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County rebuffs bid for tough review of orchards, vineyards

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Sonoma County supervisors Tuesday rejected a request from environmentalists and the state's key wildlife agency to require farmers to undertake environmental studies and public review when planting orchards and vineyards.

Instead, supervisors said they will craft a new grading ordinance that would provide stream and wetlands protections when work is done on orchards and vineyards. However, the law wouldn't force farmers to do studies and public review as required by the California Environmental Quality Act.

West county Supervisor Mike Reilly, often viewed as the board's most sympathetic member for environmental regulation, made a point Tuesday "to caution my environmental friends" that the board majority opposed placing such a requirement on farmers.

He urged environmentalists to accept a law that provides some additional protections rather than "have nothing at all."

The board held its first hearing Tuesday on a proposal to incorporate new rules on orchards and vineyards in a larger ordinance that also deals with construction drainage and grading. Supervisors will discuss the proposed law again Nov. 4.

The county currently requires permits for new vineyards, and grape growers must keep roads and vines away from certain streams and wetlands now designated in the county General Plan. The new rules would require setbacks of at least 25 feet from all natural streams and at least 50 feet from all wetlands.

Representatives from the state Department of Fish & Game, the Sierra Club and the Town Hall Coalition, a community activist organization, said the orchard and vineyard plantings should come under the state environmental process. Those regulations require public and state agency review as well as studies when deemed necessary.

Town Hall Coalition Director Lynn Hamilton said the public should have a say when growers put "in an industrial vineyard or a wine factory into our neighborhood."

"We just feel like our interests are not taken into consideration," she said.

Dan Wilson, a Fish & Game environmental scientist, said the planting of vineyards and orchards should come under the state environmental rules because of the potential negative

impacts on endangered salmon, other wildlife and rare plants. Such review would allow wildlife experts to offer solutions that could "potentially avoid these impacts," he said.

Farmers and their representatives called for exempting the replanting of vineyards and orchards from the proposed law. They also asked for greater clarity about what streams or wetlands would come under the setback rules.

Lex McCorvey, director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, said one definition of wetlands in the law would be based on plants that not only grow in lowlands but in hills and other areas, too. By using that definition, he said, "I have a feeling you're not going to be able to plant anywhere."

Both supervisors and farmers said the current vineyard erosion control ordinance provides for the county Agricultural Commissioner's Office to serve as a central place for information about all the requirements of county, state and federal agencies with respect to streams, rare species and forests.

Supervisors voiced mixed reactions to the benefit of expanding the setback rules to more streams and wetlands. But they all agreed that the county will need to better define the conditions under which such setbacks are required.

Valerie Brown, who represents the Sonoma area, said, "If you look at Sonoma Valley, it was all wetlands at one point."

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