

Proposed hillside vineyard in Angwin seeks timber-cutting permit

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In a sign of the times, a Davis Estates proposal to clear trees so it can plant a 13.6-acre vineyard in the mountains near Angwin is being closely scrutinized.

The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection must grant a timber harvest permit for the project to proceed. It released 900 pages of studies examining issues ranging from the loss of oaks to erosion to possible effects on the northern spotted owl.

Steps can be taken to reduce potential environmental harm to “less than significant,” this draft environmental impact report concludes. The public comment period is open through Oct. 5.

But Mike Hackett of Save Rural Angwin sees something at stake. He describes the project, though small, as combining with others to have a cumulative impact on the watershed that feeds St. Helena’s Bell Canyon reservoir.

“If we want to ensure for many generations that we’ll have enough water for ag and the residents, then we need to protect the watershed,” Hackett said.

Creating vineyards in the mountains framing Napa

Valley is an issue that has moved into the spotlight in recent years as vacant space on the valley floor grows scarce. Residents during county meetings increasingly have asked for more watershed protections. Some wear buttons reading “Save Our Watersheds.”

Watershed advocates have many concerns about trading natural mountainside landscapes for vineyards. They range from rapid runoff leading to less groundwater recharge to pesticides in runoff to more sediments washing into streams and, ultimately, the Napa River, where they can hinder salmon spawning.

“This watershed protection thing, I think, will grow up and take some wings and something is going to happen,” Hackett said. “We’re looking at this project as a place to say ‘No more.’ We’ll see.”

Amid this atmosphere comes the Davis Estates proposal to establish a vineyard 6 miles northeast of St. Helena. The 13.6-acre vineyard would be on a 38.7-acre property with an elevation of about 2,000 feet at 1875 Friesen Drive.

The applicant, Frostfire Vineyards II LLC, has done other work in Napa County. Mike Davis of the company in 2013 won county approvals to revamp the former Saviez property on Silverado Trail near Larkmead Lane, south of Calistoga, as Davis Estates to produce wine.

“When I put this whole project together, I built a

financial model for a business plan to produce a lot of estate grapes,” Davis said on Thursday.

The Friesen property is part of this plan. “It’s good soil, it has a good location, the sun’s correct,” Davis said.

He had hoped to plant 20 acres of cabernet sauvignon on the 38.7 acres, he said. Following state and county guidelines, he can get about 13 acres, which is at the edge of the financial model, he said.

The draft environmental document looks at drainage patterns and the potential for erosion once the land has been cleared. It calls for the applicant to do such things as build a rock-lined ditch, basins and berms to slow drainage.

Napa County must approve the project’s erosion control plan because the slopes are more than 5 percent. In general, agricultural activities on land with less steep slopes are not subject to county discretionary approval.

Another issue that can affect the watershed is pesticides and fuel leaks from farm equipment. The draft environmental report sees no problems if caution is taken doing such things as rinsing equipment.

Of the 10 acres to be harvested for timber, 5 acres is oak woodland. The draft environmental impact report calls for creating a 13-acre oak protection area elsewhere on the property to compensate for the loss of oaks. Trees such as foothill pine and manzanita

could be cut down in this oak protection area to reduce competition with oaks.

Douglas firs on the property provide possible breeding habitat for the northern spotted owl, which has federal Endangered Species Act protection. But no owls have been found there over three years of surveys, the draft environmental impact report says.

Hackett remains concerned. He doesn't think all projects proclaimed by environmental impact reports to have "less-than-significant impacts" truly do.

He brought the issue up recently before the St. Helena City Council because of possible effects on the city's Bell Canyon reservoir. St. Helena Mayor Alan Galbraith said last week that the city is evaluating the draft environmental impact report and could submit comments.

Go to calfire.ca.gov/resource_mgt/resource_mgt_EPRP_PublicNotice.php to see the draft environmental impact report for the Friesen Vineyards project.

Davis Estates also proposes to cut 5 acres of timberland near Lommel Road south of Calistoga to make room for a vineyard. No draft environmental impact report appears on the CalFire website, though CalFire in February issued a notice of preparation.