

WASHINGTON POST

March 11, 2008

California Regents Sue Animal Activists UC System Aims to Protect Researchers

By Ashley Surdin
Washington Post Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES -- It was late into the night when 25 people in ski masks descended on professor Dario Ringach's family home. Pounding on the door, frightening his small children, they screamed into megaphones, "Animal killer! We know where you live! We will never give up!"

And they apparently meant it. That year, 2006, according to court documents, animal rights activists launched a summer-long campaign of harassment against Ringach, an assistant professor of psychology and neurobiology at the University of California at Los Angeles and other scientists who conduct research with laboratory animals.

They hurled firecrackers at his house in the middle of the night and planted Molotov-cocktail-like explosives at other faculty houses, threatening to burn them to the ground.

UCLA hired private security, but Ringach feared for his family. "Effectively immediately, I am no longer doing animal research," he finally wrote in an e-mail to his persecutors, pleading to be left alone. "Please don't bother my family anymore."

The University of California regents have responded by suing UCLA Primate Freedom, the Animal Liberation Brigade, the Animal Liberation Front and five people allegedly affiliated with them. It is a tactic that the regents successfully employed nine years ago.

The regents hope to win a permanent injunction similar to one granted against Last Chance for Animals in 1989. But some experts note that the regents now are battling more violent, Internet-savvy foes who thrive in online communities, post faculty "targets" on Web sites and upload how-to guides for their attacks.

"The reality is that, unlike in the past, where movements really relied on interpersonal communication and gatherings to ferment this radicalization, all this is happening online now," according to Oren Segal, co-director of the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism in New York. "The ability for people to learn about the movement and how to carry out attacks on behalf of it are easier than it's ever been because of the Internet."

Indeed, a temporary restraining order -- prohibiting harassment and posting of faculty members' personal information on the Internet -- was granted Feb. 21 by a Los Angeles County Superior Court judge. But three days later, six masked protesters reportedly disrupted a child's birthday party at the home of a University of California at Santa Cruz researcher and confronted her husband at the door, hitting him on the hand.

It is unclear whether the protesters are connected to those named in UC's lawsuit.

Harassment by violent animal rights activists has climbed at universities across the country, including Oregon Health and Science University, the University of Utah, and Ohio State University, where researchers have been victims of home visits or, in one case, found their windows slathered in glass-eating acid. Scientists, administrators and lawyers are closely watching the effectiveness of the California regents case.

Experts say the shift toward more personal attacks is a response to increasingly fortified laboratories, which universities began securing in the 1980s and 1990s as attacks heightened.

Now, groups have shunned "Fort Knox" in favor of ill-prepared homes, said Jerry Vlasik, the former vivisector turned spokesman for the North American Animal Liberation Press Office. Vlasik has repeatedly advocated for using "whatever force against animal research scientists necessary."

"If killing them is the only way to stop them," he said in a telephone interview, "then I said killing them would certainly be justified."

Some scientists refuse to relinquish their work, but others are not taking chances. Like Ringach, some continue to work but not with animals. Most who leave the profession make their decisions quietly, not wanting to fuel the movement.

Still, ripples are spreading through the science community. Positions in animal research are increasingly difficult to fill, according to Frankie Trull, president of the Foundation for Biomedical Research, a national organization that supports the humane and responsible use of animals in medical and scientific research.

"I do hear scientists say that they have open positions and nobody to fill them because it's animal research," Trull said. "The bigger question, and we worry about this a lot, is what will happen to the future of biomedical research? Will brilliant young minds go to some other field because this field has become too contentious?"