



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Critics say that the goats graze large areas and compact the soil with their hooves, leaving the ground susceptible to erosion.

Goat order praised

Neighbors celebrate ruling that herd must go



Nikita Bury plays in the front yard of her Old Coast Road home, which is flooded each winter with manure-laden runoff from the goat ranch.

Goat Ranch

By **DAN WHITE**

SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Neighbors of a biotech goat ranch are cheering a state order that the owners remove all animals and manure from the property. One family is even breaking out the champagne.

But the fate of the 1,600-goat North Coast ranch remains unclear, and even the celebrating neighbors expressed a degree of caution.

John Stephenson, co-owner of the ranch and Santa Cruz Biotechnology, said Wednesday he has yet to decide

whether to comply with the order — or move any goats — and will meet with state Coastal Commission officials Friday.

The Westside-based company harvests the goats' blood, which produces antibodies used in cancer research.

In a Monday letter demanding removal of the goats, the commission's deputy director took Stephenson to task for "well-documented negative impacts on coastal resources." Those include degradation of a riparian area and bacteria-laden storm runoff that has led to "gross-

ly elevated fecal coliform levels" on neighboring properties, the letter stated.

High bacteria counts have been found near the home of Valerie Valdez, who lives on Coast Road, downstream from the goat ranch. She and other neighbors have complained that goat manure-tainted runoff reaches their properties every time it rains.

Valdez said this could be the first winter in three years she will not have to worry about her two children playing in her front yard. But she also expressed

Please see **GOATS** on **BACK PAGE**

7-13-00

Goats: Neighbors praise ruling; future of herd uncertain

Continued from Page A1

some skepticism.

"I'm really excited with a certain degree of caution," said Valdez, a preschool teacher with Head Start in Watsonville. "I'm not extremely hopeful this is going to happen until I see trucks taking goats away."

Valdez said she's angry Stephenson has yet to tell the state what he plans to do.

"He's an educated man," she said. "He knows what to do. Move."

Stephenson said if he does comply, he may still return and seek a permit to reopen, even if he decides to set up goat ranches in Texas or Nevada. He said he hasn't considered a lawsuit or a formal appeal to the commission, but hasn't ruled out either.

Stephenson, who lives in a large house near the ranch, complete with a goat-shaped weathervane, said that regardless of the outcome of the order, he and wife Brenda have no plans to leave Santa Cruz or move the company's research facility on Delaware Avenue.

Charles Lester, manager of the Coastal Commission's Central Coast district, said he couldn't predict what would happen if the Stephensons don't comply.

"It's premature to talk about that because we don't know what their response is going to be," Lester said.

He also said the commission order was touched off, in part, by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors' 3-2 vote last month to allow new development at the ranch under emergency permits.

Supervisors Tony Campos, Walt Symons and Jeff Almquist voted in favor, with Jan Beautz and Mardi



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

About 1,600 goats graze at Santa Cruz Biotechnology's ranch north of Santa Cruz.

Wormhoudt in opposition.

"Emergency approvals ... were not appropriate in this case," Lester said.

He also said the commission was responding to the fact the ranch was affecting local water quality while remaining an unpermitted operation.

Stephenson and his staff have said they are being singled out, that other properties with livestock yield high bacteria counts downstream, and that much of the problem is attributable to wildlife.

Wildlife photographer Frans Lanting, who lives near the ranch and is one of its most vocal critics, said it is ridiculous to blame wildlife.

Prior to the goat ranch, the land was home to bobcat and even mountain lions, Lanting said, but "no one who lives here has seen any animal the size of a bunny rabbit on their land since

they moved in."

Lanting also said the commission's assertions about degradation of the land are easy to prove.

Walking and driving near his property, Lanting pointed to several areas where goats had chewed down the grass on hillsides. In the summer, he said, the overgrazed areas "look like Africa in a drought. ... It's a textbook case of too many goats on the land."

Lanting and other opponents have compiled a detailed portfolio of photos and figures they say spotlights the effects the goats are having on the coastal scrub plants and water quality.

He also said he's never seen anything like the commission letter in his 20 years in the Santa Cruz area, "when the county let an environmental issue slide to the degree that the Coastal

Commission stepped in."

Stephenson has accused his critics of being obsessed with his undoing.

He said Wednesday that many of them seem to regard it as a full-time occupation. "They go to hearings and complain about me, that's what they do, and we market products for cancer research."

Lanting disagreed.

"We are not doing this to put anything in anyone's way," he said. "There's nothing we would rather do than not deal with this. The neighbors have spent over \$10,000 testing our own water."

Lanting said he has yet to find any pollution in his community well, located just over the fence from the Stephenson property. But he and his wife, Christine Eckstrom, say they are worried the pollution could be percolating slowly toward their unfiltered supply.

Stephenson declined to allow a reporter to visit the ranch Wednesday. Lanting, though, gave reporters a tour along Back Ranch Road, which runs alongside the property. The road is private but is open to residents and their guests.

In spite of this, several ranch employees stopped reporters and Lanting as they looked at the ranch and took pictures from the road.

"You have to leave," said one man, who would not identify himself.

"Not according to me," Lanting responded.

He later complained that others have been "harassed" on the road by ranch hands.

"People have lived here and used the road for generations," he said. "For people to say you can't use the road is totally ridiculous."



Neighbors say the goats are damaging the environment in many ways, especially by browsing on local vegetation, where they nibble trees bare as high as they can reach.