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U.S.

Napa Valley Has a Problem: It's Running Out of Prime Room for Grapes

A battle over plans for a large hillside vineyard has split the wine capital; fighting 'vineyard sprawl'

By [Jim Carlton](#) Follow / Photographs by *Andri Tambunan* for *The Wall Street Journal*

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NAPA, Calif.—Craig and Kathryn Hall are trying to convince Napa Valley there is enough, prime, arable land for new vineyards—it is just further up the hillside.

After a yearslong battle, authorities are scheduled to decide if they will grant them permission to plant after an April 19 hearing. A ruling in favor of the Halls could pave the way

for others to press up the hillsides.

“The valley floor is planted out for the most part,” said David Morrison, Napa County’s planning director. “That leaves the hills for expansion.”

Wine grapes already cover about 23,000 acres in Napa Valley’s hillsides, many the result of development years ago before residents and environmentalists began more actively opposing some of them and their operations. Nearly 70% of the farmland on the valley floor is already in vineyards.

Nearly 20 years ago, the Halls, a couple from Texas, first planned the Walt Ranch vineyard, which is perched on the flanks of 2,700-foot Atlas Peak overlooking Napa Valley. But they have been blocked until now by opponents citing a host of potential impacts from the projects, from limited water resources to climate change.



Smith-Madrone Vineyards & Winery in St. Helena, Calif.

The final issue in legal contention—whether the plan identifies conservation easements to offset the project’s impact on greenhouse gas emissions—is set for review by the Napa County

board of supervisors later this month. A yes vote would clear the way for the 209-acre vineyard, and possibly pave the way for more hillside development.

More development means more income and jobs for the region, say supporters of the project. Wine remains the biggest growth driver of Napa County, generating an annual economic impact of about \$10 billion locally with 44,000 jobs, according to industry estimates.

In her Feb. 25 letter to the county supporting vintners in general, Michelle Benvenuto, executive director of Winegrowers of Napa Valley, added that vineyards help keep urban sprawl at bay. "Let's not look for something else to put in its place," Ms. Benvenuto said.

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Opponents to the project say the Halls' plan wouldn't do enough to blunt the environmental impact.

Vineyards remove forests, shrub lands and grasslands while draining groundwater at a time when the warming climate is creating more drought, said Ross Middlemiss, a lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity, which has challenged Walt Ranch and other hillside proposals. The bone-dry conditions have been cited by state officials for the region's devastating wildfires the past several years.

"Vineyard sprawl is a good way to put it," Mr. Middlemiss said.

In Napa County, a flurry of hillside expansions since the 1990s prompted Amber Manfree to support a successful court fight last month to stop the construction of a winery production facility near her hillside home off Soda Canyon Road. In March, a state superior court judge ordered the county to conduct a more rigorous review, saying the project might hurt local water and wildlife.



Amber Manfree won a fight to stop the construction of a winery production facility near her hillside home.

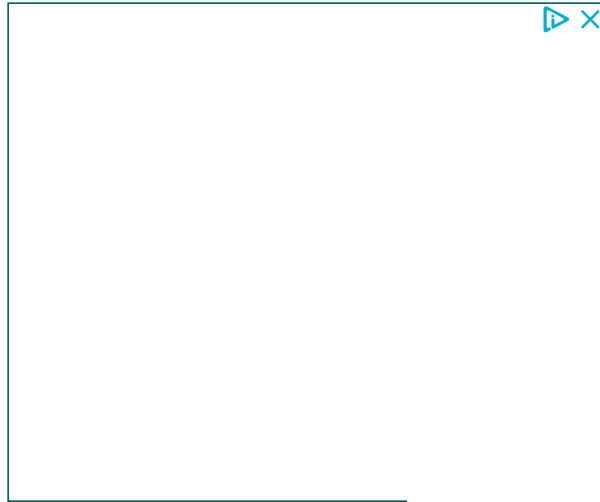
Hiking to a ridge on her family's property one morning last week, Ms. Manfree looked out over a dozen hillside vineyards that didn't exist in a 1975 photo she brought along. "I can't tell you how quiet the neighborhood was back in the day," said Ms. Manfree, a cartographer. "Now it's noisy, it's dirty and you have a bunch of strangers around."

