

# FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## Rare Discovery in Nipomo: A New Manzanita Species Under Threat by Development

*Nipomo, California* – Scientists have uncovered an ecological treasure on the Nipomo Mesa: a previously unknown species of manzanita, *Arctostaphylos nipumu*, found nowhere else in the world. This groundbreaking discovery highlights the unique biodiversity of the region but also underscores the urgency of protecting it, as the plant faces immediate threats from development.

### A Biodiversity Breakthrough

The Nipomo Mesa Manzanita, named in collaboration with yak tit'yu tit'yu yak ti'hini (ytt) Northern Chumash Tribe, pays homage to the indigenous heritage of the region, where the plant has thrived for millennia. *"We are honored to name and acknowledge this magnificent manzanita, which has withstood drought, deluge, and the harmful actions of humans,"* said Mona Olivas Tucker, Tribal Chair of the Chumash. *"The plant's resilience mirrors that of our culture and heritage."*

With only 700 plants identified across fragmented habitats totaling just 70 acres, *A. nipumu* is critically endangered. Researchers from the California Native Plant Society (CNPS), San Francisco State University, UC Riverside, and Tangled Bank Wildlife Conservation used DNA and morphological analyses to confirm the plant's uniqueness, publishing their findings in the international, peer-reviewed journal [Phytokeys](#). This ancient species may in fact be a direct descendant of the origin strain of manzanitas, making its conservation even more vital as its origins in what was then western Nevada began to diversify more than 13 million years ago, spreading throughout the West and as far as Guatemala and Eurasia. That additional study is currently underway.

*"This is not just another plant,"* said Dr. Bill Waycott. *"Arctostaphylos nipumu may hold genetic clues to understanding the evolution of manzanitas across California. Its protection is essential not only for preserving local biodiversity but also for advancing our scientific knowledge of plant evolution."*

The discovery is particularly remarkable due to the Nipomo Mesa's unique geology as a giant Pleistocene-era sand dune, which has provided a specialized habitat for diverse flora and fauna to evolve over thousands of years. Manzanitas, including *A. nipumu*, form a crucial part of the oak woodlands and chaparral plant communities supporting many species of insects, birds, and mammals. The plant's ability to thrive in drought and poor soil conditions demonstrates its remarkable resilience; however, these same adaptations mean it is highly vulnerable when its habitat is disturbed or destroyed.

*"Habitat loss along with the added stress of a rapidly changing climate, is driving many species toward extinction,"* said Dr. Bill Waycott, lead researcher. *"Understanding and protecting this apex species is about preserving not just a group of plants, but a mainstay or pillar of an entire ecosystem and cultural legacy."*

### **A Unique Local Ecosystem at Risk to Development**

The fate of manzanitas in California is intertwined with those of oak forests. Rapidly increasing urbanization fueled by the demand for new housing in environmentally diverse areas has placed 750,000 acres under immediate threat, and 20% of the state's oak woodland in danger by 2040, according to the California Oak Foundation. A recently approved development in Nipomo is a case in point: the Dana Reserve project threatens to destroy half of the remaining rare Nipomo manzanitas and nearly 4,000 oak trees. This alarming trend jeopardizes not only the future survival of many species but also the cultural and ecological significance of these woodlands.

The founding director and professor at California Center for Sustainable Communities at UCLA, spoke at a community forum in Nipomo last year and weighed in on the issue, *"The argument about the need for housing has driven dysfunctional land use patterns across California, destroying native habitat and creating a landscape of privileged single family homes and dystopic densities that are car dependent for the others."*

### **Community and Legal Action**

The Dana Reserve project was approved by the San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors despite significant environmental concerns; to be precise, 19 Class 1 impacts that cannot be mitigated, as identified in the Environmental Impact Report - a record number in County history. The highly controversial project proposes to build 1475 housing units and a commercial area, which involves the destruction of thousands of mature oak trees and hundreds of endangered manzanitas.

Alison Martinez, Director of the Nipomo Action Committee (NAC), emphasized the need for balance: *"It's a false narrative that we must prioritize housing at the expense of habitat. We can build responsibly without causing irreversible environmental damage."*

In response, two lawsuits have been filed by the NAC and the CNPS against the project's approval process, citing inadequate environmental reviews under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The initial Environmental Impact Report dismissed the manzanita as "not special," a claim contradicted by the plant's recent peer-reviewed classification as a new species. Babak Naficy, attorney for the plaintiffs, explains the need for legal action *"We were forced to file a second lawsuit against LAFCO and the County to protect our community and the environment because LAFCO ignored the significance of the discovery of this new species."*

In both lawsuits serious shortcomings in the decision-making process are cited, including inadequate assessments of water supply sustainability, insufficient wildfire safety measures, and serious impacts on critical biological resources, now including a critically endangered plant species. By pursuing legal remedies, community organizers say they are advocating for responsible development that respects the environment, safeguards community resources, acknowledges the unique cultural heritage of the area, and adheres to legal and ethical standards.

CNPS is seeking emergency federal and state species protection for *A. nipumu*, a crucial step in ensuring its survival. Advocates, like the CNPS, the ytt Northern Chumash, and NAC urge policymakers to act swiftly to preserve this irreplaceable piece of biodiversity and cultural heritage.

The Nipomo Mesa Manzanita's discovery is a stark reminder of the delicate balance between the human footprint and environmental conservation. *"Decisions made today have a direct impact on the welfare of future generations,"* said Waycott. *"We must cherish and safeguard the natural wonders in our backyards before we push them beyond the point of no return."*

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**About the yak tit<sup>y</sup>u tit<sup>y</sup>u yak tilhini Northern Chumash Tribe:** The Chumash Tribe whose members are indigenous to the San Luis Obispo County region.

**About the Nipomo Action Committee:** The Nipomo Action Committee is a grassroots organization dedicated to balancing sustainable development with environmental preservation in Nipomo and surrounding communities.

**About the California Native Plant Society:** CNPS is a non-profit organization that works to protect California's native plants and their natural habitats through science, education, and advocacy.