

Goat ranch zoning challenged

Goat Ranch
■ **Dispute:** Worried neighbors say livestock used for medical research doesn't qualify as agriculture.

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Does raising livestock for medical research still count as agriculture?

Santa Cruz BioTechnology says yes, worried neighbors of the company's ranch say no, and county planners are caught in the middle trying to figure it out.

The dispute began in February when Santa Cruz BioTechnology President John Stephenson and his wife bought a 200-acre farm on Back Ranch Road along Santa Cruz County's rural north coast.

The Stephensons, who plan to live on the ranch with its spectacular views of the Pacific Ocean, have since been grazing nearly 200 company goats there.

The goats are used by the company to develop antibodies that are sold to universities, pharmaceutical companies and other scientific organizations, primarily for cancer research, Stephenson said.

Some of his neighbors on Back Ranch Road, however, fear that the research goats may transmit disease to people, pets or wildlife, said David Mills, Stephenson's neighbor.

"I don't know whether the goats are a risk or not," Mills said. "But what I do believe in is the process. I would like the county to do a review and for him to present his case in an open manner."

Stephenson, whose company is based in Santa Cruz and employs 100, says such

fears are unfounded. No germs or viruses are given to the animals, he said. Rather, the company injects them with proteins that trigger the production of antibodies as an immune response. The antibodies are then filtered from the goats' blood and sold, and no harm is done to the animals.

"There is no conceivable danger," Stephenson said. "These proteins are completely inert materials. When you eat a hamburger or a steak, it's a piece of protein."

County planner Pete Parkinson said his agency is considering whether the practice satisfies the ranch's commercial agriculture zoning or whether it is more appropriate for industrially zoned land. Agricultural zoning allows such activities as raising livestock, but this is not traditional ranching, he said.

"If you're raising livestock that you're

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going to milk or use for meat, clearly, that's agriculture," Parkinson said. "But what if you're using the animals to produce a quasi-industrial product? New things come along that don't fit neatly into the definitions and codes we have now."

Parkinson said the department will decide on the matter within a week, adding that this is not something county planners have been faced with before.

"This is a first," Parkinson said. "This is a unique operation in the county."

The goats are just one of several disputes between Stephenson and his neighbors. The residents banded together in a lawsuit earlier this month to block Stephenson's efforts to install a gate at the entrance to Back Ranch Road. A hearing is scheduled Tuesday.

Stephenson said his neighbors simply don't want anything to happen on his land.