

State axes plan to log Gray Whale

By KATHY KREIGER

Sentinel staff writer

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SANTA CRUZ — The state Board of Forestry turned down Wednesday the latest of three proposals to log part of the Gray Whale Ranch.

The plan would have selectively logged 124 acres of the 2,300-acre ranch, which lies between UC Santa Cruz and the Wilder Ranch.

Opponents of the plan — including the county of Santa Cruz — said it didn't look closely enough at the effects of a proposed 73-unit housing development that would overlap part of the land to be logged.

In a 4-1 vote in Sacramento, the board agreed the plan did not adequately consider the projects' cumulative impact.

The logging plan had been approved last October by officials in the state Department of Forestry. The approval was appealed to the forestry board by the county Board of Supervisors at the request of residents and members of Save the Gray Whale Parklands, which wants to buy the property for a park.

Predictably, opponents of the plan were pleased, while applicants weren't.

"We're puzzled," said Gray Whale Ranch manager John Steinbacher of Wednesday's decision.

Steinbacher said the deliberations showed "apparently a lot of confusion among board members," and noted the decision was made without review by the board's attorney.

Oakland attorney Joe Brecher, who represented those opposing the plan, dismissed those concerns.

"There's nothing in law that the counsel has to be there," he said. "The board is perfectly competent to make its decision."

Furthermore, he said, the board's attorney was at the previous hearing, and no new issues were raised Wednesday.

Steinbacher said he will review the decision before deciding what to do next. He said it's by no means the end of logging at the Gray Whale Ranch.

"Absolutely not," he said. "...We'll be back."

The forester who prepared the plan said he was "very disappoint-

ed" with the decision.

"I don't know what to advise my client," said forester Roy Webster. "Because this is the third time around. This one was very well thought out. I just don't know what to do. We're going to have to sit down and decide what to do."

Opponents of the plan were jubilant.

"We're delighted," said Celia Scott, of Save the Gray Whale Ranch Parklands. "We were prepared to go into court this afternoon (Wednesday) and we're delighted we don't have to."

The plan allowed winter operations, Scott said. "So we would have had to seek an immediate restraining order."

Scott said she hopes money to buy the property may come from a proposed 1994 park bond act.

Her elation was echoed by county Supervisor Gary Patton, whose district includes the property and who spearheaded the county's appeal of the original decision. "It really does indicate the Board of Forestry went through and demanded that the property owner follow the law."

It shows, he said, that "when you propose a (housing development), you can't use the timber harvest as a shortcut. ...You're going to have to go through the whole environmental analysis."

But forester Webster said he was disappointed that the board did not give further directions for future plans.

The area proposed for logging was last harvested in 1976 by Big Creek Lumber Co. The ranch's owner, Idaho businessman Ron Yanke, bought the property five years ago to supply logs for his Soledad sawmill. Four logging plans have been submitted in that time. Three were turned down and a fourth was withdrawn.

The board's hearing of the appeal started a month ago with a session in Santa Cruz, attended by some 80 residents, many of whom had to leave before public comment began.

After hearing arguments on both sides, and public testimony, the board closed that hearing, postponing deliberation and the decision until Wednesday.