ESCONDIDO: Farm supporters criticize county gnat ordinance

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Organic farming supporters have flooded county officials with letters criticizing a proposed ordinance that could mandate pesticide spraying at a San Pasqual Valley farm blamed for south Escondido’s eye gnat problem.

The 860 letters, which came primarily from the farm's customers and environmental organizations,
urge the county to delay adopting the ordinance to allow for a more comprehensive and time-consuming review called an environmental impact report.

But such an approach has been criticized by Escondido city officials and residents affected by the gnats, because it would delay relief. Residents say the gnats ruin backyard barbecues, rounds of golf at The Vineyard and youth sports in Kit Carson Park.

County officials also received 155 letters in support of the ordinance and the less rigorous environmental review they conducted this spring, which is called a mitigated negative declaration. Most of those letters came from frustrated south Escondido residents fed up with the gnats.

The many letters in opposition could prompt the county to opt for the more comprehensive review, but county officials said this week that no decisions had been made.

The bulk of the letters criticizing the ordinance and the county’s environmental review were "form" letters that the farm, BeWise Ranch, provided to its customers and urged them to send in before the June 20 deadline for comments.

The form letters say the ordinance, which could force BeWise to close or lose its organic certification by spraying pesticides, would cost the region the "sustainability" provided by locally grown organic produce. They also say the county hasn’t adequately studied the effects of pesticides on animals and waterways near the farm.

In addition, they say the ordinance might become unnecessary, based on BeWise’s voluntary efforts this year, which they say have significantly reduced the number of gnats in the area. Those efforts include setting thousands of gnat traps, installing 13,000 feet of silt fencing around the farm and handling crop residues differently.

"We are asking you to work with the organic farmers on a pesticide-free alternative to this ordinance," many of the letters say.

BeWise owner Bill Brammer submitted a 28-page analysis of the environmental review that also suggests the popular Mule Hill Trail might have to be closed during pesticide spraying, and that forcing the closure of BeWise would force stores such as Jimbo’s and Trader Joe’s to buy organic produce from outside the area.

His letter urged the county to be patient and more thorough.

"Our voluntary control plan for eye gnats, based on the available data for this year, has resulted in a 98 percent reduction in eye gnats since 2010," Brammer’s letter said. "We are concerned that the county is rushing into this ordinance without any thoughtful environmental review and without seeing whether our voluntary efforts will succeed."

County officials have expressed optimism that Brammer’s anti-gnat efforts could succeed if he strengthens his plan with some recommendations from an entomologist working for the county. They’ve also said the ordinance only allows the use of pesticides as a last resort.

But the Environmental Health Coalition, a group located in National City, said the ordinance goes too far by giving “unprecedented power to a governmental agency to inflict harm on organic farming operations.”

City of San Diego officials sent a letter raising questions about how pesticides would affect local waterways. Brammer’s lawyers agreed, suggesting the chemicals could affect Lake Hodges, the San Dieguito River, nearby wetlands and the protected arroyo toad.

Meanwhile, the letters from residents urge the county to provide relief as soon as possible.

"We are very concerned with the problem of not being able to utilize our yard for barbecues and dining due to the terrible nuisance these eye gnats pose," said Dennis Birch, who lives on Gardenia Glen.

Resident Cindy Morriss criticized Brammer as a "guy who has been totally noncompliant" and
someone who has paid lawyers and public relations firms to avoid doing what is right.

"I feel we must approve an ordinance even if it's not perfect," said Morriss. "Because without something being passed, there will be nothing done."

Call staff writer David Garrick at 760-740-5468

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