

Big stink

County weighs action against pollution from goat farm



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Goat Ranch Manure runoff contaminates neighbors' yards

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✓ **SANTA CRUZ** — The first rain of the season may have watered the plants, but it also flushed some exceptionally contaminated water into yards of Coast Road residents.

They say samples taken last month from the uphill Stephenson Ranch, where about 1,650 goats graze, had contamination levels 120 times the established safety levels for body contact.

"It's very scary," said Coast Road resident Valerie Valdez. "We close the beaches" with lower levels of contamination.

"Should I close my yard?"

Valdez and others want county officials to do something.

But what to do has become a legal quagmire bogged down with flawed permits, applications and a process so complicated that county planning commissioners admitted they were confused.

"It's legal jujitsu," complained Planning Commissioner Denise Holbert. "What remains is a very, very, very serious problem with contamination of the water."

The confusion follows years of North Coast dispute over the goat ranch at Highway 1 and Back Ranch Road. Neighbors contend that owners John and Brenda

Stephenson have ignored county regulations and their neighbors in their quest to raise thousands of goats for their company, Santa Cruz Biotechnology. Antibodies in the goats' blood are used in cancer research.

The neighbors want the biomedical goat operation shut down, or at least cut back to hundreds, instead of thousands, of goats.

The Stephensons have countered that foes have unfairly harassed them for years.

County supervisors in October issued an

12-12-99
A worker at Santa Cruz Biotechnology's goat farm puts a goat into a holding pen at the North Coast ranch.

Goats

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emergency permit requiring that a number of the goats be moved away from drainages, and the state Regional Water Quality Control Board also issued a number of conditions aimed at water quality on the Stephenson's ranch.

Supervisors also last week asked Environmental Health employees for a report on the water-quality conditions and on who is responsible for enforcement. Meanwhile, a master plan for the property is pending.

Despite the measures, the pollution is still washing into residents' yards, irrigation ponds, creeks and beaches, and into the Monterey Bay sanctuary, said Valdez.

"I have the right to a quiet, safe home, and they're stepping on my right and the rights of my neighbors," Valdez said. "They're not responsible researchers."

Matt Mullin, who represents the Stephensons on planning matters, said they want to make changes to improve the water quality. But the county has not allowed them to, until a pending master plan for the property has been approved, Mullin said.

A seasonal fence was already approved by county officials, he said. Any changes that would permanently fence the goats out of particular areas have to be considered as part of the master plan, Mullin said.

"I don't think it serves anybody to review this ranch one fence at a time," he said.

According to Valdez, residents paid for a licensed tester to take water samples Nov. 17, following the first significant winter rains. The results showed e. coli bacteria levels at 24,000 parts per 100 milliliters, sig-

nificantly higher than the 400 parts per milliliters used by state and county officials as the standard for safe body contact.

"As property owners and residents watching the liquid manure soup flow past our homes in areas where our children play, we are entitled to protection," said a letter signed by a dozen Coast Road residents.

Jonathan Wittwer and other area residents argued that a winter ban on goats grazing in drainage or intermittent stream areas wasn't enough. They asked county officials to impose a year-around ban in those areas to keep storm runoff water from getting contaminated.

"It seems like a common-sense solution," said Martin Demare.

Planning Commissioners said they would like to, but the process of issuing permits for the goat farm had become so complicated that they didn't know how to proceed. At the advice of county counsel, the commissioners finally agreed to try to include the fence issue with the emergency measures adopted by the supervisors.

Otherwise, a new and lengthy permit process would be necessary.

County water quality experts and Mullin aren't convinced a year-round ban is necessary. Environmental Health program manager John Ricker said that the contaminated water sample, while "pretty high," was not unusual to come from a feedlot operation.

"I'm not surprised at that level this early on," Ricker said, noting that the first rain of the season stirs up accumulated bacteria and that storm water normally has high bacteria levels.

Ricker also said he felt that keeping the goats from the waterway in the winter would be sufficient. Manure dropped in the summer should biodegrade by winter, he said.

"We are keeping an eye on it," he said.