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Environmental Law

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ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS FILE LAWSUIT CHALLENGING NAPLES DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Santa Barbara, CA – Environmental groups gathered at the Courthouse steps today to announce the initiation of litigation to preserve the Naples property on the Gaviota Coast. The Naples Coalition, Environmental Defense Center (EDC), and Surfrider Foundation filed a lawsuit against the County of Santa Barbara Thursday, challenging the County’s approval of the Santa Barbara Ranch Project on October 21, 2008. The lawsuit claims that the County violated several important environmental protection laws, including the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the California Coastal Act, State Planning and Zoning Law, and the California Land Conservation Act (better known as the “Williamson Act”) when it approved the Santa Barbara Ranch Project and authorized the development of 71 estate homes on the Gaviota Coast.

“The County’s action puts the entire Gaviota Coast at risk, by introducing a large mansion development in an area well beyond the urban boundary, and known for its unique scenic, natural, cultural, and recreational importance,” said Phil McKenna, President of the Naples Coalition.

“The County not only ignored its own well established coastal protection policies, but also state law, in permitting a massive development project that is totally incompatible with the rural Gaviota Coast,” pointed out Nathan Alley, Staff Attorney for the EDC, a local non-profit law firm that has represented the Surfrider Foundation in opposition to the Santa Barbara Ranch Project for ten years.

Ken Palley, a member of Surfrider Foundation’s Executive Committee, described the lawsuit as the most important step taken to date in efforts to protect the Gaviota Coast from overdevelopment. “As Naples goes, so goes the rest of the Gaviota Coast. We must turn back this decision, and make sure the County follows the law.”

The Santa Barbara Ranch Project would allow development of 71 homes of approximately 7,500 to 10,000 square feet each, plus accessory structures such as barns, cabanas and guest houses, an

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equestrian center, agricultural support facilities, worker duplex, water supply facilities, three wastewater treatment plants, and other related infrastructure. The Project would result in the permanent conversion of hundreds of acres of agricultural lands, more than 200 acres of important wildlife habitat, and would require a re-zone of the property from agriculture to residential use. The environmental groups claim that such re-zoning and large-scale development is inappropriate for open space coastal lands located far from any other urban development.

“The County’s approval violates State law by not disclosing all of the project’s impacts, and by failing to consider alternatives that would protect the valuable resources at Naples,” said Marc Chytilo, counsel for the Naples Coalition.

“The County clearly crossed the line when it ignored important State laws protecting coastal and agricultural lands,” observed Alley. “Our lawsuit demands that the County rescind its action, and carefully examine the project and its impacts.”

The Naples property is recognized for its incredible beauty, as well as its rich ecological and cultural resources. The project area hosts numerous environmentally sensitive habitats, including coast live oak woodland, coastal bluff scrub, wetlands and native grasslands, that support approximately 80 special status bird and wildlife species, such as White Tailed Kites, California Red-Legged Frogs, American Badgers and more. The proposed development is located next to the Naples Reef, which is an important rocky reef and popular surfing destination. The biodiversity in and around Naples is recognized as having global significance.

The Naples area is also important due to its cultural heritage. Two Chumash villages were located in this area, possessing historical and spiritual value that would be destroyed by the proposed development.

The lawsuit was filed in the Superior Court of Santa Barbara County and names the County of Santa Barbara and the Board of Supervisors as Respondents. The project applicants and landowners are also named in the lawsuit, as “Real Parties in Interest.”

In addition to filing the lawsuit, the Naples Coalition, EDC and Surfrider representatives said that they intend to appeal the County’s approval to the California Coastal Commission.

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The Environmental Defense Center protects and enhances the local environment through education, advocacy, and legal action and works primarily within Santa Barbara, Ventura and San Luis Obispo counties. Since 1977, EDC has empowered community based organizations to advance environmental protection. Program areas include protecting coast and ocean resources, open spaces and wildlife, and human and environmental health.

The Naples Coalition is a Santa Barbara County, CA-based association of local non-profit groups including the Gaviota Coast Conservancy, Los Padres Chapter of the Sierra Club, Santa Barbara Chapter of Surfrider Foundation, Santa Barbara Chapter of the Audubon Society, Citizens Planning Association of Santa Barbara County, Santa Barbara County Action Network, and the League of Women Voters of Santa Barbara. The Naples Coalition is dedicated to the preservation of the rural character of the Naples property on the Gaviota coast. The Naples Coalition seeks to preserve the rural character of the Naples area from this development’s impacts.

Surfrider Foundation is a nonprofit environmental organization dedicated to the protection and enjoyment of the oceans, waves and beaches for all people, through conservation, activism, research and education. The Santa Barbara Chapter of the Surfrider Foundation was founded in 1990 to protect local beaches, coastal areas, and water quality.