

How 50 Years of Agricultural Preservation has Transformed Napa Valley

by Paul Franson



If Prohibition was society's worst social experiment, Napa Valley's Agricultural Preserve is one of the best.

For more than a century, our country had set aside land for national parks, scenic byways, historic sites, cultural attractions and recreation areas, but never for agriculture. That changed in 1968 with the establishment of the Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the act that protected much of Napa Valley for agriculture. You only need to look around the valley to recognize its success: it is lush with grapevines, not tract housing and shopping malls. It has maintained a rural character long lost by adjoining counties around San Francisco Bay.

If the act hadn't succeeded, there's little doubt that Napa Valley would have gone the way of Santa Clara Valley, which was once called the Valley of Heart's Delight for its orchards and vines long before it became a symbol for technology and urban development.

If Napa Valley hadn't been saved, a major divided highway would run through what are now some of the world's finest vineyards. Yountville, St. Helena and Calistoga would be a sea of housing development

and their quaint downtowns most likely bypassed and largely unused.

Instead, Napa Valley is America's premier wine destination, and its communities offer the lifestyle that both residents and visitors value so highly.

The fact that Napa Valley wasn't lost is primarily due to the vision of vintners and growers of Napa Valley's wine community. That vision has led to great success, and the worldwide acclaim for Napa wines has helped them support ever-heightened protection and leadership.

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Napa's unique environment

To understand why Napa Valley has maintained its unique character while much of coastal California has been overtaken by development, you have to start with its environment. Part of the answer is in Napa Valley's unique suitability for growing premium wine grapes.

Napa Valley boasts an incomparable combination of climate, geography and geology ideal for producing some of the world's best wines. The valley's natural beauty has captivated visitors to return time and again and yet it is close enough to attract those who can appreciate its attributes without a major journey.

As one of the nine counties that touch the San Francisco Bay, Napa County residents don't often consider themselves part of the Bay Area at all. Residents feel more on the fringe, but distance from the hub would not have kept the valley safe from development, as a drive through neighboring Fairfield and Vacaville attests.

As the Bay Area prospered in the years after World War II, progress inevitably spread. In those days before the '60s, Napa County was still largely a backwater, better known for its mental health facility at Napa State Hospital than for wine grapes.

Though Prohibition had ended back in 1933, there were only about 25 wineries in Napa Valley by the mid-1960s,

and only a few new small wineries were formed until Robert Mondavi built his iconic winery in 1966. Many believe that this was the start of the modern era for Napa Valley.

Napa County's landowners and farmers could see development creeping toward them. The state of California talked of building a major highway through the valley while planners placed the Bay Area's fourth major airport in the marshes south of Carneros.

The Army Corps of Engineers suggested turning the Napa River into a concrete channel like the once-flowing Los Angeles River.

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Projections envisioned 200,000 people in the city of Napa by 2000, half a million by 2020. Most people here think it's fine with today's 80,000.

Most local landowners thought that rising land values would soon mean that their property would be worth far more for development than it would for the nuts, fruit, dairy and meat cattle, grapes and other agricultural products then grown in the county.

The grape growers were getting only \$300 a ton for Cabernet Sauvignon but the most widely planted grapes were Napa Gamay, Petite Sirah and other varieties that sold for even less.

In 1968, the county had fewer than 12,000 acres planted to grape vines compared to about 45,000 acres planted today. That price per ton for Cabernet Sauvignon has risen 25 times to nearly \$7,500 per ton and the value of the grape crop from \$6 million to almost \$750 million dollars.

Those 25 or so wineries in 1968 have grown to more than 500 physical wineries and more than 1,000 wine brands.

Back in the '60s, many landowners felt that their only attractive economic course was to sell their land to developers – or develop it themselves – as had already occurred on prime farm land from San Diego to Redding. Others wanted to maintain the special environment that is Napa Valley – the beautiful views, the slow pace of life, the enchanted lifestyle.

They recognized that the Napa Valley had unique properties for growing fine wine grapes: people could live almost anywhere, but rare few places allowed noble grapevines to flourish.

These conservationists felt that the highest and best use of the fertile valley and foothills of the county was in growing grapes – not in homes and development. They also knew that it would take a strong, legally-binding change to preserve that environment.

Basing their argument on the Williamson Act that allowed lower valuation – and hence lower taxes – on land kept in agriculture, they mounted a campaign to create an agricultural preserve.

Opponents charged that the measure would destroy the value of their land, restricting it to the low \$2,000 to \$4,000 per acre of farmland, not the far higher amount that would be paid by developers.

