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OpEd: How “Sustainable” Is the Wine Industry?

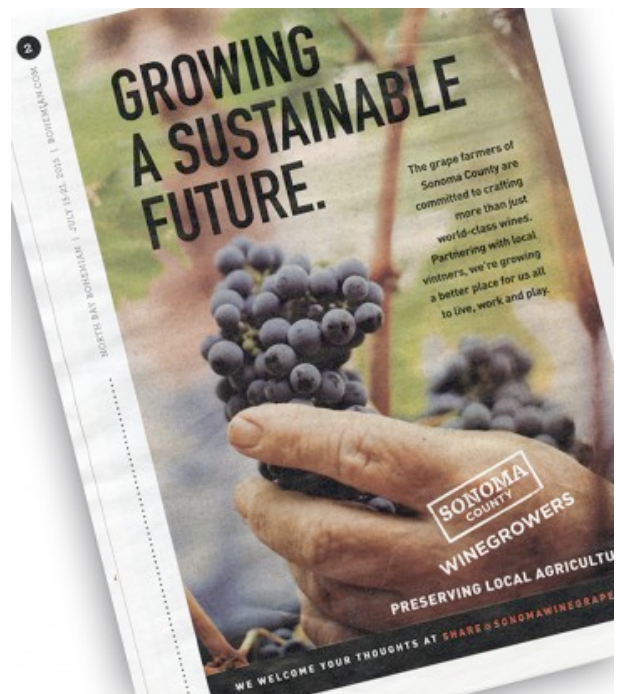
By Shepherd Bliss

As someone who has studied, practiced, written about, and taught college students at Sonoma State and Dominican Universities about what “sustainable” really means, last week’s expensive, full-page *Winegrowers* ad, paid for by tax dollars, in the *Press Democrat*, *Bohemian*, *Sonoma West*, and elsewhere offended me. It is a blatant effort to hoodwink readers.

It offers no proof and no third party verification. The Winegrowers self-regulate, thus co-opting and green-washing the word, like fox guarding the chicken coop. To be “sustainable” requires having a triple bottom line: profit, environmental protection, and social justice.

The Wine Empire is certainly profitable, for a few. They convert redwood forests, oak woodlands, and apple orchards into regimented, industrial mono-crop rows, which is not nature’s way. They leave destruction in their path. They fence out wildlife, poison bees and other critters, and hoard water—not very environmental. *Big Wine* does not treat or pay its workers a living wage.

Their wine may be “world-class,” as they claim. Wall Street and foreign investors own most of it, so most money leaves the county. Multi-national alcohol corporations—like Altira, Brown-Forman, Constellation, and The Wine Group—own much of the wine production.



“The Myth of the Family Winery: Global Corporations Behind California Wine” by the Marin Institute documents this ownership. “Preserving local agriculture,” the ad claims. This study reveals how they preserve agri-business.

“Nearly all the leading wine producers in California are massive corporations integrated with ‘Big Alcohol,’ multinational conglomerates promoting and controlling politics in Sacramento and Washington, D.C.,” the study opens.

Winegrowers received a 2014 \$377,282 federal grant to fund their “branding campaign.” That followed a state grant that brought their total to \$756,000. Tax dollars fund their ads.

“We’re growing a better place for us all to live, work, and play,” the ad claims. Meanwhile, they spray poisonous chemicals, without even informing neighbors. They crowd narrow, rural roads with tipsy drivers. The wine industry digs 1000-foot wells and takes as much water from streams as they want, even during the drought. Big Ag does not have to conserve, like the rest of us. There’s no teeth to what they describe as “sustainable.”

Big Wine does not follow the lax rules regulating it. For example, Napa County’s Wagners want their huge Dairyman Winery and Event Center in the fragile Laguna de Santa Rosa. They settled with Napa for \$1 million for violating permits by bottling 20 times as much as they were allowed.

Napa Valley used to be America’s premier wine-growing area, but some of their vintners have been moving into Sonoma County recently, such as “bad apple” Paul Hobbs. The Watertrough Children’s Alliance has been fighting him after he broke laws to put in a vineyard in the Sebastopol countryside bordering on schools with over 500 children. Mendocino and Lake Counties risk colonization by the Wine Empire.

There’s no teeth to what they describe as “sustainable.” That’s why a growing chorus of neighbors are lifting their voices as individuals and in groups such as Preserve Rural Sonoma County, Napa Vision 2050, Four County Network, against the Wine Empire’s multiple abuses of the land, water, air, and people.

“Sustainable?” Not really.

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