

County approves medical livestock ordinance

But goat-ranch fight isn't over

By MAY WONG
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The embattled biotech company that raises goats on the North Coast won final approval Tuesday of a county ordinance that validates its medical livestock operation. But company officials still weren't jumping for joy.

That's because opponents were nowhere near admitting defeat. They raised more objections Tuesday — including a separate but related proposal for a large horse barn on the North Coast property — and said they might take the battle to court.

"Two and a half years — that's a long time to get to this point ... and now they're bringing up the horse barn, and the ink (on the new ordinance) isn't even dry," said John Stephenson, who along with his wife, Brenda, co-owns Santa Cruz Biotechnology.

"It's just going to keep coming," he said.

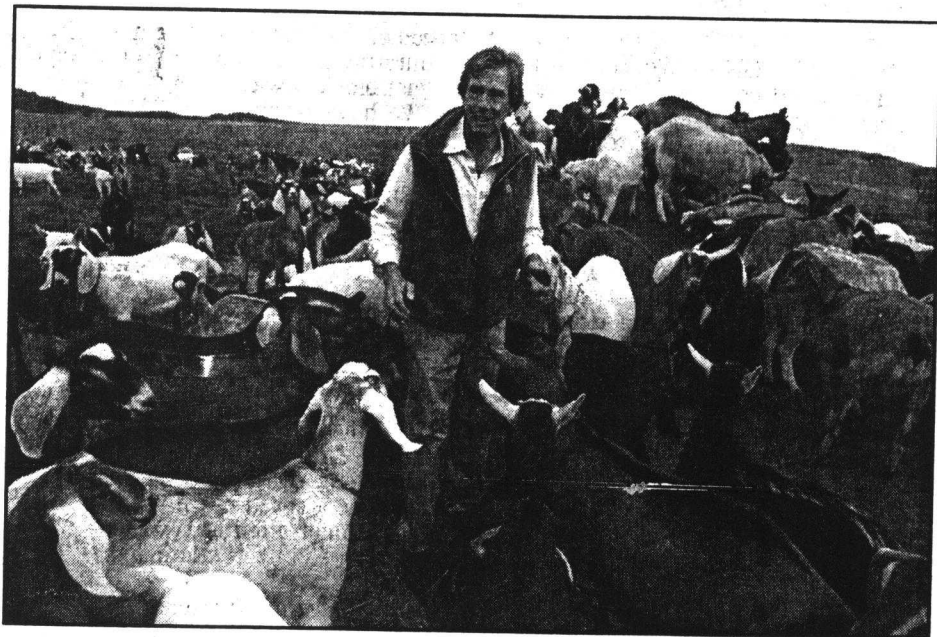
The county Board of Supervisors approved a final version of the ordinance that includes several changes the state Coastal Commission had adopted earlier this year.

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The ordinance — the first of its kind in the state — recognizes biotechnology as a new form of agriculture. It also gives the county some ground rules to go by when it comes to governing the Stephensons' biomedical goat operation or any similar activities that might surface in the future.

The Stephensons brought their goat herd two years ago to a 200-acre ranch they bought five miles north of Santa Cruz. The goats — now numbering about 1,600 — produce antibodies for cancer research.

Opponents fought the ordinance tooth and nail, won concessions here and there, but say the final version of the ordinance still isn't stringent enough. The critics, mostly neighbors and other environmentalists, say the ordinance does not adequately address water pollution problems they say are bound to occur with so many goats.

Opponents were also disappointed that the final ordinance did not include a tougher grazing limit, which in turn would limit the size of the operation. Under the ordinance, the animals must get 40 percent of their feed from grazing.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel file

John Stephenson with his flock at Santa Cruz Biotechnology.

The ordinance was approved Tuesday on a 4-to-1 vote, with Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt dissenting. "I think there's still a major question of whether this kind of activity is appropriate for agricultural land," she said.

In addition, Wormhoudt said she

thought the environmental review of the ordinance was insufficient.

Opponents agreed and threatened to sue on those grounds. They contended an EIR, or environmental impact report, should have been required before approval of the ordinance.