

## A grapegrower's new year



DECEMBER 31, 2015 3:18 PM • [BILL HANNA](#)

“Hallelujah” is a word often heard in songs of the Christmas season.

It also conveys our feeling at the end of a growing season when the last of the fruit has been delivered. That event, however, is not the end of the work season. Since then, you probably noticed straw being spread for erosion control and vineyards being removed for replanting.

We are off to a slow but good start to the rainy season — the small, spaced amounts are all

soaking in and giving erosion control grasses a chance to take root before the welcome heavy rains occur.

Now is the time we reflect, analyze the events of the past year, and plan our strategies for the next. Strategy No. 1 is always “stay flexible and adapt to conditions.”

The Napa Valley is an extraordinarily beautiful place. We are all blessed to be able to live here and to farm here. We owe a great deal of thanks to those who stood up to conventional “wisdom” and promulgated the Agricultural Preserve.

Among those people was my father, John Muir Hanna, a conservative less-government-is-better kind of guy. He witnessed the “citification” of family farms in Martinez and Santa Clara, and was watching development moving north toward Napa in leaps and bounds. He joined an unlikely coalition of farmers, environmentalists and politicians to create this “first in the nation” concept, which allowed farming to flourish and helped preserve and enhance the beauty that makes the Napa Valley so special.

The extraordinary economic success of our local wine industry has many consequences. It has allowed many landowners to voluntarily invest more in preserving and improving their land.

As a result, there are more than 50,000 acres enrolled in Fish Friendly Farming/Napa Green, which improves wildlife and fish habitat, decreases erosion, and reduces pesticide use. The restoration of the Rutherford reach of the Napa River was lauded by the EPA as a model for public/private partnership.

It has also allowed us to invest more in our workers. For many years, we have paid the highest agricultural wages in California and, either privately or through the local California Grower Foundation, provided medical insurance and retirement plans. We have assessed ourselves to subsidize the operations of our three farmworker housing centers, which serve farmworkers from all over the county at maximum capacity.

Napa Valley Grapegrowers formed the Farmworker Foundation in 2011 with the mission of supporting and promoting Napa Valley's vineyard workers through education and professional development. We raised more than \$560,000 in one night at this year's Harvest STOMP event to support this work.

We are also experiencing a great deal of angst as a result of our success. It appears we need a modern-day Solomon to help us protect our vineyard land, maintain the beauty and tranquility we expect, and continue the economic viability we require to sustain it all.

My family began growing grapes in California more than 160 years ago. My wife, Claudia, and I planted our first vines 42 years ago. No growing season during our tenure has been exactly the same as another, nor, I am sure, were any of the prior 118. As we plan for the coming year, we know we will be removing one block of chardonnay after harvest. We know all of the husbandry tasks and their probable costs but not their exact timing.

We will be prepared for frost during the spring but have no idea how many nights we may be up monitoring temperatures and wind machines. We know we will be spraying and dusting for mildew but how many times and when are still undetermined.

We are pretty sure we'll have a crop of some amount but we won't know for sure until we actually harvest. We do know that whatever crop we have has a buyer. We can estimate our expenses but can only guess at our income.

Despite all this uncertainty, I look forward to the coming year and being able to do what I love. During the winter, I follow the biblical admonition to "remove the unfruitful branches" and generally try to balance the fruitfulness of the vine with its vigor. In the spring, I watch seemingly dead branches suddenly swell and push green shoots toward the sun.

During the summer, I watch as the grapes develop and begin turning color, transforming air and sunlight into sugar, color and flavor.

In the fall, I taste the fruit as the ripening process approaches the pinnacle of perfection. Then, I watch as the crews harvest the fruit, effectively killing it. But then this miraculous transformation occurs, turning dead fruit into a wondrous beverage that enhances both food and friendship. What in the world could be better than that?