Ironically, as the county's viable vineyard property approached its limit, land values skyrocketed. Scarcity combined with the mounting reputation of Napa's wines – and its attractive lifestyle – had created land prices 100 times what they were.

It's unlikely that even the original supporters of the preserve could have anticipated such a benefit.

Thus in 1968, encouraged by a small group of vintners and growers, the county enacted changes in its code that implemented the agricultural preserve.

The best-known part is called the Napa Valley Agricultural Preserve (zoning AP) and lies primarily in the valley between the cities of Napa and Calistoga with other pockets around the county. It originally protected 26,000 acres of the valley floor and foothills. It has since grown to more than 32,000 acres.

Beyond the protection of the valley floor, the county also designated a huge area as "Agriculture, Watershed and Open Space," (AW zoning) which is also protected, and in some ways, even more so. Together, the two represent 91 percent of the county's 505,859 acres.

According to the Napa County General Plan, the "AP or Agricultural Preserve classification is intended to be applied in the fertile valley and foothill areas of Napa County in which agriculture is and should continue to be the predominant land use, where uses incompatible to agriculture should be precluded and where the development of urban-type uses would be detrimental to the continuance of agriculture and the maintenance of open space which are economic and aesthetic attributes and assets of the county."

In this Ag Preserve, only single-family houses and wineries can be built, and no other development is allowed. And no land can be subdivided into parcels of less than 40 acres.

The AW or Agricultural Watershed classification is intended to be applied in those areas of the county where the predominant use is agriculturally oriented, where watershed areas, reservoirs and floodplain tributaries are located, where development would adversely impact on all such uses, and where the protection of agriculture, watersheds and floodplain tributaries from fire, pollution and erosion is essential to the general health, safety and welfare.

This covers most of the mountainous areas as well as developed and undeveloped farm and range land, forests and some very remote areas indeed.

Only a fraction of Napa County is seen by most visitors, including the steep mountains on each side of the valley. More than half of the county lies over the mountains to the east of the Vaca range and another large portion is contained in the Mayacamas range to the west.

In these areas, the minimum new lot size is 160 acres, but that's only the start of the obstacles to building the allowed single-family home or winery, since intense environmental review must be passed to build or even plant vineyards in most cases.

Agriculture rules

As a result of the establishment of the Agricultural Preserve, agriculture remains the leading source of revenue in Napa County — unlike other Bay Area counties where farmland has largely been displaced by development. According to the Napa County Agricultural Commissioner, approximately 45,000 acres, or about 9 percent of the county is planted to vineyards, with very limited opportunity for expansion.

Beyond county regulations, Napa landowners, many of whom are vintners and growers, formed the Land Trust of Napa County in 1976. They have protected their

properties, some of which could have been used for wineries or houses, by placing them in perpetual trust, forever saving the land from development. Now more than 70,000 acres of the county are in this trust and will forever remain in agriculture or open space. That represents 14 percent of the county.

The success of establishing regulations to preserve Napa County for agriculture in 1968 led to further steps to strengthen that hold. In 1980, county voters adopted Measure A, which restricted growth in the unincorporated areas of the county to 1 percent per year.



Again restating their approval of agricultural preservation, in 1990 voters approved Measure J, which requires a two-thirds vote of the county's citizens to rezone any agricultural land.

Only a handful of these re-zoning attempts have passed, and all were very specific, such as allowing the sale of pumpkins and produce in a rural site historically used for that purposes and allowing a local restaurant in the unincorporated area to serve meals on its existing patio. In 2008, Measure J was extended and enhanced by the passage of Measure P, granting widespread and vital protections to Napa County's ag land through 2058.

The resistance to rezoning attempts clearly reflects the desire of Napa County residents to maintain the integrity of the Ag Preserve. No one wants to let that camel's nose in the tent, fearing that its body would soon follow. Though seemingly innocuous, the challenges to the measures have historically been condemned as the first steps to weaken the protection and have been soundly defeated.



Another step in protecting Napa Valley for agriculture was defining what a “winery” really is.

In other regions, wineries consider themselves to be in the entertainment and hospitality businesses as much as winemaking. Some offer extensive gift shops, restaurants, inns and wedding chapels, and derive much of their revenue from parties, wedding receptions, corporate dinners and non-wine retail sales.

