

# LATE COMMENT

## *Ad Hoc Committee for Clean Water*

P.O. Box 484 Occidental, CA 95465 707 874-3855



SWRCB  
Sacramento, CA

6/17/15

Dear Board Members.

I live in the watershed of Green Valley Creek, in the upper reach, the headwaters. It is historically water scarce with lots of serpentine and Franciscan formations, notoriously low water-bearing.

I am a past member of Salmon Unlimited, Trout Unlimited and a long-time advocate of maintaining the historic bounty of salmon in our rivers and streams and a strong fishing industry.

I have testified repeatedly that the main cause of decline of salmonids is the de-watering of the tributaries. This is widely acknowledged today, but little is being done about it.

Now comes the SWRCB proposing to focus its attention and increased regulation on the non-commercial sector of the population, making demands regarding information and monitoring of residential water use. Why? We all know that it is the rapid expansion of acreage of irrigated vineyards in the hills that is draining the creeks and aquifers due to an overindulgence in water well drilling, extraction and diversion.

Many appellations in France (if not all!) prohibit irrigation! Grapes are perfectly suited to our summer-dry climate and can thrive without irrigation. The only reason there is little acreage of grapes dry-farmed now is because grower/investors get increased tonnage per acre = increased revenue = increased profits for shareholders.

How long did we expect that generous permitting of irrigated vineyard in the dry hills of West County could continue before causing a collapse of the fishery? And, in the relentless pursuit of higher returns per acre, varieties have been allowed on land where frost is a problem, and groundwater allowed to be sprayed on grapes for frost protection -- that's flooding the soil and drenching the leaves with water to prevent freezing. Couldn't we foresee the inevitable?

Now comes the SWRCB proposing to regulate lawns! What lawns? I challenge you to find ornamental lawns in the Dutch Bill, Green Valley and Atascadero Creek watersheds. It is not *grass* that is causing a problem it is irrigated vineyard. A 5 acre vineyard uses as much water as a 5 acre ranchette. Would Sonoma County planners allow a density of 40 homes on 200 acres? Never! And water would be one of the main issues. But they readily, willingly, allow 200 acres of irrigated grapes with an equivalent water use.

Furthermore, vineyard wells are permitted without full CEQA review, with compliance essentially only with erosion control measures, without insisting on any review of irrigation alternatives and

dry-farming or any other water conserving alternatives, we believe in violation of state environmental law.

The solution is *obviously not* to ignore this travesty and restrain rural residents, it is to take on the hard task of limiting irrigated vineyard acreage in this sensitive part of the county.

We suggest the SRWCB table this new regulation and instead:

1. Hold workshops in the upper reaches to allow residents and growers to engage in our own problem solving with regulators and planners involved, including SWRCB staff;
2. Ban groundwater use for frost protection;
3. Offer incentives for dry-farming and seminars by members of the industry who are enthusiastic about the age-old technique.

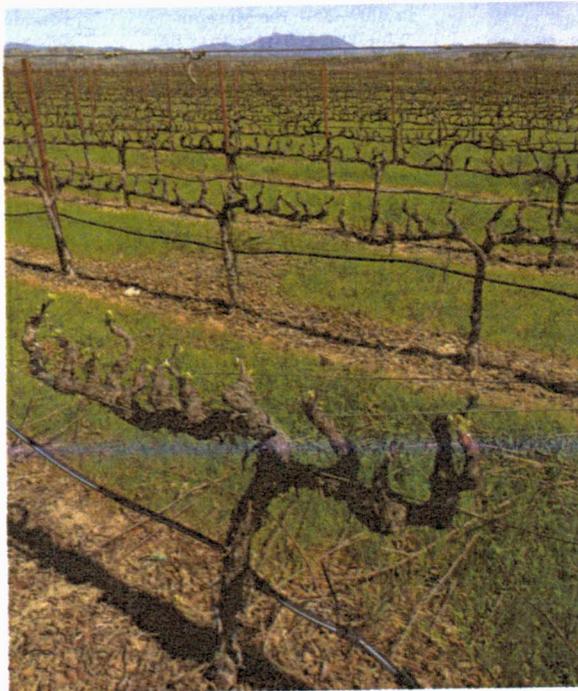
Thank-you for your consideration.  
Sincerely,

