

This photo from the Hells Angels Santa Cruz County chapter website shows merchandise similar to the products being sold at the Santa Cruz County Fair.



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY FAIR TANGLES WITH HELLS ANGELS

The Santa Cruz County Fair, Watsonville, Calif., is facing a potential lawsuit from a famous biker gang after denying members from a local chapter entry into the fair.

It had been over a year since the Santa Cruz County Hells Angels had first tried to gain entry into the fair, only to be turned away at the gates. This year, on Sept. 15, the group tried again, this time with over 100 motorcycles descending on the facility for a Saturday night at the fair, dressed in motorcycle gear emblazoned with Hells Angels symbols.

"They asked for entrance into the fair in an orderly way, they were declined entry but instructed that if they removed or covered up patches depicting the Hells Angels sign, they would be allowed in the fair," said Steve Stagnaro, the fair's spokesperson. The group refused and were given a refund of their parking fees.

"The whole thing was pretty orderly, well at least orderly as it could be when you have over 100 motorcycles coming and going off the property on a Saturday night," Stagnaro said.

In an ironic twist, the Hells Angels had been allowed to sell merchandise at the fairgrounds for the first time this year. Fair Manager Yvette Jordan said the group applied for a merchandise permit under the name "Santa Cruz Enterprises L.L.C." and gave no indication they were selling Hells Angels apparel.

"I was shocked," said Jordan of learning what the group had intended to sell at the booth. Jordan let the group continue to sell limited Hells Angels merchandise, but told the vendors that customers were not allowed to wear the apparel on the fairgrounds.

"The people in the booth had to be reminded of this several times," Stagnaro said.

The fair is now facing a potential lawsuit from the Hells Angels. A day before the group was denied entry into the fair, its attorney Richard M. Hammock of Canoga Park, Calif. sent a letter to the fair board, explaining the group would be attempting to enter the fair wearing their patches.

"They come in peace, and they do not desire confrontation with anyone," he said. In 2000, Hammock sued the Gilroy (Calif.) Garlic Festival after it denied entry to members of the Top Hatters motorcycle club, arguing that the group had a

Constitutional right to display its symbols. That case is currently before the Sixth District Court of Appeals.

Jordan said the fair denied the group entry because it had violated the fair's anti-gang policy, which bans the displaying of insignia or gang symbols from known criminal enterprises. That lists biker gangs identified by a 2005 Department of Justice report, as well as groups and individuals identified by Santa Cruz County's Anti-Gang Task Force. Also banned from the fair are biker gangs that participated in a 2002 shootout in Laughlin, Nev. — groups with names like the Mongols, the Vagos and the Ghost Mountain Riders.

Jordan said the dress code policy was enacted in 1992 after two gangs clashed on the fairgrounds and one man died from stab wounds. Jordan said the man collapsed in front of the pony ride and bled to death in front of dozens of children and their parents.

"It was horrible," said Jordan, who's worked at the fair for 37 years. "No family should have to see that.

Besides the incident with the Hells Angels, the fair had a great run this year, with gate attendance up 3 percent at 39,914 paid attendees for this year. Jordan said that number will likely increase when she gets the final tallies for tickets purchased online.

She estimated the fair brought in a little over \$300,000 at the gate this year, with adult tickets at \$9 and children's tickets at \$6. While she was still tabulating the food sales for this year, she estimated they were nearly up nine percent, a factor she attributed to great weather. The midway was operated by Brass Ring Amusements of Oroville, Calif., but Jordan said she hadn't seen any tallies from that organization.

The theme of this year's fair was "Barn in the U.S.A." — Dave Brooks

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