

Labeling Of Wine Plan Hit

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SAN FRANCISCO – Should Napa Valley be considered in the same wine region as Santa Barbara County?

That question was raised at a hearing on wine labeling, held by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) here Tuesday.

Napa vintners and winegrape growers urged that the world-renowned "Napa Valley" appellation be retained for local wines, and criticized a California Wine Institute plan to

include 14 counties, ranging from Mendocino to Santa Barbara, in the "North Coast Counties" wine designation.

"It is inconceivable to us that this area (North Coast Counties) could extend south of the San Francisco Bay or east of Solano County," remarked Andrew Beckstoffer, a Rutherford grower representing the Napa Valley Grape Growers Association (NBGGA).

He called the Wine Institute plan a case of "flagrant consumer deception."

ATF announced earlier this year that "appellations of origin" like Napa Valley would no longer be allowed on wine labels, unless the industry devised a method for determining wine sources.

Yesterday's hearing at the Hyatt Regency Hotel here was called to hear comments on the ATF plan for turning wine appellation standards over to the states. Testifying before the panel of ATF directors from Washington were wine company executives, trade organization representatives, grower association officials, and wine consumers. Wine industry spokesmen seemed unanimous in their feeling that ATF should not give appellation control to the states.

"We believe the ATF must retain ultimate control in wine labeling," said Jack Davies, president of the Napa Valley Vintners Association and head of Schramsberg Vineyards in Calistoga. "They are the most qualified by experience and authority to achieve the policy goals."

Other spokesmen said state authority would result in confusion, and hinted that a state appellation agency could be subject to political pressure from "big wine" interests. The Napa vintners group outlined a proposal for determining wine appellations for grape-growing regions other than a state or county. Davies said the area should be determined based on a vote of vineyard and winery owners.

In addition, the appellation area would be judged on its historic association with winemaking, the similarity of topography and growing conditions in the region, and its significance as a wine-producing district.

A nine-member advisory committee of four vintners, two growers, an independent wine expert and ATF official and county farm advisor would evaluate requests for appellation and make recommendations to BATF, under the Napa vintners' plan.

The local grape growers' organization offered a similar proposal, although the advisory committee suggested by NVGGA would contain an equal number of growers and winemakers.

Both organizations asked that existing designations like "Napa Valley" be automatically approved. Currently, only nine non-county appellations are used in California, including Napa Valley, Alexander Valley, Central Coast Counties, North Coast Counties, Livermore

Valley, Napa-Sonoma-Mendocino, Russian River Valley, Santa Clara Valley and Santa Cruz Mountains.

The Napa Valley vintners also rapped the Wine Institute plan for an expanded "North Coast Counties" definition. "Some California counties, sometimes referred to under such grouping, could not stand the test of logic or meaningfulness in labeling," said Davies.

Rennick Harris, a Yountville grape grower, testified on behalf of the California Farm Bureau Federation, which has endorsed the NVGGA proposal.

John Wright, president of M & H Vineyards in Yountville, the California subsidiary of French Champagne-maker Moet & Hennessey, said the strict appellations are based on historical and geographical factors, and are "tailored" by local industry.

Edmund Mirassou, president of Mirassou winery in Santa Clara County, defended the 14-county definition for a "North Coast" appellation. "Who are we to determine what is the North Coast," he said. "The Spaniards said that everything north of Tijuana is Alta California."

The hearings continued today, and will be followed next month by further hearings in Washington D.C. ATF director Rex Davis said a decision on the matter should be made in about six months.