In Napa County, this issue was resolved with a hard-fought battle that ended in 1990 with the Winery Definition Ordinance that prohibited new wineries from engaging in ancillary activities like weddings, restaurants, inns and gifts shops, and required all visitors to make appointments. Many wineries have severe restrictions on the number of visitors allowed, some even prohibiting members of the public from visiting at all.

The only activities allowed for new wineries are focused on educating visitors and supporting the sale of wines, not to unrelated businesses.



A river runs through it

It seems as though 1990 was a watershed year for Napa County, for that year, the county also adopted a hillside erosion control ordinance and setbacks from streams designed to protect the waters and wildlife. The setbacks were largely supported by the wine community even though they reduced plantable acreage in many vineyards.

Once again in 1998, Napa County voters followed the wine community’s lead and endorsed the common good by approving Measure C, a project to control the periodic flooding of the Napa River. This forward-thinking plan chose natural controls, such as wide flood plains and acceptance of occasional flooding of certain

areas, instead of the all or nothing approach of fighting nature that has historically been favored by the Army Corps of Engineers. This measure has largely eliminated the frequent flooding of the city of Napa and other areas while enhancing the river’s environment.

In this effort as in the others noted, most vintners and growers were strong supporters even though any of these measures could potentially affect their individual property rights. In fact, many even donated valuable land suitable for growing premium grapes to restore the Napa River.

Nearly 90 percent of the Napa River watershed is in private ownership and a public/private partnership is vital to the long-term viability of the Napa Valley winegrowing community.

To enhance the valley and the watershed, the Napa Valley Vintners helped develop two sustainability programs and has set a goal of having all eligible members participate in them by 2020.

The Napa Green Land program began in 2003. It looks at all aspects of a grower’s property from vineyards to roads, buildings and non-farmed land to curtail erosion, reduce or eliminate pesticide use and adopt practices that will ultimately enhance the Napa River watershed



and preserve or restore wildlife habitat through sustainable agriculture. Currently, 50 percent of Napa vineyard acreage is certified Napa Green.

As a complement to the Napa Green Land program, the Vintners developed a companion program for winery production facilities.

The Napa Green Winery Certification extends Napa Green through the winemaking process into the winery. The program covers such issues as water and materials recycling and energy conservation to reduce the carbon footprint of wine production facilities.

Napa Green Land and Winery go beyond compliance, meeting or exceeding environmental regulations to help the businesses become more sustainable through economically viable, environmentally sensitive and socially equitable practices.

More than 125 members are certified in one of the two programs and more than 30 wineries have dual certification.

What the future holds

Napa Valley continues to maintain its commitment to agriculture with full support from the Vintners. The county sets very high priorities on maintaining the Ag Preserve and its most recent General Plan states clearly: “Napa County in 2030 will remain a world-famous grape growing and winemaking region, with a viable and sustainable agricultural industry. Under this General Plan, the amount of land designated for agriculture will increase, assuming no further annexations of county land by incorporated cities and towns. New non-agricultural development will continue to be focused in the incorporated cities and already developed areas.”

The Plan continues, “Policies supporting agriculture include the long-standing ‘right to farm’ which ensures that new residents and new users of land understand they inhabit an agricultural area where the viability of agriculture comes first. These policies also define all the components of agriculture encompassed by the right to farm and perpetuate the county’s longstanding commitment to protections for agricultural land.”

The Plan also establishes agriculture and rural residences as the principal users of groundwater aquifers and calls for data collection and long-term monitoring to ensure adequate supplies remain in the future. The most recent groundwater monitoring report finds major storms in winter 2017 helped boost the supply in Napa Valley’s aquifer to the highest level in a decade.

The General Plan states that vineyard development is expected to continue and will become increasingly environmentally sensitive as business practices and conservation priorities converge.

The Napa River will increasingly run clean and healthy, supporting native fish, plants and animals and serving as an important part of the life of the county’s people. The General Plan emphasizes, “Napa County in 2030 will retain its rural character and outstanding quality of life.”

Looming in the future is the sunset in 2058 of measure P, which forces zoning changes to a vote of the people. Coming decades will be spent convincing voters to uphold that protection—and perhaps make it permanent. As the Agricultural Preserve achieves its first 50-year milestone, these steps are sure to be part of the continuing effort to maintain Napa as a community devoted to agriculture — some would say, paradise.



About the Napa Valley Vintners

The Napa Valley Vintners nonprofit association has been cultivating excellence since 1944 by inspiring its 550 members to consistently produce wines of the highest quality, to provide environmental leadership and to care for the extraordinary place they call home. Learn more at napavintners.com.



napa valley vintners