

Vineyard conversions and the fate of coastal California forestlands

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The rising popularity and prestige of Pinot Noir wine is causing unprecedented and rapid land use changes in Sonoma and Mendocino Counties. For the first time, traditional forestry and ranching in coastal mountains are being displaced by intensive agriculture (viticulture). Sonoma County is now proposing new regulation of conversions to vineyard in coastal forestlands.

Entrepreneurs intent on capitalizing on this wine market trend have arrived in Sonoma's coastal forests with plans to deforest ridge tops and plant vineyards. Last year more timber conversion applications were filed with the California Department of Forestry than in the last 10 years. The scale of proposed vineyard conversions ranges from a few tens of acres, to massive projects approaching 2,000 acres. Despite the unprecedented proposed scope of land use change in the region, no county or state agency has initiated either land use planning or analysis efforts.

Each vineyard proponent so far has pointed to the small individual size of their projects relative to the remaining forest land in the county (applying the impermissible "ratio approach" to cumulative impacts analysis) to argue their claim of no environmental impacts from their project. The lead CEQA agency for forest-vineyard conversion, the California Department of Forestry (CDF), has adopted this questionable cumulative impact perspective in its CEQA documents, and these have failed to withstand recent legal challenge. CDF has not required any true landscape-scale, geographic analysis of vineyard conversions in the Gualala River watershed, where most conversions are proposed.

Sonoma County is updating its general plan, and is considering broad land use zoning restrictions on vineyard conversion in forestland. But as the regulatory language of a proposed conversion ordinance evolved, it changed from forest protection into a nominal "no net loss" compensatory mitigation system for vineyard conversion, with no geographic land use planning component. No natural resource experts, land use planning experts, state resource agencies (nor even trustee agencies) were consulted in formulating the ordinance.

The premise of the "no net loss" compensatory mitigation in the proposed ordinance is that "preserving" and "restoring" the timberland on two thirds of a development property would effectively mitigate for all direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of agricultural conversion within large, unbroken tracts of forestland. There was, however, no analysis of the scientific soundness of this premise. The effects of forest fragmentation, indirect effects of intensive agriculture, expansion of roads, or growth-inducing effects, were not addressed. How these cumulative and indirect impacts would be mitigated by a compensatory "no net loss" mitigation scheme is unclear. The approach lacks any watershed or landscape analysis — a recipe for irreversible and significant forest fragmentation.

Sonoma County asserts that the mitigation program of the ordinance is exempt from CEQA and its requirement for rigorous analysis of cumulative and indirect impacts. Exempt or not, the County could instead use CEQA affirmatively as an integrative land use planning and regulatory tool, with the assistance of resource agencies, qualified scientists, and land use planning professionals. However, emphasis on minimization of impacts is not popular with most project proponents, since it usually means looking at ways to reduce the project size or configuration, diminishing profitability.

If they recognize all the scientific uncertainties about ecological restoration, permit agencies can't do business on the basis of compensatory forest mitigation. They have to assume that restoration of habitats will achieve what they promise and predict. Much commercial mitigation relies on ecological restoration measures that are essentially big, long-term experiments with limited control and monitoring. Almost all we know about "restoration" of redwood forests, for example, comes from very recent improvements in forest practices.

Proponents of mitigation have a vested interest in emphasizing the promises of ecological benefits they can finance with "restoration forestry." A rigorous, critical scientific evaluation of restoration forestry proposals is needed before "forest restoration" becomes a standard currency for mitigating vineyard conversions. The region also needs sound, scientific evaluation of how well natural forest regeneration, in the absence of short-rotation timber harvests, is contributing to recovery of forest habitats before we assume that "restoration" is either necessary or appropriate.

The primary goals of mitigation are avoiding and minimizing impacts through scientifically sound environmental analysis and affirmative land use planning. Will the emphasis on compensatory mitigation for vineyard conversions make land use planning and cumulative impact assessment moot?

Vigilant public participation will be essential to ensure that political and regulatory decisions about vineyard conversion, and its mitigation, are fully informed by rigorous public interest review, and the scientific scrutiny of independent experts and scientific review panels.