

Gruff debate over goat ranch

Neighbors butt heads with biotechnology firm



Sentinel file photo

Neighbor Jonathan Wittwer says the biotech firm's use of goats for cancer research isn't agriculture.

Goat Ranch

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County to weigh use of agricultural land

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SANTA CRUZ — Biotechnology and agricultural interests are expected to clash Tuesday in Santa Cruz when a proposed ordinance that seeks to appease both sides goes before the county Board of Supervisors.

The controversial law would allow allow biomedical facilities on agricultural land while imposing strict restrictions.

On one side is Santa Cruz Biotechnology, a leading worldwide supplier of antibodies used in cancer research. These antibodies are produced in about 1,500 goats kept just outside the city on a ranch overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

"Agriculture is more than just food and

fiber," said John Stephenson, president and chief executive officer of the firm.

He sees any obstacles to his operation as a strike against finding a cure for cancer.

On the other side, neighbors firmly oppose allowing biomedical operations on prime soil. They say it will lead to irreversible and drastic changes in prime agricultural land across a county with a rich farming history.

"The key is not to use land with good agricultural soil for this purpose," said Jonathan Wittwer, a nearby resident opposed to the mixing of the two industries.

Wittwer said he doesn't want to shut the door on this blossoming industry. He thinks it has a place, it's just not on some of the richest soil in the county.

In the middle of the great goat debate is the

Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors, which must decide this issue.

"At this point, it's one property, but we're drafting an ordinance that will apply to the county," said Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt. "We will be establishing a precedent that will have real ramifications for agricultural land throughout the county."

Wormhoudt, who represents Santa Cruz and the North Coast, said she was still studying the issue. A main issue is "whether we are talking agricultural use or not," she said.

To Stephenson, the answer is absolutely.

While the goats are not used for meat or milk, they are still a form of agriculture according to the county's Agricultural Policy

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Goats

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Advisory Commission, the Planning Commission and the county's planning staff. "Every review group we went to said it's agriculture."

He uses the argument that corn is grown in Iowa for more than just the dinner table. It is also a fuel source.

Biotechnology is a rapidly growing industry that employs living organisms to develop new products.

Stephenson's company injects the goats with peptides, inert proteins, and then draws blood from the animals. It purifies the antibodies — proteins present in the blood that can combine specifically with foreign substances and assist in their removal from the body.

The company has offices and labs in Santa Cruz and employs about 160 people.

Stephenson and his wife, Brenda, vice president of marketing for the firm, are building their home on the ranch that once grew brussels sprouts and fed grazing cattle.

To Wittwer, the goat ranch isn't a form of farming, but industry. The use of goats only clouds the issue.

Wittwer claims similar operations could take over the remaining scenic farms and wipe out productive fields. The ranch is not a bucolic picture of goats grazing on a hillside, he said, adding that the animals are in pens and eat out of troughs.

He wants to confine biotech operations to agriculturally-zoned land that does not have prime soil

and is not "commercially viable." Even on other agricultural land, it could be appropriate if it is a subordinate use, he said.

Wittwer, who quit his job as an attorney for the county so he could speak out against the goat ranch, also points out that biotechnology operations are allowed elsewhere on industrial-zoned land in the county.

The loss of farmland is a national issue, according to Wittwer.

"Traditionally agriculture cannot compete with this kind of use," Wittwer said. "It is so much more profitable. ... Ultimately, the population of the world is growing, and it is important that our country, state and county have agriculture land."

Opponents have also raised questions about the disposal of animal waste and the potential of contamination to the groundwater.

Santa Cruz Biotechnology wants to increase the number of goats to 5,000 over the next five to seven years.

Stephenson said he doubts that other biotechnology firms will follow him in locating in Santa Cruz. While the proposed ordinance would allow such operations on agricultural land, it is filled with tough restrictions that would deter firms from coming here.

For example, the proposal calls for the maximum land covered by all structures and impervious surfaces that are part of the biomedical operation to not exceed 1 percent of the total gross parcel size.

Another restriction links the number of animals permitted on a farm to the number that can be

Biomedical livestock ordinance

A proposed county ordinance would allow biomedical livestock operations on agricultural land.

Some of the key points of the proposal include:

- The applicant will submit to the county Planning Department a master plan of the proposed facility.

- The master plan will be reviewed by the Agricultural Policy Advisory Commission, including consultation with the agricultural commissioner, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and the UC Extension Service. The commission will make a recommendation to the zoning administrator on the size and location of support structures and appropriate animal density for the site. The recommendation will be based on the number of animals that

could be feasibly and economically grazed on the site, assuming a minimum 40 percent of feed will be from grazing on-site.

- The maximum land coverage by all structures and impervious surfaces that are a part of the biomedical livestock operation will not exceed 1 percent of the total gross size. This limit could be extended in certain circumstances.

- No biomedical laboratory will be located on the site.

- On agriculturally zoned land, any research, testing, experimentation or product manufacturing at the biomedical livestock operation will be limited to the injection, or introduction, of those reagents which are inert, non-viable and non-infectious. Live viruses and bacteria are excluded.

grazed on the site assuming a minimum of 40 percent of the feed will be from grazing.

Stephenson wants that rule removed. "It makes no sense for the county to regulate what a goat eats," he said. The goats eat some grass, but also need pellet food, he said.

The other side wants more restrictions, not less.

Again, Wittwer wants biotechnology operations off prime soils. He also wants the county to have such an operation clustered so it is not sprawled over a property; limits on the number of animals to

what can be grazed; and structures to not be completely enclosed so they don't look like industrial buildings.

Whatever the county supervisors decide, it will still not likely be the end of the goat ranch story.

Under the proposed ordinance, a biomedical operation must submit a master plan. This means more hearings and discussions about the goat ranch.

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors is scheduled to discuss the issue at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday at the County Government Center, Fifth Floor, 701 Ocean St., Santa Cruz.