



Friends of the Gualala River

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PRESS RELEASE

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STOP FORESTLAND DESTRUCTION

SANTA ROSA, CA – Private and corporate interests are targeting coastal redwood forestlands in Northern California for clear cutting to make way for extensive new vineyard projects. Once these redwood forests are destroyed, they will be lost forever. Conservation groups including the Sierra Club and Friends of the Gualala River are working to protect existing forestland for the benefit of future generations.

Converting forestland to vineyards has negative environmental and social consequences. Vineyard installations permanently strip the thick forest vegetation that provides habitat for many animal species. Exposing bare soil to direct sun alters the surrounding area's microclimate. Massive amounts of lime are applied to the virgin soil. Miles of fencing that interferes with wildlife mobility are constructed. Insecticides, fungicides and herbicides are applied to kill unwanted organisms and ensure that only grapes grow in the new vineyard. In rural areas, vineyard installations create serious housing and transportation impacts.

The impacts of deforestation are severe and irreversible. Forests intercept fog and rain, and slowly release water during dry months to maintain cool summer base flows in streams and rivers. The flow of the water that does fall is intercepted by rain-collecting reservoirs for vineyard irrigation. These reservoirs are used to augment scarce ground water pumped from agricultural wells.

The rivers in Northern California are already impaired by high temperature and excess sediment; deforestation will make both problems worse. The survival of endangered fish species and the watersheds' biodiversity all depend on this capture and slow release of water.

California has laws ensuring that projects will not cause environmental damage, and that project descriptions provide adequate information to demonstrate that lack of damage. The Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) is failing to enforce the law with respect to vineyard conversions by approving projects without the thorough analysis of environmental impacts required by law.

To protect our forests, the Sierra Club and Friends of the Gualala River are asking a judge to strike down CDF's recent approvals of three projects that would convert forestland to vineyards. All three projects named in the legal action are in close proximity to each other and to the headwaters of Little Creek, a tributary of the Gualala River, in the community of Annapolis in northwestern Sonoma County.

Peter Ashcroft, Conservation Chair of the Sierra Club's Redwood Chapter commented on the action, saying, "CDF must perform the environmental impact analyses required by law. Not doing so flies in the face of the well documented environmental degradation that accompanies conversion of forests to vineyards."

Tom Cochrane, President of Friends of the Gualala River says, "For centuries, the redwood forests have given life to the Gualala River watershed. Unsound logging practices have already greatly damaged the watershed. We need assurance from CDF that thorough, unbiased analyses of the vineyard conversions show that conversions would not tip the balance and kill the river."

Biologists, botanists and hydrologists have identified numerous individual and cumulative impacts from these conversions on Little Creek as well as from other past and potential future conversion projects. Patrick Higgins, a well known fisheries biologist, states, "Impacts from these projects, coupled with existing high levels of disturbance and existing problems with aquatic health, are likely to have dire consequences for the prospect of salmonid recovery in the Gualala River basin."

Sierra Club and Friends of the Gualala River are also working to add a forestland protection amendment to Sonoma County's General Plan. This much-needed amendment would serve as a model for general plan updates in the surrounding counties.

The Sierra Club is one of the largest and oldest environmental organizations in the United States. The Club's purpose is to protect and restore wild places, public health and wildlife for future generations. It is a non-profit, member supported, public interest organization that promotes conservation by influencing public policy decisions. The Redwood Chapter covers the area lying west of I-5 from Sonoma and Solano Counties in the south to the Oregon border in the north.

Friends of the Gualala River (FoGR) advocates for preservation and restoration of the ecosystems of the Gualala River watershed in Sonoma and Mendocino Counties. FoGR is especially concerned with preserving water quality for the area's residents and visitors, and with protecting healthy habitat for threatened and endangered species.

For more information, see <http://www.gualalariver.org>

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