But winemakers say the hillside vineyards are built in environmentally sound ways, and that the mountains where they are situated receive more than enough rain to offset whatever they pump out for irrigation.

Mike Reynolds, president of Hall Brambletree Associates, which runs the Halls' wine business, said in an email: "We look forward to the [April 19] hearing...and we hope to move forward

with the project soon.”

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As for the neighbors who complain, “It’s all about they have theirs and they don’t want anyone to have anything else,” said Stu Smith, founder of Smith-Madrone Vineyards & Winery.



Stu Smith, founder of Smith-Madrone Vineyards & Winery.

Standing on his hillside vineyard overlooking Calistoga at the north end of Napa Valley, Mr. Smith pointed at a grass-covered hillside he wants to convert to grapes—but is too worried to

proceed over a likely legal battle. “They are intimidating every one of us living in the hills,” he said.

The Halls’ saga started after the couple bought the 2,300-acre Walt Ranch in 2005 with the intent to use the grapes for their Hall Wines brand. Mr. Hall, a real-estate developer, and his wife, a second-generation grape grower and former ambassador to Austria during the Clinton administration, professed an affinity for the environment, as evidenced, they say, by the green certification of their winery in St. Helena, Calif.

“Our Texas friends think of us as crazy, tree-hugging, liberal Democrats,” Mr. Hall said in a biography posted on his company’s website. The couple’s winery has hosted fundraisers in Napa Valley for prominent Democrats, including Hillary Clinton and Pete Buttigieg.

The Halls initially proposed a 397-acre vineyard, but downsized it to 209 acres after years of public outcry and county review that culminated in a 2016 approval of the project. Some residents and environmental groups challenged the approval, first through county appeals and then through a lawsuit in state superior court.



Residents of Circle Oaks objected to the Halls’ vineyard fearing it would leave them without enough water.

One concern was that pumps used to irrigate the vineyard might draw down an aquifer used to support the neighboring community of Circle Oaks, which has about 200 homes. “If your house doesn’t have water, it is worthless,” said Lisa Hirayama, a resident there.

In its environmental review, the county determined there was sufficient groundwater. More than a dozen other issues raised by the opponents—including potential harm to wildlife, impact on roads and the use of pesticides—were deemed by the county and later the courts not enough to overturn the approval.

After years of other legal wrangling, the board of supervisors is set to hold the hearing on April 19 and to vote afterward.



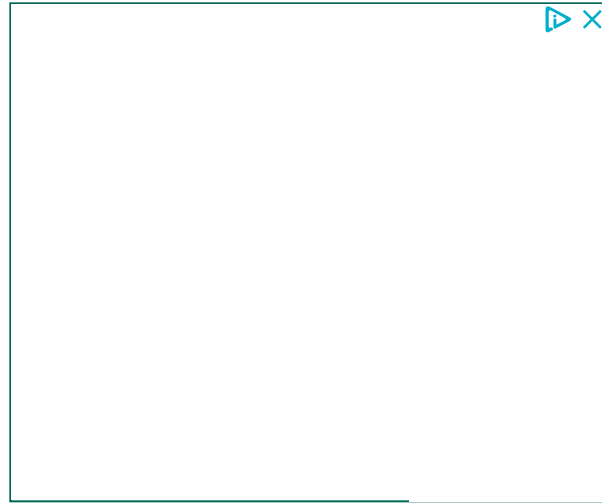
Droughts are part of a natural cycle of water. But the drought currently gripping the Western U.S. has climate scientists concerned that the cycle may be shifting. This has major implications for farmers and the communities they surround. Photo illustration: Carter McCall/WSJ

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Do you think plans to build the Walt Ranch vineyard should proceed? Why or why not? Join the conversation below.

Write to Jim Carlton at jim.carlton@wsj.com

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