

Research goats qualify as agriculture, judge rules

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Goat Ranch

SANTA CRUZ — Goats growing antibodies for medical research might not be your usual goats but they're still part of agriculture, a Santa Cruz County judge tentatively ruled Monday.

"Agriculture certainly includes more than providing food and fiber," said Judge Bill Kelsay.

Save Our Agricultural Land and the Sierra Club had sued over the county's biomedical livestock ordinance, which governs Santa Cruz Biotechnology's goat raising operation on agricultural land near Davenport.

Although Santa Cruz Biotechnology is the only biomedical farm in the county, lawyers argued that the ordinance would allow a proliferation feedlots and feedyards, which are prohibited under Measure J, the county's growth-con-

trol ordinance that also preserves agricultural land.

"Measure J demands that agricultural lands be in agricultural production and I don't believe feedlots are agriculture," said Matthew Lintner, an attorney representing Save Our Agricultural Land.

"We have an agricultural environment but we don't have agriculture," Lintner said.

Lintner maintained that the goats raised by Brenda and John Stephenson, owners of Santa Cruz Biotechnology, on their ranch north of Santa Cruz are different than those raised in a traditional rangeland operation. Under the ordinance, they must get at least 40 percent of their diet from pastures. The rest can come from feed supplements.

That allows more than twice as many goats to be kept as would be possible if they depended on grazing.

Lintner argued that the ordinance will allow the

Stephensons to ignore "traditional agriculture practices in pursuit of profit."

"Unrestrained by either the ordinance or the laws of economics, these operations will in practice overload their land and destroy the agricultural productivity of the parcel," the lawsuit contends.

Kelsay rejected those arguments in favor of counterarguments by County Counsel Dwight Herr. Herr argued that Measure J says nothing specifically about biomedical operations. It is up to the county Board of Supervisors to decide to what extent biomedical operations can be allowed on agricultural lands, as the board did when it adopted the the biomedical livestock ordinance, Herr said.

Kelsay said the biomedical livestock ordinance has built-in protections, including limitations on the number of animals, the size of the buildings and a review process.

Kelsay said he expected to make his ruling final next month.