

Ranch goats topic of another debate

Goat Ranch Regulation criteria could set precedent

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SANTA CRUZ — The goats on Stephenson's Ranch, which produce antibodies for cancer research, are once again pioneers.

Earlier this year, the North Coast goats led to the first ordinance regulating biomedical operations on coastal agricultural land in the state.

Now the question is whether they should fall under existing regulations for the humane treatment of "agricultural" animals or "biotechnology" animals — or a precedent-setting hybrid of both.

The debate was aired, but not settled, by the county Board of Supervisors Tuesday. The matter will return to them in about a month.

Two supervisors have already made clear that they favor local, stringent, precedent-setting rules. "If it's precedent setting, so be it," said Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt. "Good for us."

Chairwoman Jan Beautz agreed. "I think it's pretty awful the way some animals area treated."

The SPCA had proposed that local ordinances be adopted specifically aimed at biomedical and research operations. The facilities would be required to use local or general anesthetic on animals when performing any pain-causing procedure, such as dehorning, disbudding or castration. SPCA officials also wanted to require that euthanasia of research animals be performed by a licensed veterinarian or euthanasia technician.

The American Humane Association lauded the effort saying it was "impressive and encouraging."

Others were not impressed. Dave Casper, a veterinarian with Long Marine Laboratory, maintained that adding local laws would be "redundant and unnecessary."

The federal government, through the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Institutes of Health, already have rules and regulations in place concerning use of animals in biotechnology that would apply to Santa Cruz Biotechnology, said Casper.

USDA inspectors would "not countenance" pain causing practices in a biotechnology setting, even though dual standards allow such practices in agricultural animals. The issue of euthanasia of animals is also already addressed, he said.

The USDA is also in the process of preparing guidelines for the care and use of agricultural animals in research and teaching. The guidelines will be used by federal inspectors in evaluating Santa Cruz Biotechnology's operation at the Stephenson Ranch.

Casper suggested that the supervisors delay action until those guidelines are complete. If they still felt a local ordinance was needed, the supervisors could use those guidelines as the basis.

Susan Ness, president of the California Biomedical Research Association, agreed. Ness said that existing federal laws already require humane treatment, unscheduled regulatory site visits and appropriate veterinarian care.

While the requirement for anesthetic for castrations and dehorning would be precedent setting, scientific research on whether it's necessary is ambivalent, according to Pam Hullinger, a veteri-

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narian with the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

It would also be more than what is required of livestock in agricultural operations, which troubled Supervisor Jeff Almquist. "I don't see any distinction between goats on Stephenson's Ranch ... and other farm animals," Almquist said. "Why raise these animals to a higher level of protection than any other farm animal? I don't see any particular reason to single out these particular goats?"

Animal rights activists wanted more. Jodi Frediana, who fought previous approvals of the Santa Cruz Biotechnology operations, said that existing rules didn't exclude the practice of bleeding an animal to death.

"To allow that to happen with large animals is not a humane procedure," Frediana said.

Santa Cruz Biotechnology doesn't bleed its goats to death, representative Steve Tronick assured supervisors.

Supervisors agreed to postpone action until the federal guidelines are published in about a month. Then they will compare the guidelines with the local proposal.