

Judge Halts Plan to Divide Rancho La Laguna in Santa Ynez Valley

Environmental Defense Center hails the ruling to protect the 4,000-acre property



by Janene Scully | Noozhawk North County Editor

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A Rancho La Laguna presentation from 2017 includes pictures of the lots that would be created by subdividing the 4,000-acre property in the Santa Ynez Valley. (Rancho La Laguna photo)

A [Santa Barbara County Superior Court](#) judge in Santa Maria has halted a plan to divide a 4,000-acre site in the Santa Ynez Valley into several small ranches, siding with the county [Board of Supervisors](#) and environmental groups in the lengthy battle.

The case centered on the historic Rancho La Laguna property and a proposal to split it into 13 parcels of varying sizes, allowing the building of high-end residential homes as ranchettes.



“This was an important win in the effort to preserve the agricultural economy and spirit of the Santa Ynez Valley,” said Alicia Roessler, senior attorney at the [Environmental Defense Center](#).

“Farming and ranching are not only part of our heritage of this area — it’s also a major part of our local economy,” Roessler added. “Approval of this project would have set a terrible precedent, paving the way for other large-scale subdivisions that would threaten critical agricultural land and biodiversity across Santa Barbara County.”

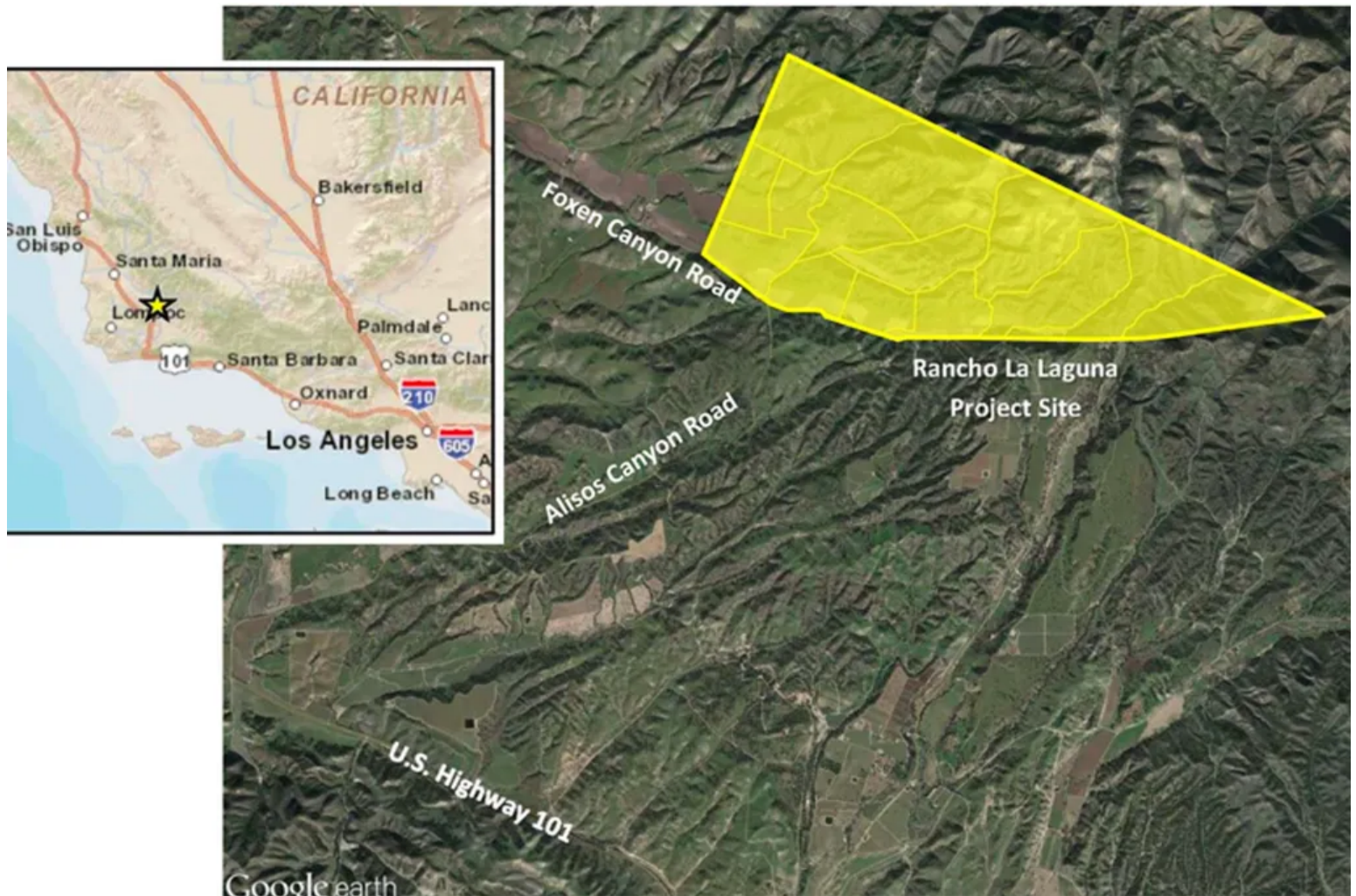
Rancho La Laguna overlooks the Santa Ynez Valley, sitting near Foxen Canyon and Alisos Canyon roads.

The property boasts 57 rare wildlife and plant species, including the California condor, EDC officials said.

During the board hearing in 2017, the owners were identified as Chip Hanly, from a fourth-generation Solvang family, Hollywood producer [Chuck Roven](#) and Stephanie Roven.

Those opposed to the split claimed it could interfere with the continued use of the land for agriculture where assorted row crops are grown and cattle graze.

The applicants had proposed creating lots between 160 acres and 605 acres.



A map from a Santa Barbara County planning presentation shows the location of the 4,000 acres making up Rancho La Laguna in the Santa Ynez Valley. (Santa Barbara County map)

The Board of Supervisors narrowly voted to deny the project in 2017, with Das Williams, Janet Wolf and Joan Hartmann opposing the split and Steve Lavagnino and Peter Adam favoring it.

In the case's original legal filing, Rancho La Laguna's attorneys contended that agriculture could continue if the property became multiple smaller lots and that other small ranches exist nearby.

The denial prompted the landowners to file a lawsuit that has inched its way through the court system since October 2017.

"It's been a long, long battle," Roessler said.

On Tuesday, Judge Jed Beebe issued his ruling noting that ample evidence existed to support the belief that the land would remain in agriculture, but added that it would be equally wrong to say the board lacked a basis to deny the project.

“Reasonable minds could differ as to what consequence could follow from the proposed subdivision’s approval and whether general plan politics and goals would be advance,” Beebe wrote in his order. “It was not unreasonable or unfair for the board majority to adopt the findings that it did. The writ of mandate is denied.”

While the civil action was filed against Santa Barbara County, the court had allowed the EDC to intervene in the lawsuit on behalf of the **Santa Barbara County Action Network**.

“Splitting this land into smaller lots for development would have undermined not only the agricultural integrity of Rancho La Laguna and the Santa Ynez Valley, but also would have eliminated much of the natural resources that make this area so beautiful,” said Carla Frisk, a member of SBCAN’s board of directors.

“Farming and ranching are a key part of Santa Barbara County’s heritage. We are pleased that the court has validated the county’s process that ultimately led the supervisors to deny this project.”
