



BACKGROUND ON THE “PRESERVATION RANCH” PROJECT PROPOSED FOR SONOMA COUNTY: GUALALA RIVER WATERSHED

A public relations piece, “Preservation Ranch - Wise Plan for a Wounded Land”, was given out at a meeting between William Hill of PPV (Premier Pacific Vineyards) and environmental groups gathered in Santa Rosa approximately four years ago. . During the interim, the scope and totals on acreage affected have risen and fallen, but the project encompasses some 19,000 acres of land, we understand. The project was named “Preservation Ranch” by its proponents to disguise its essential nature as a speculative for-profit venture which targets the steep, undeveloped redwood and oak woodlands of coastal Sonoma county. Presently the information we have is that the project has changed from focusing upon vineyards into a project which also incorporates many units of residential development in addition to the vineyards proposed initially. We understand that the development now includes:

1. Parcels totaling some 1600 or so acres of **vineyards**.
2. Some number of consolidated parcels comprising about 17,000 acres in **timber production**
3. Some 100 or so parcels in **residential development** with a total acreage

of perhaps 400 acres.

To put the size of this in perspective, consider the following facts:

- PPV covers 19,000 acres (roughly 30 sq. miles), approximately 13.3% of the total Gualala River watershed, and approximately 10% of the Sonoma county portion of the Gualala River watershed. At 30 sq. miles this will involve an area of land larger than the size of Manhattan Island (23.1 sq. miles), or twice the size of Petaluma (14 sq. miles) or $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of Santa Rosa (40.4 sq. miles)
- The projected vineyards and residences on PPV (2000 acres=3.1 sq. miles) will cover an area equal to more than half the size of Lake Sonoma (6 sq. miles) and equal to more than twice the size of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park (1.5 square miles)

PPV proposes to set aside in conservation easements some of its land in order to 'mitigate' for the loss of hundreds of acres of forest. As proposed and potentially allowable under the new proposed Sonoma County General Plan "forest protection" amendments, PPV can trade steep undevelopable land for these converted acres and then continue to log them in the future. PPV contends that these lands have a future to recover in only if PPV intercedes now and creates "economic engines" to raise the funds needed for this plan. There is, however, much evidence that this conversion and residential development is not needed at all. Natural self-regeneration is happening in these abused forests. The burden of proof lies on the proponents to prove that this development-with-mitigation package is in the forests' and the public's best interest.

Consider the following issues:

1. **Doubletalk:** 'Preservation Ranch' is now a residential development ranch. What's in a name? Everything, in this case. Prez Ranch named itself so back when it proposed vineyards as an ALTERNATIVE to the threat of residential development - a threat that they are now making good on!. Now this is a development project with mitigation set-asides and 'restoration' being vaguely talked about. There is NO "preservation" of a landscape that is converted from unoccupied land to a land dotted with mansions and roads. The name doesn't represent the reality on the ground.
2. The project will have **growth-inducing impacts and will introduce new residential roads and road upgrades into the area.** The roads and road upgrades which the project will require and its piecemeal residential development will have growth-inducing impacts in now undeveloped mountainous terrain, spanning oak woodlands, grasslands and forests. The North Coast of Sonoma County has until now been spared the most

intensive development pressures suffered in the the Bay Area because of the present major constraint of limited road access across the coast ranges. Prez Ranch may provide an economic basis to upgrade Kelley Road to a county road or a paved private toll-road.

3. **Rest *is* restoration and doesn't require 'mitigation'**. Why should we believe that accepting development is necessary to fund restoration? MOST of the damage done to forests and streams by the previous tractor logging era is self-correcting over time. Where is the evidence that natural restoration is not occurring? The biggest challenge to regeneration of forests is over-harvesting, stand re-entry, and the reactivation of re-vegetating forest roads and skid trails. Where is the evidence that the progress of natural succession is lagging so much that intervention justifies residential development and agricultural conversion? Exactly **what won't time heal** without development and mitigation-funded restoration? You should only get mitigation credit for doing something that natural habitats can't do themselves because they have passed the threshold for self-repair so far that they are "doomed if you don't" – becoming basket cases worse off if left alone. That's an incredibly high threshold for these forestlands and it has not been demonstrated here. Prez Ranch is not in the business of ecosystem restoration: they have the burden of proof that there is an overriding public interest for the development-with-mitigation package they propose, compared with no action.
4. **Fragmentation** - paper "fragmentation" versus real habitat fragmentation. Merging parcels legally defined on paper does not consolidate preservation of real forest habitat in unfragmented blocks if the reality on the ground is that the consolidated ownerships are dotted with mansions and vineyards and dissected with all-weather roads. Prez Ranch equivocates upon the word "fragmentation", taking it from landscape ecology and applying it in a purely legal context with no meaning in conservation biology.
5. **Effects of upstream agriculture on downstream fish**: look at the watershed map above and the distribution of the proposed vineyards and mansions. The Gualala River is the only undammed river system in Sonoma County with no intensive crop and residential runoff sources in its watershed. The Prez Ranch proposal would place both point and non-point sources of herbicides, insecticides and fungicides in the upper watershed to be transported downstream in runoff to the primary steelhead stream reaches from Annapolis to the coast. Some of the worst unregulated pesticide and herbicide releases come from heavily manicured mansion landscapes.

