

*Animal Welfare*

# Judge orders horses returned to owners

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*12-15-90*

SANTA CRUZ — A judge Friday ordered the SPCA to release the remainder of a seized herd of Arabian horses back to the owners who are accused of mistreating the animals. The horse owners, the Sabankaya family, deny mistreating the animals and said the horses will receive better care at their Bonny Doon ranch than at the SPCA.

At a hearing Friday in Santa Cruz County Municipal Court, a veterinarian testified that the remaining 24 horses have caught lice and that five of the animals have contracted pneumonia while under the care of the SPCA.

"Having the horses released is a victory for the Sabankaya's but it is muted by the discovery of health of the horses," said Gordon Salisbury, an attorney for the Sabankaya's.

The five horses with pneumonia are not seriously ill, but need immediate treatment to prevent the sickness from becoming worse, Salisbury said.

The horses are the last of a herd of 44 which was seized by the SPCA on Oct. 30. The SPCA charged that the horses were malnourished and poorly taken care of. After an inves-

tigation by the SPCA, the District Attorney's Office filed charges of animal neglect against the owners, Mustafa, Nezhah and Semih Sabankaya.

The herd was taken to a small fenced in area at the SPCA shelter on Seventh Avenue where they were to be nursed back to health. Under state law the horses must be released back to their owners once healthy. Last month 20 of the animals were released back to the Sabankayas.

Attorneys for the family asked the court to release the rest of the herd.

Assistant District Attorney Kristen Long argued Friday that the Sabankayas might continue to mistreat the horses if they were released.

Municipal Court Judge Robert Atack ruled that the horses should be returned and imposed a set of conditions that included a weekly check of the horses by veterinarians. He ordered that the Sabankayas must cooperate with the SPCA and that the several groups of horses must be separated to ease the competition for food and to help nurse the ill horses back to health.

The Sabankayas have pleaded not guilty to animal neglect charges. A trial is scheduled for March 5.