

Movie Ranches to Qualify as Production Facilities Under State's Film Incentive Program

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The California Film Commission is preparing to include movie ranches under the definition of an "approved production facility," said an official with the state commission. Under the current definition, studios with indoor sound stages were typically considered as approved facilities.

Santa Clarita has many movie ranches, including Melody Ranch, Blue Cloud and Disney's Golden Oak Ranch, that have served as backdrops to feature films. But not all movie ranches in the area will meet the approved criteria, said Amy Lemisch, executive director for the California Film Commission.

"A movie ranch has to be properly primarily used for film and TV commercial production," Lemisch said. But, the benefit of including movie ranches under the umbrella of approved production facilities is for those production companies seeking tax credits for a film or TV project.

Tax credit incentive

A number of factors are weighed when production companies apply for the state's film tax credits, such as the budget of the project and how many jobs a film project will create. Applicants, however, also accrue bonus points that help them on their way to earning a tax credit – such as the number of days they'll shoot at an approved production facility.

Productions, of course, aren't limited to approved facilities, Lemisch pointed out. Film and TV projects are free to shoot anywhere, even "in your backyard," she said. An approved production facility only comes into play when a production company is trying to earn extra points to become eligible to earn the state's film incentive tax credits.

After years of runaway film and TV productions, state legislators approved a new program in 2014 which took effect this year, doing away with the old lottery system; upping the money allotted to level the playing field as to which type of film and TV project could be eligible, luring more productions back home; and putting more emphasis on jobs created.

But, with many movie ranches in the area, Assembly members Scott Wilk (R-Santa Clarita) and Adrin Nazarian (D-Sherman Oaks) held an informational hearing on the status of the film tax credit, and Wilk recently led a tour of some of Santa Clarita's movie ranches for legislators.

Knowing that movie ranches had inadvertently been left out of the approved production facility definition, Wilk and Nazarian spoke with Lemisch about the omission.

California Film Commission

The California Film Commission got to work on correcting the oversight. When the legislation was passed by Gov. Jerry Brown, the commission had a very short period of time to completely re-write the state's film incentive regulations.

Essentially, Lemisch said, emergency regulations were put in place on an interim basis to get the program up and running so quickly. Now the commission is engaged in making lots of tweaks and changes. It's been a long process because the new program is more complex. Prior, it was little more than a lottery.

"We had a very tight timeline to get them (regulations) together for the May TV season," she said. "Now

we are working on the program to create permanent regulations and we're changing the definition of production facilities to include movie ranches."

Calling Santa Clarita "film-friendly," the state film commission works with Santa Clarita's film office, Lemisch said. She rattled off a few projects that received film credits in Santa Clarita, such as "Stitchers," "Switched at Birth," "Westworld," "Justified" and "Wicked City."

"Switched at Birth" has now been airing for five years and filming in Santa Clarita all that time. Ditto for "Justified," which has filmed locally for six years. "Wicked City" just aired this year, but the project won't be a drain on the film incentive program as the network, ABC, just cancelled the show after three episodes.

As for including Santa Clarita movie ranches in the definition of approved production facilities, that will take effect in early 2016, Lemisch said. Just in time for the new TV season and in plenty of time for film projects that may have been planning to shoot on "outdoor" stages.



Location Manager Tony Salome waiting for Sound Mixer Dave Schneider to wrap a scene being shot for "NCIS Los Angeles" at the Sable Ranch movie ranch in Santa Clarita in September 2014. Photo by Richard Cartwright/CBS Broadcasting courtesy photo