

Vineyards clash with wheat

Farmer fights to preserve way of life after county slashes parcel sizes

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MILTON-FREEWATER, Ore. - The road to Robert Klein's house isn't paved.

That's the way he likes it.

Paving the gravel road that Klein has traveled all his life would signal things have changed in this rural section of northeast Oregon.

It's a change Klein, a wheat farmer, is afraid is in the works.

Milton-Freewater, Ore., wheat grower Robert Klein has appealed a state decision that gave the go-ahead to a plan to site 40-acre vineyards on these hills overlooking his wheat farm.

Up from the road, near the top of the rolling hills north of Milton-Freewater, workers are busy planting winegrapes.

Klein fears once the vines are in place, wineries - and tourists - will follow.

"This rock road won't be here in 10 years," Klein said. "It will be paved. We're going to have traffic out here like we've never seen before."

The activity on the fields overlooking Klein's acreage has brought Klein to the front lines of a land-use dispute he believes will shape the future of the area outside Milton-Freewater. On some levels, the dispute is a microcosm of a tug-of-war for farmland playing out around the world, he said.

Klein and two other local property owners are appealing a county land-use decision allowing the hillside owner, Seven Hills Properties, to subdivide its 1,681 acres into 40-acre parcels - 120 acres less than the county's allowable minimum lot size on land zoned exclusive farm use. The request for the smaller minimum lot sizes is known in land-use parlance as a "go-below."

Klein's appeal is based on a clause in state law requiring go-below in EFU land to be consistent with the commercial agriculture in the area.

Forty-acre winegrape parcels and 160-acre wheat parcels, he said, are not compatible.

The challenge now is before the Oregon Court of Appeals, which is expected to rule on the case this summer.

In town, citizens are split on the issue. On one side, business owners welcome the increased traffic the wineries likely will bring to Milton-Freewater. On the other side, dozens of wheat farmers fear the wineries will disrupt their farming practices and change their rural way of life. And they believe they have plenty of proof to back up their contention.

Just across the Oregon-Washington border, 15 or so miles north, Walla Walla, Wash., today is a

vacation destination for tens of thousands of tourists who annually flock to the once-sleepy farm town to sip the region's fine wines.

The same could happen in Milton-Freewater, said Norm McKibben, a principal partner in Seven Hills.

It's a change McKibben said will do wonders for the small community.

"These wineries attract tourists," McKibben said. "You can't hardly get a hotel room in Walla Walla except in mid-winter. I'd like to see that in Milton-Freewater, too."

Klein, too, admitted wineries would boost the local economy. "It probably is good for the economy of Milton-Freewater," he said.

But Klein wonders at what price. "You bring houses and wineries out here, and there are going to be issues," he said. "There are going to be costs."

Key to the ability of Seven Hills to attract buyers for the hundreds of wine acres now being planted on the hills over Klein's wheat farm is the go-below that county commissioners and state land-use commissioners approved. Buyers generally can't afford to buy and plant more than 40 acres, McKibben said, especially given the high cost of planting acreage to winegrapes.

Even 40-acre parcels could be hard to move. McKibben had hoped to divide several of the parcels into 20-acre blocks.

"It's in our best interest (to obtain the go-below)," McKibben said, "and it's in the area's best interest."

Klein, on the other hand, said it is not in his best interest to site wineries on the foothills.

"I bale hay in the middle of the night," Klein said. "That's not going to go over well."

In addition, Klein said, he fears the wineries will lower the area's already sinking water table. The deep basalt aquifer that serves him and other wheat growers in the region is the same aquifer that would serve the wineries, Klein said.

It already is suffering from overuse, he said. For evidence, he said, his well's pressure has dropped from 1,300 gallons a minute 50 years ago to 650 gallons a minute today.

Also of concern, the recent activity is driving up land prices to the point Klein can't afford to expand.

"I'm a small farmer," he said, "and I want to expand. But at these prices, I can't."

Klein said before Seven Hills bought the hillside and started dividing the parcels, he had an agreement with a neighbor to buy 156 acres. The neighbor recently backed out of the agreement and upped his price.

"He just doubled his price, basically," Klein said.

On a bigger scale, Klein said, what's happening in Milton-Freewater is symptomatic of what's happening around the world.

"There is just no way that breaking up that acreage into smaller parcels is as efficient a use of that acreage as leaving it whole," he said.

It's no wonder food prices are rising to astronomical levels and officials now are warning of an international food shortage, he said.

"Now the consumers are starting to feel what our forefathers were trying to prevent - the loss of farmland," he said.

Klein is president of Friends of Umatilla County, a group of about 50 county residents seeking to halt land-use changes that affect the area's farm heritage.

"A big part of the philosophy of our group is to look at why things are set up the way they are," he said. "Here in Umatilla County, the minimum lot size in farmland is 160 acres. There is a reason our forefathers set it up that way."

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