AgAlert
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Grape growers see potential in water recycling program

Water that was once discharged as wastewater into San Francisco Bay is now being recycled to provide a resource to farmers in a water-scarce region of the North Bay, in a project intended to boost premium grape production and the restoration of wetlands and wildlife habitat.

Officials say the regional water reuse program will bolster water supplies for agriculture, recreation and the environment in Napa, Sonoma and Marin counties.

The North Bay Water Reuse Authority oversees implementation of the North Bay Water Reuse Program. The regional group consists of seven public utility agencies in Napa, Sonoma and Marin counties, with several additional agencies expected to join in 2013. Since its inception more than 12 years ago, the program has completed environmental and economic feasibility studies, solicited input from potential recycled water customers and established partnerships to secure funding.

"By creating a model for maximizing limited water resources and demonstrating how regional-scale water reuse provides a critical component to the North Bay's long-term sustainable supply of water, we have been able to receive support from state and federal agencies," according to Grant Davis, general manager of the Sonoma County Water Agency, which administers the program.

The Carneros grape-growing region stands near the center of the NBWRA service area. Carneros is also a water-scarce region, with limited rainfall and clay soils. Growers in the region said they welcome recycled water and some may benefit from current and future NBWRA projects.

Jim Lincoln, vineyard manager for Beckstoffer Vineyards, said vineyards in Carneros are farmed with little water.

"It would be very beneficial if we could get some recycled water out there to augment the surface water," he said. "It would increase the value of the land. You could grow more grapes and it could bring the Los Carneros region to its potential. A lot of the vineyards are under-irrigated. Dry farming (yields) basically 1 ton to the acre. If you're irrigating, you're talking about 3 to 4 tons to the acre."

In addition to providing water for irrigation of vineyards and parks, officials said the program will provide up to 1,700 acre-feet per year of recycled water to the Napa Sonoma Salt Marsh Restoration Project. A pipeline to deliver recycled water crosses the Beckstoffer property and Lincoln said he hopes an agreement to deliver recycled water to his vineyards will reach fruition.

A 2006 study by University of California Cooperative Extension concluded that recycled water was suitable for vineyard irrigation.

"The water quality was good and impacts on vines and soils were negligible or limited," said Nick Frey, president of the Sonoma County Winegrape Commission. "I think it's an important resource and one that we need to take advantage of."

Al Wagner, director of vineyard operations at Clos Du Val Winery in the Napa Valley, said the winery uses recycled water to irrigate 150 acres of vineyards.

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The winery has contracted with the city of Yountville to receive recycled water since 2001.

"I think as growers we're beginning to understand that recycled water is a necessity as we move forward," Wagner said.

The quality of fruit produced with recycled water is not in question, he said.

"Our cabernet goes for $6,500 a ton," Wagner said. "The old perception of recycled water has gone out the window."

A demonstration vineyard in front of the winery tasting room features a sign telling visitors that the vines are irrigated with recycled water.

"People think it's great," he said. "I don't think we've had a single negative comment."

NBWRA said the first phase of the program could yield more than 5,500 acre-feet of water annually to irrigate winegrapes, irrigate parks and restore wildlife habitat.

"We are supportive of the development of more sources of tertiary-treated recycled water for ag use," said Sandy Elles, executive director of the Napa County Farm Bureau. "Having access to more recycled water is a sustainable option in times of drought. Growers in Napa see the value of reclaimed water as a supplement to existing groundwater and surface water supplies. As we face greater water scarcity, it will play a bigger role in the future."

"Connecting landowners to a safe, dependable and affordable source of recycled water encourages stewardship and conservation efforts from farmers and ranchers," said Lex McCorvey, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau. "Water reuse is an integral part of Sonoma County's future and provides enormous benefits to produce local food and agricultural crops."

To date, NBWRA said the program has earned nearly $15 million in grant funding from state and federal agencies.

"Recycled water provides a more reliable and environmentally friendly source of water for our area's farmers," said Rep. Mike Thompson, D-Napa. "I am proud to have worked to get more than $1.6 million in federal funds for the Napa Sonoma Salt Marsh Recycled Water Project, and I will keep working with organizations like the North Bay Water Reuse Authority to get money for recycled water projects in the future. This is good for agriculture, our environment and our economy."

In the future, with the certainty of drought and the uncertainty of climate variability, grape growers said recycled water could provide a measure of security.

"If that recycled water happens and we can start our year with full ponds," Lincoln said, "that will be a big insurance policy for a lot of growers."