

Gray Whale Illegal road draws penalty

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Preservationists hail Gray Whale settlement

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The owners of rural Gray Whale Ranch in Santa Cruz County have agreed to pay \$8,568 as part of a settlement with county prosecutors over the illegal bulldozing of a road last year through woodlands and a stream.

Under the arrangement, property owner Ron Yanke of Boise, Idaho, and several partnerships will pay \$5,000 in civil penalties. They also will pay \$3,568 to Santa Cruz County's planning department and the state Department of Fish and Game to cover investigation costs.

In November 1992, a contractor widened a 19th-century cattle path — near Wilder Creek at the south end of the ranch — into a 12-foot dirt road. The work was done without permits.

County environmental officials said the half-mile road violated several state laws, damaged stream habitat and caused hillside erosion during winter rains.

Tuesday, an attorney for Yanke repeated earlier claims that the work was nothing more than routine maintenance.

Dispute over intent

"The whole thing got blown out of proportion," said the attorney, Steve Worthley of Dinuba. "I have no regrets about the work done out there. I regret that they didn't get the proper permits."

But prosecutors say the owners deliberately tried to skirt basic land use rules to lay the groundwork for road needed for a proposed housing development.

"They had already been told they would not be allowed to have this as a secondary access road," said Morgan Taylor, a Santa Cruz County deputy district attorney.

Shortly after the incident, Gray Whale Ranch property manager John Steinbacher left Santa Cruz. Taylor said Tuesday that he was fired because Yanke was angry about the road incident. Worthley confirmed the firing.

The 2,319-acre Gray Whale Ranch lies between Wilder Ranch State Park and the University of California, Santa Cruz. With spectacular views of Monterey Bay and rich forests, it has been at the center of a development controversy since 1988.

Land use battle brewing

Yanke has filed applications to subdivide the land into 73 residential lots with a swimming complex and equestrian center. Environmentalists are attempting to add the property to adjacent Wilder Ranch State Park but do not have the estimated \$10 million needed to buy it.

Consultants hired by Yanke have begun an environmental impact statement, which is expected to be finished by next summer.

One aspect of Tuesday's settlement praised by some conservationists was a permanent injunction against future grading violations.