

# Help county preserve ag industry

By **ANDY BECKSTOFFER**

In 1968 there were 30 wineries in the Napa Valley, 10 percent of the current total; and 11,908 acres of vineyard, 25 percent of the current total. The Napa Valley wine industry had little voice.

Ag land preservation began with conversations about a National Preserve, Williamson Act provisions and economic viability of vineyards.

Amid the confusion County Administrator Al Haberber, County Assessor George Abate, county supervisors and planning commissioners came up with the idea of an Agricultural Preserve.

Our wine industry was split on the issue. The Inglenook people opposed, stating their concern for individual property rights. Louis Martini was in favor of it. In at least one prominent family, brothers took opposite sides and feuded vehemently. There were strong interests to the right and to the left.

County supervisors compromised with a 20-acre minimum parcel size and passed the historic Agricultural Preserve Ordinance.

The Ag Preserve's most critical period was the 1970s. There was great pressure for "cluster housing" and "executive retreats" in the unincorporated area. In the mid-1970s, Caltrans began purchasing rights-of-way

for an approved freeway through the Napa Valley! The question was, "Were we for 'no growth' or 'limited growth?'" The "limited growth" people were in the majority, protecting and being protected by, the county ordinance.

I was a member of the Napa County Planning Commission from 1976 to 1981. We heard the arguments — and increased the total Ag Preserve acreage and increased the minimum lot size to 40. We granted use permits for over 100 new wineries, while the growers doubled the number of acres in vineyards! The Ag Preserve ordinance kept us safe, as vineyards and the wine industry grew in popularity and sustainability.

In the 1980s, people continued to ask, "Why do you keep fighting for this? The majority of the vineyards will be gone in 10 years." But now the Napa Valley Grapegrowers Association had been formed and the Vintners' Association was being managed with strong voices and involvement. People began to understand a clear plebiscite — protection of agricultural and open space in Napa County was going to win, but not without a big fight.

Finally, agricultural and environmental interests, people who loved open space and elected officials united to protect the Ag Preserve.

Measure A in 1980 limited the county's growth to one percent annually and Measure J in 1990 prohibited the conversion of

agricultural land to urban uses without a vote of the people. With Measure J it became very difficult to develop agricultural land by taking it out of the Ag Preserve. That loophole was closed.

The Ag Preserve ordinance allowed one winery per parcel ... but what was a winery? A second loophole — that of the souvenir shop with tours and tasting, selling mostly non-Napa wines, disguising itself as a Napa Valley winery — had to be closed. We began to understand that we were to protect Napa Valley agriculture and not agriculture in general, which could mean grapes from Monterey. The scar tissue from that three-year fight has not completely healed today. In 1989, with the Winery Definition Ordinance, the growers, vintners, environmentalists and concerned citizens joined together in a most significant refining of the terms of the Ag Preserve Ordinance.

The phylloxera infestation of the late 1980s and early 1990s could have doomed viticulture in Napa County had the Ag Preserve not been in place. It cost a fortune to replant the vineyards. If an urban use alternative had been available, many would have taken it. As it was, the industry made major reinvestments in vineyards. The solution to the phylloxera problem came with the introduction of resistant rootstocks. New vineyard regimes emphasized environmental sensitivity. We had succeeded in maintaining our rural economy

and community with great help from the Ag Preserve long enough for viticulture to become sustainable. Vineyards that had once been purely business assets to be exploited became national treasures to be preserved.

We must not take the Ag Preserve for granted or forget the concern, vigilance and personal discomfort that was required to get to this point.

By 2000, vineyards were the highest and best use of the land in economic terms.

But the agricultural industry has not done enough to explain itself to the newly active environmental community. The long-term constituency that had served the county so well had unraveled. Good people with a basic common goal but different strategies for accomplishing it, disagreed.

Today, people for the "protection-of-individual-property-rights at all costs" are active again.

There are strong interests to the right and to the left. All of these interests are represented by good people who have valid points of view.

Thirty-five years ago it took our elected county officials to pull us all to the center. Let's not make it so hard on them, and us, this time.

**(Andy Beckstoffer, a founding member of the Napa Valley Grapegrower Association, is a current member of the Napa County Farm Bureau.)**



Beckstoffer

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