



OpEd: Common Ground for the Common Good

By Magick Altman

It is time to find common ground for the common good by setting limits in perpetuity on the further expansion of vineyards in Sonoma County.

For too long the agricultural use of water has been “self-regulated” while, due to the drought, residents must cut back their water use by 25%. Vineyards that were successfully dry-farmed in the past are sucking the creeks dry.

Sadly, in 1950 Big Ag successfully lobbied the repeal of the state law for monitoring agricultural water pumping. Before 1970 all vines in our county were dry farmed. This method actually created a higher quality of wine. But corporate profit motives have made quantity the highest priority, with disregard for their neighbors, wildlife, and the depletion of groundwater.

The good news is there is now a model for sustainability, through the work of Mike Benziger.* He states, “...In 12 years of conventional farming we completely killed the property. No birds, no insects, the soil was dead. It was an oh-my-God epiphany, the grapes are subsisting on artificial, piped-in elements.” *Then he gave up control.*

His team learned bio-dynamics, a system that mimics nature, heals the soil, and integrates cover crops, insects, and animals. It worked to create excellent wine and *save millions of gallons of water.*

Our young our ready to step in and demonstrate the benefits of these bio-mimicry systems, that make agriculture a community generating, life-affirming activity, ending the mono-cultures that are a death knell to life as we know it.

Other small, respectful vineyard owners would also benefit from learning this method as well as a ban on further growth. But those who pursue profit over community and are or in the event entertainment business under the guise of agriculture, must be reined in now.

Event offerings have become a key marketing tool and revenue source for wineries, which now number more than 400 outside city limits in the county — with 62 applications now in the pipeline. Meanwhile, complaints about events and their impacts on surrounding neighborhoods concerning water, roads, and people’s wells, are intensifying.

The adage that crisis equals opportunity is the hidden advantage of the critical issues involving climate change and the drought. Because of this crisis hidden realities are surfacing including the bizarre fact that water rights exceed by 5 times the actual water that exists in California!

Also, according to the Marin Institute, “Despite the industry-promoted image of mom-and-pop wineries in Californiasix of the seven producers that own 82% of U.S. wine are global corporations.”

We, the people, who actually live and work in this county, need to demand that our representatives have the ethical backbone and the foresight to stop this now.

The L.A. Board of Supervisors did it. They worked with the Coastal Commission to ban all new vineyards in the Santa Monica Hills in perpetuity.

On April 9, the City Council of Santa Monica voted 7-0 to adopt the state’s first ever [Bill of Rights for Sustainability](#), directing the city to “recognize the rights of people, natural communities and ecosystems to exist, regenerate and flourish.” Santa Monica joins dozens of U.S. communities, the nations of [Ecuador](#), Bolivia, and [New Zealand](#) in the fast-growing movement for [Nature’s Rights](#).

With the passage of this ordinance, Santa Monica challenges the legal status of nature as merely property, and empowers the City or residents to bring suit on behalf of local ecosystems.

This is a way to end the devastation of mountaintops that fill our rivers and streams with precious topsoil, for the bank accounts of the elite.

May our legacy be that future generations feel the shelter of the mighty redwoods, see the leaping of salmon, and the clear, clean waters of the Russian and Eel rivers.

The word human is rooted in the word *humus*, the earth. We can either continue to have the *hubris* to think we know better than life or have the *humility* to re-enroll in Life’s school and find a degree of sanity and sustainability in our beloved community.

We need a miracle, Let’s turn the wine back into water!

* <http://www.benziger.com>