

February 15, 2008

Board of Supervisors
County of Mendocino
501 Low Gap Road
Ukiah, CA 95482

Subject: Appeal CDP #55-2006

Position: Deny

Dear Supervisors:

The Dorothy King Young Chapter of the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) has the following comments about CDP #55-2006. The points made in this letter will demonstrate why CNPS believes this project should be denied.

Summary of Issues

CNPS has recommended denial of this project on the basis of: 1) serious, unresolved plant-related concerns, 2) piecemealing of additional phases of the project involving as-yet-undisclosed development plans and 3) excessive and unfair impacts to the Gualala Bluff Trail – a project supported by CNPS.

The recently altered plan for the retaining structure on the bluff, calls for a Geoweb ® structure instead of a concrete block wall, partly in response to public concern about the esthetics of the proposed wall. However, there are still insurmountable barriers to restoring a functioning bluff plant community with a pleasing, natural-appearance.

Revegetation – Soil and Maintenance

The addition of fill material to establish a new bluff is unacceptable for a variety of reasons, regardless of the width of the added fill zone. From a restoration perspective, a very high failure rate must be expected for revegetation on fill material.

It may well be impossible to establish a sufficient number and variety of native plants in a sterilized, compacted fill material, since the beneficial soil biota would have been killed along with the weed seeds. Nor is it probable that a relatively weed-free, chemically and structurally compatible soil could be found elsewhere in the quantity needed for this project.

This project runs a high risk of creating an artificial bluff of nearly 300 feet in length that will not support a native plant community. Project goals such as relocating the Gualala Bluff Trail, protecting “existing development” i.e., a dirt parking lot, or creating more land for any as-yet-undisclosed development do not justify this imposition on a coastline valued for its natural character.

The soil used in conjunction with the GeoWeb ® structure is also of concern. The only soil choices are: 1) Use the soil now present on the site in its existing state, which would create huge problems due to the long-term weed seedbank that exists in the soil. 2) Replace the existing soil with a sterilized mix – either by sterilizing the existing soil or by hauling in a sterile mix from elsewhere. I know of no way to sterilize the soil in situ, and it is hardly practicable to remove it, sterilize it and then return it to the site.

CNPS must predict a high failure rate for native plants grown in the Geoweb ® cells, based on understanding of local flora and a diagram of the Geoweb ® structure. The schematic drawing

shows plants growing horizontally out of the cells – difficult to achieve. Local indigenous bluff plants are highly adapted to a set of unique and harsh environmental conditions. This adaptation means they are often unsuited for standard methods of revegetation or weed control.

Besides the extreme difficulty of establishing plants in these cells on an extremely steep slope, how would the plants be watered sufficiently to get them established?

Standard practice is to plant native plants onsite, native soil with as little disturbance as possible. However this project will cause massive disturbance that will activate the thousands of weed seeds present on the site.

Revegetation – Weed Issues

Whether or not a sterile mix is used, the surrounding soil is also filled with weed seeds, which will soon infest the planted areas. The highly invasive weeds on the site include plants of large stature like jubata grass (*Cortaderia jubata*), Himalayan blackberry (*Rubus armeniacus*), poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), and cape ivy (*Delairea odorata*), and low, ground smothering species like Cape weed (*Arctotheca calendula*). Such weeds are undesirable because they: 1) overwhelm and suppress native plants, 2) dry up in summer and create a fire hazard and 3) present an unkempt, esthetically unappealing appearance.

Noxious weeds in large quantities are guaranteed to grow back each year (some can germinate, grow and flower during most of the year). How, then, are these weeds to be controlled? Herbicides and germination suppressing products cannot be used in close proximity to an estuary, especially one frequented by protected animals, such as the brown pelican.

Given these constraints, the only option is manual weed control over a long term. How will workers accomplish the necessary weed control on such a steep slope while avoiding additional soil disturbance? Can the applicant assure the public that the workers can differentiate between emerging native plants and emerging weeds? Is the applicant willing to fund long-term, intensive weed control (e.g., weekly, for a period of at least five years)?

The predictable failure rate for revegetation and weed control would result in an extensive Geoweb® structure that is not disguised or softened by native plant growth. The project goals for restoring the bluff vegetation would not be met. What recourse will the public have if the retaining structure is exposed and the bluff face overrun with weeds? This scenario would be an ecological and esthetic disaster, yet there is a high probability of it coming to pass.

Rare Plant Issue

As outlined in the earlier comment letter from botanist, Jon Thompson, the absence of the rare bluff morning glory, *Calystegia purpurata ssp. saxicola* has not been satisfactorily demonstrated. Mr. Thompson has considerable experience identifying this plant taxon, and his letter should be given due consideration. CNPS has not seen full disclosure from the applicant's botanical consultant about methods used to survey for this rare plant and determine the identity of any *Calystegia* plants found on the site.

