

## **RANCHO GUEJITO: Goats prompt new development fears**

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RANCHO GUEJITO -- Truckloads of goats grazing on a historical 23,000-acre ranch east of Escondido this month rekindled some neighbors' long-held suspicions that rumors of secret plans to develop the sprawling property are true.

Dan Silver, leader of the nonprofit Endangered Habitats League, said the goats would destroy the coastal sage scrub and other flourishing native vegetation, paving the way for large-scale development on Rancho Guejito -- the largest piece of privately owned, undeveloped property in the county and the last intact Mexican land grant in the state.

Meanwhile, Hank Rupp, a Temecula-based attorney who serves as the public face of Rancho Guejito, said the decision to bring in more than 100 goats to the ranch had nothing to do with development.

"It was a business decision," he said, adding that ranch hands are in the process of removing the goats from the property this week. "We thought we'd try out raising goats and decided they weren't a good fit."

But Silver and some area residents aren't buying Rupp's explanation. They said the goats represent yet another effort by the ranch's elusive owner to render the land less valuable as a future preserve and more valuable to interested developers.

The arrival of the goats, coupled with a recent 100-acre-parcel purchase by Rupp's client that opens up access to Guejito from Highway 78, lends credibility to rumors that the owner has plans to develop the land, Silver and the residents said.

A working cattle ranch roughly the size of the city of Escondido, environmentalists often call Rancho Guejito the "conservation jewel of San Diego County." Historians have hailed the untamed land as a "time capsule from the 1800s."

The rugged expanse, which stretches from the San Pasqual Valley north to the 4,221-foot peak of Pine Mountain near the La Jolla Indian Reservation, also houses prehistoric American Indian sites and ruins from previous settlers, according to Valley Center History Museum historians.

In 1974, Benjamin Coates, a wealthy businessman, bought the property for \$10 million. Since his death in 2004, his daughter Theodate, a New York artist represented by Rupp, has been managing his estate, including Guejito.

Silver and San Diego County Supervisor Bill Horn, among others, have argued that the property should be preserved at any cost and plan to lobby federal leaders next week for funds to buy the ranch.

For his part, Rupp has accused the county of exaggerating environmental concerns to devalue the property so the county can buy it at a depressed price in the future.

He has described Horn's overtures to buy the ranch as "outrageous" and has insisted that the property isn't for sale at any price.

While cattle have been a mainstay on the ranch for more than 150 years, the recent addition of goats is troubling, said Bonnie Wheeler and Meredyth Pierson, both of whom own land adjacent to portions of the ranch.

"Cattle are selective in their grazing, but goats eat virtually everything," Pierson said Tuesday. "They're devastating to the natural habitat."

In 2005, when neighbors noticed helicopters flying over the property, they began worrying that it was being surveyed for construction.

A few months later, Rupp approached Escondido city officials about annexing the land, a move that would subject the property to less-stringent zoning regulations than if it remained in the unincorporated part of county.

In addition, Guejito's owner has hired a prominent public relations firm and a development consultant.

All those developments have created speculation that the owner is preparing to move forward with developing the property or attempting to drive up the value of the land before putting it on the market.

"I can't speculate or read minds," Silver said. "But it certainly seems like now they're trying to remove habitat as a prelude to development."

Contact staff writer Darryn Bennett at (760) 740-5420 or [dmbennett@nctimes.com](mailto:dmbennett@nctimes.com).