

Desert plants 'mowed down,' residents say

By Douglas Kreutz
The Arizona Daily Star

A mobile home moving company employee "indiscriminately mowed down desert plants" while preparing to haul a mobile home into a desert area northwest of Tucson, residents of the area charged yesterday.

Among the casualties was a mature saguaro cactus.

The owner of the moving company acknowledged that "it looks like we had a little problem" in the incident last Thursday. He said company representatives "will try to get things squared away and get these people (residents) happy."

Meanwhile, a native plant law specialist for the Arizona Department of Agriculture said he plans to look into the incident.

"It's a crime, what they've done here," said Anne Spaulding, who is one of about a dozen homeowners in the area northeast of West Picture Rocks Road and North Van Ark Road. The area is about a quarter-mile from the west unit of Saguaro National Monument.

"They just indiscriminately mowed down desert plants all along this road," said Spaulding, who pointed out fallen cacti along the 1/2-mile stretch of dirt road. "They knocked down a saguaro, prickly pears, greasewood — and they knocked a huge limb off a magnificent old ironwood tree."

"When the road was put in about four years ago, every cactus in the way was carefully transplanted," Spaulding said. "We've taken great care to preserve these plants and then they come in and just devastate them."

Resident John Harrison said he owns the property on which a mature, 20-foot saguaro was knocked down, apparently in an effort to widen the road to accommodate the 80-foot-long mobile home.

"People moved out here because they care about natural

beauty," Harrison said. "We greatly value our saguaros. For somebody to come along and destroy a saguaro like that shows no concern for the natural beauty."

Harrison and Spaulding maintained that the moving company should be required to replace all destroyed or damaged plants and return the rural road to its former condition.

Eddie Sorensen, owner of Lou's Mobile Home Movers Inc., acknowledged that one of his employees used a tractor with a grader blade to "widen the road before we took the mobile home in there."

"We have a job to do and we normally don't have those problems, but this time it looks like we had a little problem," Sorensen said. "When you've got an 80-foot mobile with a 15-foot truck in front of it, you're looking at 95 feet in a straight line. At some of those turns, you just couldn't get through there without widening the road."

"We didn't have a whole lot of choice on most of this stuff. What should have happened is that we should have checked with the property owners before doing this."

Sorensen said he'll try to reach an agreement with residents of the area on restoring destroyed or damaged plants.

"They said they want us to replace the cactus, so we will try to get things squared away and get these people happy," he said. "We'll replace what we have to. . . I'm not going to say exactly what we're going to do."

Sgt. Lawrence Huff of the Pima County Sheriff's Department said an officer investigated the incident last week.

"We had anticipated taking criminal action, but the owner of the property said we wouldn't have to do that if things were



David Sanders, The Arizona Daily Star

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Anne Spaulding surveys a damaged saguaro near West Picture Rocks Road area

Saguaro

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taken care of with replacement of the plants," Huff said.

No charges have been filed in the case so far, Huff said.

Larry Richards, native plant law specialist for the state Department of Agriculture, said yesterday he had not been informed of the case.

"But this is something I would look into," said Richards, who is known informally as Arizona's "cactus cop."

"We've had similar situations develop with moving companies in the past, and we've taken them to court," Richards said. "The judges have done everything from giving them a fine to giving them a fine plus replanting the area at their expense."

"It would depend on the extent of damage, but it could be, say, a \$200 fine plus a requirement that they rehab (replant) the area," he said.

He said the Agriculture Department could issue a warning in the case "regardless of whether they make amends or not."