

Gray Whale Ranch goes up for sale

■ Reversal:

After losing battles to log and build homes on the scenic parcel, the owner asks \$14.5 million.

BY PAUL ROGERS
Mercury News Staff Writer

An Idaho lumberman and developer who has battled environmentalists for eight years over Gray Whale Ranch, a scenic parcel of land on Santa Cruz County's north coast, has offered the property for sale.

Ron Yanke of Boise said Thursday he is asking \$14.5 million for the land, long coveted by local leaders and conservation groups as a potential-state park.

"I like Santa Cruz County," Yanke said in a telephone interview. "I don't understand all the restrictions though. I don't understand why the county is so anti-growth."

The ranch, a 2,319-acre landscape of redwood forests, meadows and panoramic ocean views, lies between Wilder Ranch State Park and the University of California, Santa Cruz campus. It is considered one of the most important sites in the county, ecologically, still in private ownership.

Yanke, who owns a machine shop in Boise, bought the property in 1988 for \$5 million. Since then he has applied to the state at

least seven times to log second-growth redwood trees there. After losing several lawsuits filed by environmentalists, he successfully logged three sections of about 200 acres. He also has pending plans to log an additional 192 acres in an area known as Cave Gulch.

Yanke ran into the biggest controversy, however, in 1992, when he submitted plans to create 73 residential lots for luxury homes, a swimming complex and equestrian center on the ranch. Despite spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on environmental studies, he withdrew the plans after the project became a key issue in a race for the Santa Cruz County supervisor's district encompassing the area.

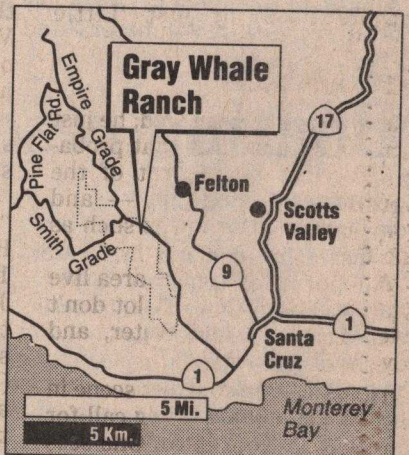
That race was won by Mardi Wormhoudt, who opposes any development on the site.

"It's an extraordinary piece of land," Wormhoudt said. "I always thought that property should be in public ownership. It's got magnificent trees, caves and spectacular flora and fauna."

Wormhoudt called Yanke's \$14.5 million asking price "overblown."

She said she plans to talk to private land trusts and regional political leaders such as state Sen. Henry Mello, D-Gilroy, to see about raising money to buy the land. That possibility, however, is a long shot.

There is no money in the state parks budget for new land purchases, largely because voters have not passed a parks bond



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since 1988.

On Thursday, Yanke offered two reasons for attempting the sale.

He said he has grown weary of Santa Cruz's devout slow-growth movement, which has battled him at every turn. And he said he is focusing new effort into timber production in Livingston, Mont.

If the land doesn't sell, he said, he may one day present a new development plan if the county's slow-growth politics changes.

"If Santa Cruz is ever ready for it, we'll come back with another development plan," he said. "When they want it, I'll be happy to work with them."

Environmentalists scoffed.

"That could be a long time," said Celia Scott, a spokeswoman for Save the Gray Whale Parklands, which gathered more than

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Foiled by environmentalists, owner is asking \$14.5 million

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3,000 signatures on petitions opposing the old housing plans.

"On the whole, I'd call this a good thing," said Scott, also a Santa Cruz City Council member. "He evidently has decided he can't develop the land. That's what the community wanted. I guess he got the message."

The land is zoned for logging and agriculture. To allow houses, the board of supervisors would have to change the county's general plan. Yanke's real estate agent, Leroy Rockelman of Thunderbird Real Estate in Capitola,

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said the land was offered for sale about five years ago. Two developers made offers, he said. Both wanted to donate most of the land as a public park on the condition they be allowed to build about 40 homes. But the office of former Supervisor Gary Patton rejected those offers, and the deal

fell through, he said.

The land is mostly zoned for timber and agriculture. It has 15 legal lots for houses. Rockelman said that in the past week he has had three inquiries from prospective buyers, two from the Bay Area and a group of Texas developers.

Rockelman defended the price, noting that the price of redwood has quadrupled since Yanke bought the land in 1988. He said he will seek more prospective buyers with ads on the Internet and in the Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal and other publications.