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BREAKING TOP STORY

Wine Industry

Napa wine industry organizations describe disaster losses as 'staggering'

Barry Eberling
Oct 29, 2020

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Following the Glass Fire, umbrellas stand in a scorched picnic area at Fairwinds Estate Winery that was destroyed in the Glass Fire. Wine industry groups are asking the Napa County Board of Supervisors for help in dealing with unprecedented losses from two wildfires since August and the ongoing effect of COVID-19 on tourism.

AP Photo/Noah Berger

Barry Eberling

Citing potential losses of \$1 billion from the Glass Fire alone, a disaster-reeling Napa County wine industry has given county government a list of recovery requests.

Napa Valley Vintners, Napa Valley Grapegrowers and Winegrowers of Napa County submitted the letter earlier this week. They called on the county to further assist residents, businesses and landowners suffering from this year's string of calamities.

The Glass Fire came on the heels of the Hennessey Fire. Both happened amid the COVID-19 pandemic. All of this has the wine industry seeking less red tape for rebuilding and more fire prevention efforts.

“The overlapping disasters of COVID-19 and the fires threaten the economic viability of our agriculturally-based economy,” the three wine industry groups wrote.

They got that possible \$1 billion winery-loss figure for the Glass Fire from a MarketWatch article. A wine analytics expert said property damage to three dozen wineries will alone total hundreds of millions of dollars.

But there's more than burned buildings, burned vineyards and destroyed wine inventory. The three wine industry groups in their letter give examples.

Smoke damage to grapes will cost growers and wineries hundreds of millions of dollars and crop insurance rarely equals the full market price. A preliminary analysis shows wage losses for vineyard workers could total \$50 million. Some wineries won't make a 2020 vintage.

“The numbers are staggering,” wrote Linda Reiff of Napa Valley Vintners, Jennifer Putnam of Napa Valley Grapegrowers and Michelle Benvenuto of Winegrowers of Napa County. **Napa wine industry organizations describe disaster losses as 'staggering'**

On Tuesday, the Napa County Board of Supervisors discussed priorities in general. Rebounding and restoring the economy from multiple disasters rose to the top.

“I think those two are the pillars that we need to talk about, because they are time sensitive and there are so many people out there who need economic recovery and economic stimulation,” Supervisor Alfredo Pedroza said.

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Supervisors are to tackle business regulatory relief in December and some of the wine industry requests fall into this category. They are to tackle further fire prevention efforts at various points before the 2021 fire season.

Here’s a sample of what Napa Valley Vintners, Winegrowers of Napa County and Napa Valley Grapegrowers want the county to do:

Ease regulations that could hinder burned-out wineries from making wine, holding tastings and selling wine at other locations, as they will need to do for several years.

Fast-track rebuilding permits for fire-destroyed wineries and homes and waive or discount county fees.

Allow fire-destroyed wineries or homes to be rebuilt at a different location on their properties with minimum permitting if that location is safer from wildfires.

Allow landowners during a wildfire to do emergency grading and tree removal for fire protection without fear of facing county enforcement actions.

Work with Firewise groups to do more to reduce fuel loads in rural areas. Strategies include invasive species removal, prescribed burns, and chipping programs. Also, review home and winery construction for wildfire protection measures.

Advocate for the State Insurance Commissioner to protect county homes and businesses. The fear is insurance companies will stop insuring undamaged properties near the perimeters of the fires.

“COVID-19, along with two wildfires during harvest — and wildfire season isn’t even over yet — have caused unprecedented harm and economic harm to Napa County,” Michelle Benvenuto of Winegrowers of Napa County told supervisors.

A group of nine vintners under the name Coalition Napa Valley previously wrote a letter to Napa County. They had their **own list of disaster recovery** requests different from those of Napa Valley Vintners, Napa Valley Grapegrowers and Winegrowers of Napa County.

Among other things, Coalition Napa Valley wants the county to ease winery visitation limits, suspend by-appointment requirements for winery tastings and expand tasting room hours.

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Barry Eberling covers Napa County government, transportation, the environment and general assignments. He has worked for the Napa Valley Register since fall 2014 and previously worked 27 years for the Daily Republic of Fairfield.

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