

State orders goat ranch closed

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Coastal Commission tells owners to remove animals, stop all building

NORTH COAST — The state Coastal Commission has ordered an embattled bio-tech goat ranch to shut down by July 21.

In a bluntly worded letter dated Monday, commission deputy director Tami Grove has demanded removal of all goats and manure at the ranch in the hills above Highway 1 about four miles north of Santa Cruz. She also demanded that all unpermitted operations cease

and development at the site stop.

The county Board of Supervisors on Aug. 8 is set to discuss a permit for the 1,600-goat ranch that would allow new construction.

Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, however, said the state's order might make that permit "a moot point." The commission has ultimate authority on development within the Coastal Zone, she said.

"They trump the county," she said. "They're a state agency."

Santa Cruz Biotechnology co-owner John Stephenson said Tuesday night he was unsure what would happen to the ranch.

He said he hoped to work something out with the state to avoid having to relocate the goats. Antibodies in the animals' blood are used worldwide in cancer research. The biotech company is

based on the Westside.

Stephenson said he is looking at alternative ranch sites, including spots outside Fort Worth, Texas, and in Nevada.

"I'm not certain what is the best thing to do to tell you the truth," Stephenson said. "I'm not sure what makes the most sense economically."

But while the goats might be moved, the company's research building will stay, he said.

Neighbors of the 4-year-old ranch have fought it from the start, saying it pollutes their land with manure-laden run-off every time it rains.

Stephenson has been seeking county OKs for, among other things, barn-roof extensions to stop the problem. But opponents say they will be satisfied only when the animals are gone, and charge the county with lax enforcement.

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Goat ranch

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The letter leaves no room for interpretation and does not offer a middle ground. It also demands site restoration after the animals are gone.

If the deadline passes, the owners face a potential cease-and-desist order, which could result in fines of up to \$6,000 a day, Grove states in her letter.

"This means removing from the properties a) all goats, b) all manure, and c) all materials contaminated with feces and/or urine," the letter reads.

The commission took the ranch to task for pollution.

"Run-off contaminated with goat feces and urine has led to grossly elevated fecal coliform levels," Grove wrote.

Neighbors were declaring victory Tuesday.

"They've had four years to clean up their act, and it's about time," said wildlife photographer Frans Lanting, whose drinking-water well is close to the ranch.

Ranch opponent Jodi Frediani said the letter is crystal clear, "but whether Santa Cruz Biotechnology will take that as an order remains to be seen. Their past history is that they will go ahead and do what they please regardless of directives to do something else."

But Stephenson charged neighbors with treating him unfairly.

"The facility in town runs very smoothly," he said. "Certainly there is some controversy over the goats. ... A lot of it is hard to understand. There is a small group of individuals on the North Coast that take it upon themselves to put different projects out of business."

In June, county supervisors voted

3-2 to authorize new construction at the ranch under emergency permits.

But county Planning Director Alvin James later said he wouldn't issue those permits in spite of the supervisors' OK. That decision came on the heels of a lawsuit filed by Friends of the North Coast and Save Our Agricultural Land. The groups argued there was no emergency, and won a temporary injunction against the ranch.

Wormhoudt, who voted against new construction at the ranch, said she supports the Coastal Commission crackdown, and said the fate of the ranch will become more clear once the deadline passes.

"Frankly, I've never seen this happen before," Wormhoudt said. "I've never seen a situation when the Coastal Commission was so clearly in conflict with the Board of Supervisors."