

Grape growing, fish protection clash in California

By JASON DEAREN (CP) – 8 hours ago

HEALDSBURG, Calif. — Grape growers in Northern California's cool, fertile Sonoma County wine region are stomping mad at a new plan to limit the amount of water vineyards can pump from local rivers and streams to protect crops from frost - a proposed regulation meant to safeguard coho salmon, a species on the brink of local extinction.

Vineyard acreage in Sonoma County, adjacent to the Napa Valley, has increased 30 to 40 per cent during the past decade and the county estimates the businesses generate about \$2 billion annually.

But the growth has run up against federal protections for coho salmon, an endangered species that once filled streams and rivers along California's central and northern coasts.

When hibernating vines are coming to life in the spring, temperatures can still drop below freezing overnight and destroy young grapes. During those frigid nights, growers spray river water onto the vines, encasing them in a protective frozen shell.

Farmers say one bad night when temperatures quickly drop 5 to 10 degrees below freezing could wipe out huge percentages of their crop.

"Down here in the bottom, if we don't have the water, it's not going to get it done," said vineyard manager Paul Foppiano, standing in a low-lying field of pinot noir vines near the Russian River. Sprinklers hovered over the gnarled vines in a part of his family's 140 acres, which have been producing wine in Sonoma County since 1896.

"The problem with frost is one year you might have to run 15 to 20 nights like we did a couple of years ago," he said. "Last year we only ran three or four nights so you're not using a whole lot (of water)."

Foppiano is not against the state managing river water use to help protect fish, but believes accurate accounting of use by other county growers is needed before any regulatory decisions are made.

"If the state is willing to work with us, we're willing to work with anybody," he said. "But there's got to be some answer to it other than to completely cut us off. It's going to be a problem."

At issue is the continued existence of the hook-mouthed coho salmon and the threatened steelhead trout that spawn in coastal streams and rivers - a habitat that stretches from Alaska to central California. While coho still thrive in Alaska, their once plentiful stocks in California and Oregon are under threat, federal fisheries managers say.

Under the state's proposed regulation, any pumping would be illegal unless approved by the State Water Board's management program. The new rule could be in effect by 2011.

State water regulators say using river water for frost protection is currently legal, but they are seeking a middle ground that will protect fish and grapes while ensuring some oversight.

"The goal is not to shut (pumping) down, but to make sure it's done in a responsible manner with an eye to making sure the resources are protected," said Vicky Whitney, deputy director for the State Water Board.

In 2008 and 2009, both drought years, vineyard pumping resulted in the deaths of hundreds of coho and steelhead as creek levels dropped, stranding the fish. The kills spurred outrage from environmentalists and concern from federal fisheries managers.

State water officials and federal regulators said it is likely many more fish were killed in undocumented incidents, underscoring the need for quick action. Growers have challenged that notion.

"I question the validity of their assertions of there being several incidents," said Lex McCorvey, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, an advocate for the county's wine industry. "(Regulators) have a responsibility to step forward with that information; that way the problems can get fixed. In 2008, there were two incidents, both have been fixed so they won't happen again."

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Map

