

July 14, 2001

Andrea Tuttle
California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection
1416 Ninth Street
Sacramento, Ca 95814

**Re: THP/Conversion applications 1-00-147 SON, 1-00-140 SON, 1-00-238 SON,
1-01-171 SON, 1-01-202 SON, 1-01-223 SON, etc.**

Dear Director Tuttle:

An increasing number of Timberland conversion applications in the Northwest part of Sonoma County in recent months are yet another threat to the dwindling amount of forest land in the region. This is particularly distressing as these conversions involve clear cutting and complete removal of vegetation which results in the complete destruction of the forest ecosystem.

Combined with the reality that unsustainable timber harvest practices seem to be the rule rather than the exception, conversions represent a serious threat to productive timberland and wildlife attempting to survive in their constantly shrinking and fragmented habitat.

The end result of these conversions - usually forest to vineyard, is an ever-increasing tendency towards monoculture, (over 56,000 acres in wine grapes exist in Sonoma County already), increased sedimentation, and pesticide and herbicide runoff into streams and rivers. As you know, salmonid species on the brink of extinction in these waterways are seriously threatened by these pollutants. The Gualala River is already listed as an impaired river under 303(d) of the Clean Water Act and a great deal of money, time and energy is being spent by state and federal agencies, as well as private groups and individuals, to deal with the restoration of this watershed and its endangered species. To allow conversions that contribute to further degradation of the watershed is not only irresponsible, but also unconscionable in this day and age.

Vineyard irrigation presents additional problems to this region's water scarcity, (please see numerous recent articles in the Santa Rosa Press Democrat.) Over pumping of wells to recharge reservoirs can lead to aquifer depletion. This can seriously impair residential water wells nearby.

Water diversions for irrigation have become a common problem on many rivers and streams in Northern California due to lack of agrarian monitoring and law enforcement. Stream diversions and surface water interception are deleterious to salmonids as the practices greatly impacts flow and temperature levels critical for their survival.

Yet another threat to the preservation of our forests and related natural resources seems to be the Sonoma County General Plan (GP) It allows vineyard conversions under its “Resource and Rural Development” zoning classification. Yet the GP also states “The primary purpose of this land use category is to protect the lands needed for commercial timber production and to protect natural resource lands including watershed, fish, and wildlife habitat, and biotic uses.” There appears to be competing purposes in these GP goals.

Conversions can cause irreparable to forest lands and their ecosystems, endangered species and water supply. Furthermore, conversions violate the mandate of Sonoma County,s General Plan. The Sierra Club, Sonoma Group urges you to enact a ban on non-TPZ forest land to vineyards. This is the only way to protect this precious and dwindling natural resource.

If an outright ban cannot presently be accomplished, then we urge an EIR be required for every forestland conversion application. These EIRs would more accurately determine the effects of the conversions on timber resources, water supply, water quality, endangered species, and the cumulative impacts on the region as required by the California Environmental Quality Act.

The time has passed when government agencies can shirk their responsibilities to protect our badly depleted and compromised natural resources. We, (Sierra Club, Sonoma Group and our five thousand members,) urge you to act swiftly and decisively to do what the people have empowered you to do.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Will McAfee

Forestry Chair

Sierra Club, Sonoma Group