

# Abalone farm proposal draws big, noisy crowd

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A large, contentious crowd turned out at a county Planning Commission hearing yesterday, with speakers alternately urging approval of a North Coast abalone farm and castigating it as an environmental disaster that might lead to off-shore oil drilling.

The crowd of about 150 was divided about evenly between those who believe shellfish farming would herald a new era of innovative agriculture in Santa Cruz County, and those who believe the four-acre farm would destroy the view and environment of the county's north coast.

Kim Tschantz, a county planner, told the commission the abalone farm was an appropriate use for an abandoned corner of a brussels sprouts farm about 10 miles north of Santa Cruz. He said it would be barely visible from Highway 1 and invisible from nearby Laguna Beach.

But the residents of 12 houses on nearby Coast Road protested that their views would be ruined by three water tanks and that wastewater pumped back into the sea from the plant would pollute local beaches.

Resident Roxanne Raphael also protested that she would no longer be able to walk on a bluffside path to watch whales in the spring and meditate at all seasons.

Her complaint led to farm owner Kurt Zeiher's vociferous protest that she had no right to walk across his property and was trespassing.

If the abalone farm is approved, Zeiher will lease a portion of his brussels sprouts farm to Peter Scrivani, proprietor of a new firm called Pacific Mariculture.

Scrivani's operation plans to drill holes for pipes through the ceiling of the third-largest sea cave, on the California coast and pump seawater up and waste-water out. In its trip through the mariculture plumbing, the water will glide through shaded tanks of abalone, emulating natural conditions of the ocean.

Scrivani told the commission the plumbing system would be built by the same engineer who designed the plumbing at Long Marine Lab and the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Julie Packard, director of the aquarium, wrote a letter in support of Scrivani's undertaking, saying seafood cultivation was a great development.

"The establishment of this project would not only hold the potential of lessening reliance on harvesting wild (abalone) populations, it would contribute

to our knowledge of marine biology through the research work conducted at the facility," Packard wrote.

She pooh-poohed the claims that abalone excrement — all liquid — would befoul the local beaches.

"Such facilities cannot allow any discharge of polluted water, as their intake lines would draw it back into their systems, jeopardizing the marine life in their facilities," Packard said.

Scrivani said mariculture was one of the cleanest forms of farming because it requires no chemicals or pesticides.

"It is effectively organic farming," he said.

Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau President Steve Siri spoke in favor of the project.

Siri noted that the California Coastal Act gives coastal-dependent development, such as fish farms, priority over development that could be built elsewhere, such as houses.

Celia Scott-von der Muhll, attorney for the Coast Road residents, took issue with the farm's environmental impact report. She said it was insufficient in six ways.

Scott-von der Muhll and other speakers complained that the effect of drilling through the sea cave had not been adequately studied.

One speaker said drilling through this cave would set a bad precedent for drilling through others, and that there are not so many sea caves in California.

The meeting was punctuated by a shouting match between Planning Commissioner Dale Skillicorn and an unruly Coast Road resident who gave a 20-minute address and refused for a time to sit down.

In a rambling speech, Richard Conner said the abalone farm would be the "thin end of the wedge" in the oil companies' struggle to drill off the coast, because the farm's water tanks would provide a precedent for building oil storage tanks on the coast.

He also tried to compare the Planning Department's processing of the abalone farm application to the start of the Vietnam War.

Skillicorn told him, "This case has to do with Pacific Mariculture, not Vietnam or other issues." He threatened to call a break if Conner did not sit down.

Conner continued to speak, until one of his friends whispered to him to sit down. Later, Conner apologized to the commission for his behavior.