority purposely ignored vernal pools to minimize the project's potential impacts.

Ample evidence exists detailing the pools' locations throughout the base, including in the very military report the authority's consultants cited. The pools have been extensively studied and mapped at least three times, according to that report. Miramar's Boyer said he has identified 64 acres of pools that will be destroyed.

Environmentalists say that damage to vernal pools is a deal-breaker. Researchers estimate 97 percent of San Diego's vernal pool habitat is already lost to urban development. The unique pools occur on flat hilltops whose topography attracted home construction to accommodate the area's growing population.

Ellen Bauder, an adjunct biology research professor at San Diego State University, has studied Miramar's vernal pools since 1981. She said the airport's plan would drive the San Diego mesa mint to extinction, because the rare plant species is found solely in vernal pools. Other species such as the San Diego fairy shrimp and coastal California gnatcatcher would gradually follow, she said, with little way to stop their demise.

"It cannot be mitigated. Period. Total disaster," Bauder said. "That's like saying you'll build a new Grand Canyon somewhere or a new Yosemite. This may not be as charismatic and flashy, but it is very important -- and it is the only piece that is left."

Efforts to mitigate destruction of vernal pools elsewhere have been unsuccessful, said the Center for Biological Diversity's David Hogan, who successfully led efforts to have two species at Miramar listed as endangered.

"The term mitigation represents the idea that habitat or species can be destroyed or killed in one location -- and other habitat restored, purchased or protected to replace the loss," Hogan said. "Here, there is no other place to replace the loss. You can't create vernal pools, and there are no other large concentrations of vernal pools to protect to offset this loss."

Vernal pools have posed problems for development in northeastern San Diego before. Construction of a Mira Mesa elementary school has been delayed at least a year after vernal pools were found on the proposed site. The project is being moved.

Ted Brengel, chairman of the Mira Mesa Community Planning Group, has fought for the school project. Brengel, who opposes the Miramar airport plan, said vernal pools have the potential to kill construction projects.

"If a vernal pool is in the wrong place, you're not building on that property," he said. "You're done."

The airport authority expects a fight over environmental impacts if voters approve the airport and the unwilling military hands over the land. The authority has assumed environmental reviews and ensuing lawsuits would take five to 10 years.

Experts familiar with environmental mitigation procedures say middle ground likely exists between the airport authority and environmentalists.

Eliot Cutler, a Washington, D.C.-based environmental law attorney, was deeply involved in airport negotiations in Denver, the only major American city to build an airport in the last 30 years. He said airports can be built in ways that protect endangered species around them. Though that may be difficult, he said, it could be easier than coping with the effects of Lindbergh Field reaching its capacity.

"Start by understanding that building a new airport -- or expanding an existing airport -- is one of the most complicated undertakings in public infrastructure," Cutler said. "It takes a lot of space to do it. The impacts are complicated and multiple. It's a very difficult thing to pull off."

But Cutler, who has been involved in dozens of airport expansion battles across the country, continued: "I've almost never seen an airport situation where problems cannot be resolved in one way or another."

