

Planned vineyard near reservoir worries St. Helena

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St. Helena is worried that trading trees for a small vineyard in its Bell Canyon Reservoir watershed could hurt a key city water supply.

The vineyard would be on a mountainside near Angwin at 1875 Friesen Drive. Davis Estates is seeking a state timber harvest permit to remove 10 acres of forest to help make room for a 13.6-acre vineyard on a 38.7-acre property.

A draft environmental impact report released by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection finds that, with various steps taken, the project would have a “less than significant” effect on its surroundings. St. Helena isn’t so certain.

“The Bell Canyon watershed is of utmost importance to the city of St. Helena,” Mayor Alan Galbraith said in a statement released over the weekend. “Water flowing into our reservoir from the watershed is an essential component of our potable water supply. The city cannot risk any adverse impact to either the quantity or quality of that supply.”

St. Helena supports the “no project” and “no timber harvest” alternatives listed in the state report as being the environmentally superior choices, he said.

At the very least, the city wants the state to revise

900 pages of analysis done for the proposed vineyard. It wants more information.

This marks the second time within a year that a city has raised questions about proposed vineyards in local mountains. The city of Napa in late 2014 stated that the proposed Walt Ranch vineyards could hurt water quality in its Milliken Reservoir. Napa also was skeptical of a draft environmental report that said the project would have no significant impacts.

St. Helena Public Works Director Steven Palmer wrote a letter on behalf of his city to Cal Fire addressing the Davis Estates vineyard proposal. He noted that St. Helena relies on Bell Canyon Reservoir for almost half of its drinking water.

“Consequently, it is imperative that the watershed of this reservoir be managed to protect the health and life (and) safety of the residents of the city of St. Helena,” he wrote.

St. Helena is concerned that replacing forest with vineyards could lead to more sediments washing from the property and into the reservoir. The draft state report says Davis Estates can create a vineyard that actually reduces the amount of sediment leaving the property, but the city is skeptical.

The city is concerned that pesticides, herbicides and fertilizer could be in the runoff. It opposes any increase in the use of chemicals in the watershed, Palmer wrote.

He requested that Cal Fire revise the draft environmental impact report to include additional information and then repost it for another public

comment period.

Davis Estates is located along Silverado Trail near Larkmead Lane, about 2 miles southwest of the proposed Friesen vineyard. Mike Davis of the winery said last week that the Friesen vineyard is part of his plan to use 100 percent Napa grapes for his wines.

He had hoped to have a 20-acre vineyard on the 38.7-acre Friesen property. But following state and county guidelines cut this back to about 13 acres, he said.

“That’s kind of the edge of my financial model where it pays back,” Davis said.

Mike Hackett of Save Rural Angwin has raised concerns about the project and brought the topic to the St. Helena City Council.

While not big in itself, the proposed Friesen vineyard would be one more watershed project, Hackett said. The pressure for new vineyard development is on the watersheds. He is concerned about cumulative impacts.

“In order for there to be enough water in the future, the easiest and most obvious way is to protect our watershed,” he said.