Wetlands

The wetland issues associated with this project have not been satisfactorily resolved. The Botanical Survey lists nine wetland species, and coastal wetlands cannot be determined solely on the basis of soils.

Rare Plant Communities

CNPS is still concerned that the number of plants of mature silk tassel plant – *Garrya elliptica* – (including those that were killed) indicates the presence of a *Garrya*-dominated vegetation alliance, designated as rare by the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG).

Please see the letter from CNPS dated November 12, 2007, for a more detailed explanation of this rare plant community issues. CNPS requests that someone from the Department’s regional office in Humboldt County or a DFG vegetation specialist from Sacramento visit the site and provide an assessment of the plant communities.

Any removal of mature *Garrya* plants should be considered as cumulative impacts, since a number of them have already been destroyed on the applicant’s property, apparently at the behest of the applicant.

Bluff Stability Issues

The purpose of the Geoweb® structure remains unclear. The originally proposed wall was to control erosion. The newly proposed geoweb structure is said to be needed for stabilization, while drainage systems will control erosion. If erosion is no longer an issue, then the rationale for a retaining structure must be to allow land to be added to the bluff edge – needed only for future, undisclosed development.

A poorly vegetated “new” bluff would be very vulnerable to erosion caused not by parking lot runoff but by the direct action of rainfall. The GeoWeb® would not protect against this.

The GeoWeb® would allow the widening of the bluff edge using compacted, sterilized fill material. Even though the newly-designed project would remove less soil than the concrete block wall, it still requires a great deal of disturbance for a structure nearly 300 feet in length.

Any destruction of mature, woody plants will have a destabilizing effect, and further destabilization can be expected to result from construction activities, including impacts from heavy equipment. Post construction activities could involve considerable foot traffic on the bluff, including in wet weather when soils are most vulnerable to disturbance.

Project Segmentation

CNPS believes this project’s impacts to native flora, both direct and indirect, must be analyzed in the context of a single project. Treating the phases of the applicant’s overall project as separate, unrelated projects would constitute project segmentation under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

CDP 55-2006 is actually part of a larger project for parcel AP#145-261-13, and related to another project on AP #145-261-05, currently pending submission to the California Coastal Commission. The applicant is rumored to be planning to apply for permits for a paved parking lot and some 7,000 square feet of commercial space.

These activities are all part of the same project, and are interdependent because they would occur on contiguous parcels and would have combined environmental impacts and cumulative effects. The public cannot base its expectations on verbally stated intentions or any “vision” for the rest of the project. The extent and exact nature of the related development on the applicant’s property are as yet undisclosed.

CEQA requires all aspect of a project to be considered together. This promotes disclosure of project details to allow for analysis of cumulative environmental impacts and design of mitigation measures. The people of California will be denied these benefits of CEQA if the phases of this overall project are treated as separate projects.

Gualala Bluff Trail

CNPS has been an ongoing supporter of the Gualala Bluff Trail project of the Redwood Coast Land Conservancy. This trail has galvanized local residents to work toward restoring public access to our coast, both for viewing (in the case of the Bluff Trail) and for beach access (subsequent RCLC projects).

The concerns about soil outlined above also apply to the Bluff Trail, particularly if the applicant intends for the Bluff trail to be re-built on the new bluff edge, comprised of fill. Since native plants are unlikely to become established in compacted fill material, what guarantee does the public have that it will be possible to landscape the new trail appropriately with native plants?

Weed concerns also apply, even though weed abatement on the level bluff edge would be much easier than on the cliff face. Will the applicant be responsible for keeping the Bluff Trail free of the invasive weeds fostered by construction disturbance?

The Bluff Trail already faces the loss of space for plantings and benches, plus the loss of mature native vegetation that enhances the trail. The trail proponents certainly would come out as the losers if the trail was relegated to a “fixed easement” status. Why should volunteers who built a public trail on an existing easement be penalized by trail closures and additional problems not of their making? CNPS believes that this project, even with modifications, would still impair the ability of the Gualala Bluff Trail to fulfill its mission.

Conclusion

Approval of this project would degrade the viability of our local coastal flora, and would diminish the public’s opportunity to appreciate the coast’s natural features. Further, it would set a dangerous precedent for the Mendocino coast by condoning project segmentation and oversized retaining structures.

The California Native Plant Society respectfully requests that the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors deny CDP 55-2006 and withdraw the associated Mitigated Negative Declaration. Treating the phases of this project as one project under the California Environmental Quality Act would honor and uphold the values embodied in CEQA and the California Coastal Act.

Sincerely,

Lori Hubbart
Chapter President - California Native Plant Society
Dorothy King Young Chapter