

Gray Whale Ranch logging hearing set

By TRACY L. BARNETT
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Local residents will have an opportunity to sound off tonight at a public hearing on the Gray Whale Ranch timber harvest — the fifth of nine such harvests on the land.

Adjacent to the UC-Santa Cruz campus, the tract has drawn attention because of citizen efforts to procure the tract as an addition to Wilder Ranch State Park. Funding to buy it was included in the failed 1994 Prop. 180, and more than 4,000 citizens signed a petition that year to prevent a proposed development on the tract.

Since that time, there have been three timber harvests on the property. Six more are proposed, and public hearings are pending on two of them, including one tonight.

Under new regulations requiring expedited handling of timber plans, the state Department of Forestry and Fire Protection will be hearing comments on the new harvest plan tonight, less than a month after the original plan was released. Local activists say they haven't had time to find out about it, request copies from the agency and study it.

"So few people know about it, I suspect it will be a cipher experience," said Celia Scott, Santa Cruz councilwoman and environmental lawyer. "The community isn't going to know anything about it or have chance to review the plan, and this will probably be the last opportunity for public input. It's such a bad process."

Scott said concerns center on cumulative impacts to Majors Creek, which is in the headwaters of the Santa Cruz water supply. This particular harvest involves 192 acres at the intersection of Empire Grade and Smith Grade roads.

The county has appealed a separate harvest on the Gray Whale land, saying that the land should be resurveyed for wildlife migration following major timber harvests.

County Planning Director Daniel Shaw has identified the tract as "an incredibly diverse refuge for many species of plants, animals and insects." The property contains several endangered species,

and mushrooms so rare they are known to exist nowhere else in the world.

The hearing will be at 7 tonight at the County Government Center in the fifth floor Board of Supervisors Chamber.

Another Gray Whale harvest plan, which the county has appealed, will receive a public hearing April 19 along with the Gamecock Creek timber plan.