

Santa Cruz Biotech gets reprieve on goat waste water

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Goat Ranch
SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors ordered their staff to cite Santa Cruz Biotech for violation of pollution laws and then turned around and told their staff to allow the firm to apply for emergency coastal permits so they can clean up the water leaving the property during the rainy season. Each vote during Tuesday's meeting was 3-2.

Supervisor Jeff Almquist joined Supervisors Mardi Wormhoudt and Jan Beautz in ordering the citation be issued after neighbors of the goat farm owned by John and Brenda Stephenson said fecal coliform tests were very high and complained bitterly about the runoff coming close to their homes. They told the board the operation was creating a hazard for children living in the area.

Almquist then joined Supervisors Tony Campos and Walt Symons (the two supervisors representing the Pajaro Valley) in ordering the planning staff to issue emergency coastal permits so the firm can build whatever facilities are necessary to clean up the runoff.

Campos said following the meeting it was not right for the board to cite the Stephensons for problems on the ranch and not allow the firm the opportunity to get the permits to clean things up.

On the vote to cite the firm, both Campos and Symons agreed the Board was singling out the firm when tests at livestock facilities elsewhere in the county were even worse than those taken at Santa Cruz Biotech.

Symons told his colleagues Santa Cruz Biotech should not be cited. "If anyone should be issued a citation it should be the board" for allowing polluted water to pour down on land owned by neighbors.

He said following the meeting he was "very sympathetic to the people that have to put up with it."

Last year, the board refused to approve permits to build manure bunkers and for a cover over a large area between barns where the goats could assemble during rainy weather. The cover and the storage

bunkers were recommended by the Regional Water Quality Control Board as a solution to the drainage problem. Now it appears the county may issue the permits after all.

Attorney Jonathan Wittwer, a resident in the neighborhood working with his neighbors, said following the meeting, "our experts tell us the additional buildings and covers will not halt the pollution." He was also upset because neighbors had to put up \$5,000 of their own money to take water samples to prove their case that polluted water was running off the Stephenson property. He said the job should have been initially carried out by the Environmental Health Department.

Environmental Health Official John Ricker told the supervisors, "all of the livestock areas need to be improved including better handling of manure piles."

Ricker also said in his report two livestock operations in the San Lorenzo Valley were also sampled (runoff from a goat operation had twice the fecal count as Santa Cruz Biotech) but said the county is working with various groups to get those problems cleaned up. Symons praised Ricker for sampling in other places in the county.

Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt attempted to get her colleagues to change the designation of the operation by noting goats were spending a lot of time under cover, "which takes them out of an agricultural operation. It seems to me that's more like a feed lot (which is not allowed on the North Coast site)."

"There are known solutions," Santa Cruz Biotech spokesman Matt Mullen said. "We are willing to make improvements if we can move forward in good faith." He said the firm has hired a consultant to work with the company on a drainage program, and he said the company would bring in a set of plans already completed for consideration in the next couple of weeks for consideration by the planning staff.

Wittwer told the supervisors their first choice should be to order a reduction in the goat herd, but the board appeared reluctant to make the move.

Mullen said following the meeting, "we will clean up the site," and said they will soon be seeking permits.

Wittwer called the board's action "reasonable". The issue will again be discussed by the board in April.

Marmo's Trailer Park

A group of people living in Marmo's Trailer Park at Pinto Lake bitterly complained to the board during oral communications about conditions at the facility and claimed they were being mistreated by the park's court-appointed manager. The court stepped in and ordered the facility cleaned up after the health department and the county counsel's office said health codes were being flagrantly violated on the site.

Tenants alleged they were being denied the opportunity to bring in newer mobile homes and RVs onto the site, and promises for a play area for the children were not being carried out. They also said there was no water pressure at the facility except in the public bathrooms, which were "filthy."

The supervisors have a policy of not commenting on issues brought to the board under oral communications, but Campos said later he's been working with the court and the owners and he expects a solution within the next several weeks.

Rio Highlands

Meadowlark Lane residents in Rio Del Mar urged the board not to allow bond money put up by the developers of Rio Highlands to be returned, claiming they had not carried out the work required to build the walls and fencing required in the plans. They also made their complaints during oral communications.

Symons said following a litigation session on the question the issue will be taken up in public by the board next week.

There's a row of homes along Meadowlark Lane that abuts against the Rio Highlands Project and Symons says he supports the efforts of the residents to get the facility fixed to their satisfaction.