Conversion of forests, woodlands and other natural wildlife communities to

vineyards poses a serious ecological threat within the Sierra Club Redwood Chapter geographical area. This threat has been exacerbated by high wine prices, and the fact that some grape varieties are preferentially cultivated on steep slopes with poor or rocky soils, (i.e., areas that had not been previously cultivated for other crops). Ecological impacts of vineyard conversion include habitat fragmentation, fresh water depletion, pollution from toxic substances used for farming, soil erosion, and down stream flooding, loss of biodiversity, and increase of edge effects, disruption of wildlife corridors, ground water depletion, impoundments of water and water diversions from streams, increased rate of flows causing bank flooding, bank failures, mass wasting and other river dis-equilibria, sub-surface hydrologic flow changes, pollution to fresh water sources caused by pesticides and herbicides, sediment inputs and mobilization of mercury, asbestos and other geologic particulates, re-contouring, deep soil disruption, micro-climate changes, invasion of exotic species, endangered species "takes", aesthetic impacts, and economic impacts to the County's infrastructure.

Sierra Club supports preservation of natural ecosystems. These natural vegetation types include commercial timberlands, oak woodland, grasslands, savannah, mixed oak conifer forests, and chaparral. All of these habitat types provide enormous value to a wide range of species, some of which have been identified as threatened or endangered.

We support the conservation of existing low-intensity-use agricultural lands such as rangelands, as these are more compatible with wildlife, and soil and water conservation values, than is high intensity vineyard use. If converted, the net loss of forest to low-intensity-use agricultural lands should be minimal and should not result in fragmentation. Further, any vineyards replacing low intensity uses should conform to best management practices, giving full consideration to slopes, existing natural vegetation, erodibility of soils, streams, wetlands and seeps, listed plant and animal species, slides and archaeological sites. Conservation measures should be employed that include stream setbacks, retention of native vegetation, wildlife corridors, limited fencing, no pesticide use, limited water use, conservation easements and other mitigations that are designed to reduce ecological and aesthetic impacts.

Sierra Club opposes the water diversions and impoundments associated with vineyard conversions. Because all North Coast rivers and many streams including the Gualala River are on the EPA's 303(d) list of impaired waterbodies, appropriate flows must be allowed to sustain viable and healthy fish habitats. It is our policy to file objections with the State Water Resources Control Board to any new applications for water diversion until the State Water Board adopts a policy to maintain healthy flows for human communities and for fish and other species.

Sierra Club also opposes damming of canyons and drainages in forest areas so as to create reservoirs for storage of agricultural irrigation water. Such reservoirs

destroy the natural forest vegetation and wildlife habitat, but in addition, destroy the water courses with fishery and potential spawning habitat. Possible release of the wastewater in storm situations can result in contamination of associated creeks and rivers. Installation and maintenance of pipelines and service facilities impacts additional natural areas outside the reservoir.

Because all vineyard development needs to be evaluated for its potential to cause significant, adverse environmental impacts, **Sierra Club** supports regulation that requires discretionary permitting subject to the California Environmental Quality Act. (CEQA), and which includes public noticing and review. The major focus of all agency and public review should be the *cumulative impacts* of proposed projects. **Sierra Club** supports true watershed restoration.

Sierra Club supports the adoption of local ordinances and General Plan amendments and zoning laws which truly protect forest from conversion to agriculture and which protect beneficial uses of water. County governments should work with other permitting agencies to maintain careful records of vineyard conversions, and to provide such information, including maps and other data, to the public. As part of any approval process County governments should carefully and scientifically consider the cumulative impacts assessments of vineyard conversions, including the impacts of conversion on steep slopes, on riparian habitat, and the impacts of habitat fragmentation on threatened and endangered species.

The **Sierra Club** does **not** support the use of the retirement funds of public employees for projects that convert forests to intensive agricultural use. One project immediately in the wings is this 'Preservation Ranch' project, which intends to put some 1,900 acres of vineyards into the Gualala watershed. 'Preservation Ranch', financed by CalPERS, has announced that, after deforesting some 1400 or so acres, it intends that some of the vineyard income will be used to maintain and even to restore the rest of what are currently badly over-logged forests. This may be a laudable goal in theory, but we understand that the project is still in study mode. In our eyes it is a very large open question whether they can manage to achieve such goals in any measure, even with the extensive financing which they have. The road to Hell, etc. The claims made by the proponents of Preservation Ranch are often very inflated. A recent *S.F. Chronicle* article, for instance, cited CEO William Hill as promising to "preserve 2,000 acres of old-growth redwood forest" on the project. This would be an extraordinary accomplishment, as this land has been heavily over-logged for decades, and it is very doubtful whether the property includes even a few acres of anything which could be called "old-growth redwood forest" by any stretch of the imagination! What we do know is that they plan to cut down some 1600 acres of forest, and that doing so will have significant consequences (see *S.F. Chronicle*, Dec. 26, 2005: "Wine country casualties: Grape-eating bears killed as vineyards' territory expands".) As noted in the *Chronicle* article, the bears were destroyed because the bears had torn down vineyard fencing to get at vineyard

grapes. This is the sort of problem which arises as humans encroach into our own remaining (semi-) wilderness.

The following is from the recent World Bank report on deforestation; the authors are speaking of tropical forest, but much of the report applies equally well, *mutatis mutandis*, to all forestland:

“Environmental problems are social problems, and society may be moved to intervene if one person’s land-use decisions significantly affect other people’s well-being. Those impacts operate through different channels and depend on the location of deforestation, for instance:

- The most widespread impact—and arguably the one with the most costly damages—is the effect of forest loss on climate change through CO₂ emissions. These greenhouse emissions are associated with all permanent losses of forest, regardless of location. Moreover, their physical impact is reasonably well understood, and society can place an increasingly well-defined economic value on reducing these emissions.
- There is considerable global demand for preventing extinctions and other biodiversity losses, and an increasingly good understanding of where biodiversity is richest and most threatened.”

(P. 15, “Overview: At Loggerheads? Agricultural Expansion, Poverty Reduction, and Environment in the Tropical Forests”, Kenneth Chomitz et al, World Bank, 2007.)

More information can be found at
<http://redwood.sierraclub.org/sonoma/ForestProtection/>