

Owner: Goats going, going ...

By DAN WHITE
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

SANTA CRUZ — Santa Cruz Biotechnology co-owner John Stephenson agreed Thursday to move all goats off his ranch by July 21, but voiced outrage over the state's "burdensome, unjustified" demand that he do so.

Stephenson's capitulation, in a letter to the commission, puts an end to a four-year goat war between Stephenson and his neighbors, at least for now.

On Monday, the state Coastal Commission ordered Stephenson and wife Brenda to clear out the roughly 1,600 goats and manure on his North Coast ranch by the deadline or face a cease-and-desist order and fines.

The company, with a ranch four miles north of Santa Cruz and a plant on the city's Westside, harvests the goats' blood, which produces antibodies used in cancer research. Neighbors, however, say the goats have soiled the area's groundwater and harmed the environment.

Stephenson said earlier this week he was unsure what he would do about the order. But on Thursday, Matt Mullin, Santa Cruz Biotechnology's director of planning and regulatory affairs, said there was no other choice.

"Clearly from the way the (state) letter was worded, there was not much of a decision there," Mullin said. "It was rather unequivocal in what it stated."

The question now is: Where will the company take the goats?

Stephenson's letter, a mix of protest and resignation, does not address the

Please see **GOATS** on Page A10

Goats

Continued from Page A1

issue, only stating that they will be moved and that it will cause him problems.

"The commission's directives are burdensome, unjustified and damaging to Santa Cruz Biotechnology Inc., (and) to Brenda and I as individuals," he wrote.

He also said he was complying under duress and that moving the goats would harm his company's efforts to develop cancer-fighting products.

Jodi Frediani, a neighbor and vocal critic of the ranch, said, "It's not a matter of putting him out of business, it's just a matter of not doing pollution in the coastal zone."

Stephenson said earlier this week he was considering moving the goats to Texas or Nevada. He also said he was thinking of removing them before the Coastal Commission letter because of pressure from neighbors and the high cost of living for ranch employees.

In her letter, Coastal Commission Deputy Director Tami Grove told Stephenson he could no longer operate as an unpermitted facility that degraded the land and leaked manure-laden runoff.

Stephenson was allowed to open without a permit because the facility was initially considered an agricultural operation.

Grove wrote that the ranch was responsible for degraded riparian corridors along with runoff contaminated with goat droppings and urine, which has led to "grossly elevated fecal

coliform levels."

Stephenson and his staff say the county, neighbors and state are singling them out for harsh treatment, and that all land with livestock yields runoff with very high bacteria counts.

But neighbors argue Stephenson hasn't responded to their concerns, deadlines, orders or anything else. And recent data from the county shows runoff from the site with fecal coliform bacteria levels up to 225 times the safe body contact standards, Grove said.

"This polluted runoff has been found in groundwater, watercourses and flowing through residential yards and to the ocean, to the detriment of residents, downstream beach goers and surfers," Grove said in her letter.

On Thursday, Stephenson's most outspoken critic, lawyer Jonathan Wittwer, sounded too stunned to rejoice.

"It's happening so fast," he said. "I'm hopeful I might go back to having more of a life."

Wittwer served as the county's chief deputy counsel up until 1996, when he quit to devote much of his time and energy to fighting the goat ranch. He's now in private practice.

Stephenson has the option of returning to the county and seeking permits to reopen the ranch, but Wittwer said that would be a very lengthy process.