APNewsBreak: Napa growers give up land for salmon

TRACIE CONE - Associated Press - Associated Press

Along one of the San Francisco Bay's most valuable watersheds, healthy salmon runs will soon coexist, at last, with cabernet sauvignon.

The ambitious project to halt erosion in the heart of California's premiere winegrowing region includes 40 landowners voluntarily giving up 135 acres of some of the most prized farmland in the nation, so riverbanks along the Napa River can be stabilized and salmon spawns restored.

"It's valuable property, but we have to be stewards of the land and the environment," said Regina Weinstein, of Honig Vineyard and Winery, which produces sauvignon blanc and cabernet sauvignon in the heart of the restoration area. "We want the land to be here and be healthy in the future, so we can pass on the business to future generations."

Many stretches of the 55-mile-long Napa River have filled with silt over the years as floodwaters and non-native plants took a toll on the banks. The river drains into the San Francisco Bay and is considered the most important watershed in the region for steelhead and Chinook salmon spawning.

"Giving up a few rows of vines is a small thing to do to help the big picture," said Weinstein, whose bottles can fetch up to $75 each.

The first of five phases of the project, begun on a 4 1/2-mile stretch south of Calistoga called the "Rutherford Reach," involves removing some rows of vines and trees to reshape the riverbank into a wide V-shape to lessen erosion. Growers from the prestigious viticulture area — including Opus, Frog's Leap, Cakebread Cellars, Nickel and Nickel and Sutter Home — began planning the project more than a decade ago as part of a broader land stewardship program under the auspices of the Rutherford Dust Society, a group of growers and vintners that promote cutting-edge practices in the region.

The project is seen as a model for private landowners initiating environmental improvements before they're mandated by the government.

"It's being initiated from the bottom up, not the top down," said Gretchen Hayes, the Rutherford Reach project leader.

The Napa River historically supported a run of 8,000 steelhead. They dwindled to 2,000 in the 1960s and to just a few hundred today. Silt washed from steeply eroded banks — in places up to 30-feet high — has covered the gravel where the fish lay eggs.

"A big part of the project so far has been to clean it out and make a pathway for them to spawn," said Hayes.

Stretches of the riverbank now have been shaved down to a gradual slope easing into the river. Grasses and willows have been planted to stabilize the banks, and burlap-covered berms are in place to keep sediment from washing into the river. Resting places have been developed for the fish to take cover during times of heavy flows.

A mountain of soil excavated last year might have been some of the most expensive fill dirt ever. Land in Napa County can go for as high as $235,000 an acre.

The wine industry in Napa Valley generates nearly $11 billion annually and is the region's largest employer.

The voluntary program has been paid for by the landowners, a local sales tax to improve the river and state and federal sources. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency planned to announce Friday details of $3.3 million in new funding to continue work on the project that is expected to cost $22 million and take until 2017 to complete.

The project is one of many that area vintners are participating in to reduce the impact of farming on the scenic region. Napa growers were among the first to adopt sustainable farming practices, including a reduction in pesticides and tilling. Many have converted to solar power and plant cover crops to bring in beneficial insects.

"We have some of the most biodynamic and organic growers in Napa," said Davie Pina, of Pina Vineyard Management. "We are close to nature and we wanted to do something positive."

Now the river that many once viewed as a burden because of all of the government regulations that come with farming close to it is becoming a source of tranquility and inspiration for the growers.

"It's not just a drainage ditch anymore," Pina said. "It's amazing how the animals are moving back in. We have three or four beaver dams and the river otters are waiting for our first rainstorm because they know the salmon will start coming up. It's changing rapidly, quite rapidly."

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