

Gray Whale Ranch owners seek OK for development study

By KATHY KREIGER

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Owners of the Gray Whale Ranch have taken the next step toward building 73 houses at the controversial North Coast property.

Authorization to proceed with a \$206,867 environmental study of the project is set for routine approval Tuesday by the county Board of Supervisors.

For years, however, the only things routine about the 2,319-acre North Coast property have been the protests and opposition to every proposal to log or build houses there.

Since Idaho businessman Ron Yanke bought the property in 1988, he has faced an uphill battle in his efforts to realize a return on his investment.

Local environmentalists have long fought to preserve what they say is a unique and priceless piece of nature.

Their hopes of buying the land were dashed this month, however, as voters turned down Proposition 180, a \$2 billion state bond issue which would have provided at least some of the money needed to buy the land.

An earlier setback came this spring, when a court allowed Yanke to proceed with a timber harvest. His state logging permit allowed him to cut 800,000 board-feet of lumber — \$500,000 worth —

on a 124-acre parcel near Wilder Ranch.

The day after the June 7 election, Yanke paid the county the full cost of preparing an environmental report. County planners say he has also put down a \$500 deposit toward the county's review and processing costs.

The property is bordered in part by Empire Grade Road and UC Santa Cruz to the east, Wilder Ranch State Park to the south, a large-lot housing development to the west and single-family homes to the northeast. In the past, it has been farmed, logged and mined. Most recently, it has been grazing land for cattle.

Titled La Cumbre Subdivision, the proposed project would include a private swimming club and tennis facility, and an equestrian center. Three lots would be set aside as a common area, and another three would be saved for timber production.

A site next to Empire Grade Road is to be set aside for a new fire station by the developer.

The report will be prepared by EIP Associates, a San Francisco consultant, and is expected to be ready in October.

Key issues to be discussed in the environmental study include a second road to the property, circulation, land use, biological resources, timber resources, watersheds on the property, and visual impact.