*Ann Maurice*

# Can Sonoma County Dry-Farm Grapes?

By Ann Maurice

Dry farming of grapes is tried and true, with a thousand year old record of sustainability. So why are so many grape growers not doing dry-farming anymore? Because in the 1970s drip irrigation was introduced. Since grapes are sold by weight, growers knew they could increase tonnage per acre, and make more money by irrigating. So, to raise their "bottom line", they ripped out most of the old vines planted in the late 1800s and early 1900s and replaced them with new rootstock that they watered. How much water? Typically, a 5 acre vineyard uses about the same amount of water as a 5 acre homestead. Therefore, living next to a 35 acre vineyard, from a groundwater point of view, is like living next to a 7-home development. That's a concern in water scarce



areas, and a potential problem for neighbors because today, the big issue is depletion of groundwater!

So, what to do to conserve groundwater? We have two options: either use less or find another source of water. As for grapes, I vote for dry-farming. It's proven, it works, and I believe it is a growing trend in the industry. In Italy, France and Spain, for example, in many areas, growers must rely on natural rainfall because irrigation is illegal! Think of that! Some of the finest wines in the world have been produced for hundreds of years by dry-farming, allowing nature and rainfall to dictate.

Here in California, today, we see drip irrigation lines between the vines almost everywhere. But, with a growing concern about groundwater depletion, there is a corresponding trend to convert to dry-farming. Many growers say that while their dry-farmed yield is lower, the quality is higher and the fruit has a richer, deeper flavor reflecting the area where the vines are planted -- called by the French word, "terroir".

Is anybody dry-farming grapes in Sonoma County? Emeritus pinot noir is grown on entirely dry-farmed vines on the Hallberg Ranch in Sebastopol; Bedrock wine Company produces wine from hundred-year old vines on Sodini Vineyard in the Russian River Valley; Bucklin Old Hill Ranch, Frederick's Vineyard, Pagani Ranch and Compagni Portis dry-farm in Sonoma Valley; Beeson Ranch, Sabari Vineyard and Bernier Zineyard in Dry Creek. There's lots more choices if you consider Napa County -- Frog's Leap, Dominus Estate, Napanook, Hayne, Meyer, Rachel Rossi, Smith-Madrone and Stony-Hill Vineyards; and up in Mendocino County there's Poor Ranch, Mezzoni Home Ranch and Tollini.

Check out the Community Alliance for Family Farms (CAFF) website. They have an excellent article on dry-farming, and is the source of the above dry-farmed vineyard list.

An alternative? In some circles, the idea is to replace groundwater with municipally treated wastewater for irrigation. We're talking a lot about wastewater in Occidental these days. We've got an option to upgrade the wastewater treatment plant to a tertiary level adding ultra-violet disinfection to replace chlorine. What about irrigating local vineyards with Occidental's treated wastewater instead

of irrigating with groundwater? Hmm... Is that a wise marketing strategy? Do we want West County to be known for its wastewater irrigated "terroir"? We buy free-range chicken and grass-fed beef and organic produce if we can afford it. Wastewater wine does not enhance that dinner table!

How much water would a typical vineyard use anyway? If a 35 acre vineyard uses 1 - 2 acre feet in a growing season (325,000 - 650,000 gallons), that's only about a month's output of wastewater from Occidental! So, we'd have to spread wastewater over hundreds of acres of grapes to use up Occidental's dry season effluent.

Compare that to a better plan, which is to irrigate grasses. Sod consumes an outrageous amount of water. Only 6 acres of pasture would be needed to consume all of Occidental's dry-season output! So, we say, dry-farm grapes and irrigate pasture and lawns with wastewater.

Can we encourage the wine industry to dry-farm? Why not consumer-driven influence on the industry? Select dry-farmed wines for your dinner table. Consumer demand drove the beef industry to grass-fed and humanely treated animals, and less reliance on growth hormones and antibiotics. The dairy industry has greatly reduced reliance on synthetic bovine growth hormones (rBGH, rBST). Organic produce was once a specialty found only in "Health Food" stores. Today they're everywhere.

What about a "dry-farmed" wine section in the local supermarkets? We've got gluten-free sections, sugar-free sections driven by market demand! Yes, we can influence the wine industry to dry-farm more acreage in Sonoma County, if we really want it to happen!

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