

FESTIVAL RILES NEIGHBORS, LOPE OFFICIALS

ORGANIZER WAS DENIED PERMIT, COULD BE FINED

By **Dana M. Nichols**
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Record Staff Writer

SAN ANDREAS - Calaveras County officials are mulling how to regulate things that go bump in the night. Or whomp.

A recent dustup over noise involves Wood Whomp, a music and art festival held in Mountain Ranch.

Calaveras County officials say they denied the festival's request for a permit but organizers held it anyway, prompting thousands of dollars in costs to taxpayers as sheriff's deputies and other staff were called to the scene over the weekend of June 8-10.

Neighbors complained about the festival's noise and the procession of unfamiliar cars it drew to the wooded residential neighborhood, where most lots range in size from 15 to 20 acres.

"This has just disrupted our nice neighborhood so badly, because of his disregard for law and for his neighbors," said Janet Catlin, a neighbor of Stewart Alberts, one of the owners of the 22-acre lot where the festival was held.

Alberts said he and the festival's organizers are trying to provide a wholesome music-and-art experience for an extended network of friends. And he said that in 2011, the festival's first year, he reached out to his neighbors and invited them to come dine for free on tri-tip during the festival's opening night.

Not one of the neighbors came, which may reflect a cultural rift between the mostly young artists and their neighbors.

"Heavens, no," Catlin said of whether she accepted Alberts' invitation. "This is early-20-year-olds who stay up all night and do whatever they want to do to loud music. We are just retired folks in the country."

According to the festival's website, participants paid \$65 to \$90 for a ticket admitting them to the three-day event.

Calaveras County Planning Director Rebecca Willis said officials could fine Alberts \$4,000 for penalties and staff costs associated with the unpermitted event.

Wood Whomp is only the most recent noise dispute. Residents on Lake Tulloch also have complained over a series of Bump Fests at the lake that draw large numbers of skiboaters who play urban music with a heavy bass beat.

Calaveras County Sheriff's Department officials say they can't do much about such complaints, because the county does not have a noise ordinance.

Law enforcement officials also say unpermitted events leave taxpayers on the hook to pay for extra staffing if things get out of hand. The Sheriff's Department reported making eight arrests during Bump Fest IV in August at Tulloch.

And Willis said the county's basic one-size-fits-all permit process for events also is a problem. She said the \$100 fee and paperwork is too cumbersome for small events, such as fundraising dinners held in private homes, and too inadequate for large events, where issues such as traffic, fire safety and sanitation require inspectors and planning.

Wood Whomp, for example, advertised online that fire dancing was part of the entertainment. Willis said that without a permit, officials had no way to know whether organizers took proper precautions to keep fire from spreading to tinder-dry oak woodlands nearby.

"We do have several different things that will happen as a result of this," said Supervisor Steve Wilensky, the elected county leader whose district includes Mountain Ranch.

In addition to seeking penalties that would cut into any profits from Wood Whomp, Wilensky said officials will again consider adopting a noise ordinance or other measures to prevent events from disrupting residential neighborhoods.

Ole-Ivar Alberts and his girlfriend, Sarah Hodson, founded the festival. Alberts said the name comes from the bass-heavy, largely electronic music he and his youthful friends enjoy.

"We were out in the woods listening to our whomp music," Alberts said.

The festival included youth bands from the Lake Tahoe area, Sacramento and Calaveras County, as well as Clan Dyken, a Calaveras-based band that represents an older, hippie-era demographic.

Hodson said the festival incorporated a variety of art opportunities, such as a blank wall with paint cans at its base.

"Anyone out there at the gathering, any of the members can grab a paintbrush and paint what they are inspired by the music to paint," Hodson said.

"We started a group called the Wood Whomp tribe," said Hodson, who like Alberts grew up in Mountain Ranch. "It is not open to random public, people we don't know. We are trying to keep it as an extended family of friends. Anyone who knows someone can come."

Alberts said the \$4,000 fine, if imposed, would likely kill the event.

"Definitely. We already lost money doing it this year," he said.

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 607-1361 or dnichols@recordnet.com. Visit his blog at recordnet.com/calaverasblog.

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