

Are you burning in the wind?

BY SANDY SHAFFER

I haven't lived in a lot of different places in my life. Three states, maybe half a dozen homes. But ever since the first day my husband and I saw our piece of raw Applegate land in the early 1990s, it has always felt like home.

Do you feel the same about your property? I think there is something special and different about our valley, something that is hard to define. Who does the Applegate Valley belong to? With parts of our watershed in two states and three counties, there's not a slam-dunk answer.

We don't have any "government" entity out here, such as a county seat or a capital city or even a mayor! (Yes, I know that on one Saturday in May, someone is afforded the title "Mayor of Buncom," but that's as close as the Applegate comes to government.)

Most of the time I appreciate the lack of city politics, even when we sometimes get campaign mail from

both counties during voting season. However, we do have the important stuff—a few good schools for the kids and two great fire districts (Applegate Valley and Williams) that provide us with fire protection and medical care.

As far as communications across our valley, we residents have created some effective means of sharing information, keeping in touch, alerting neighbors: phone trees, email lists, neighborhood bulletin boards, websites like applegateconnect.org, and the *Applegater!* (What did I miss?) But if you know me, you know that I'm always looking for a new way to communicate with both our rural residents and our valley's visitors.

So, when we Shaffers were driving through Coos County a few months ago, I happened to notice a couple of enticingly written signs about being careful with fire. The messages were: "Is It Safe to Burn?" and "Are You Burning

in the Wind?" I quickly found some paper to scribble down those messages.

These signs were directly targeted at the private landowner! I loved that they were more creative and personal than the Oregon Department of Forestry's (ODF) signs that read "Fire Season in Effect—Debris Burning Is Prohibited."

At first I was confused as to how coastal Coos County could be in "fire season" earlier in the year than our Jackson-Josephine county area, but then I realized that these were not ODF's work but were put up by the Coos Forest Protective Association. "Very cool," I thought; year-round fire safety messages. We can do that!

Applegaters are special. We're smart, savvy, passionately involved in our community, and we love our land. So we take care of our land, all year long. (And if you haven't heard this before, firefighters from around the country who come here to work when we have a large wildfire are *always* pleasantly surprised—and appreciative—of how defensible our homes are!)

However, because our valley is so special, we continually have new

folks buying property and moving out here. If they're like we were when we moved to "cool, green Oregon," they are unaware of the fire danger (as are the tourists who visit the Applegate for our wineries, rivers, hiking trails, and parks!).

This is why I continue to write and talk about fire safety and regulations in our fire-prone valley. I never know when someone will notice a sign or read my article for the first time and decide to talk to our Applegate fire chief about living safely on their land.

So I'm going to look into this concept of having relevant messages posted year-round in the Applegate. It could be a bit of work to get organized.

Maybe I can get the volunteer firefighters to help me change out messages in their various corners of the valley? And I wonder if the ODF folks would let us use their signboards during the non-fire season parts of the year...

Let me know what you think!

And be safe during this fire season, my friends.

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■ CLEAR SKIES

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Rogue and Applegate valleys. Joe said, "We've seen a huge impact on summer tourism from the smoke," which has increased over the past several years. This summer the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality reported Applegate air quality as "hazardous" at times due to smoke.

Smoke taint that affects wine quality is becoming a growing problem for southern Oregon vintners, as it is for California winemakers. Ash sticks to grape skin and seeps into the flesh, particularly affecting thin-skinned

varietals. "Unfortunately, smoke taint usually shows its ugly face after the wine is bottled," Joe said.

Although methods have been developed to screen grapes for the risk of smoke taint before processing, Joe said all vine tenders can do while the berries are growing "is pray."

Weeding problems

Another challenge for Applegate Valley viticulture, Joe said, is the surge, since legalization of recreational marijuana in 2015, of commercial cannabis growers.

Too many marijuana growers operate without obtaining water rights, Joe said, and currently water restrictions are not well enforced. He said weed growers use around 192,000 gallons of water per acre each season, a practice that exacerbates water shortages resulting from warming trends and less snow melt. Joe admits pot sales have been good for the local

economy, "but if pot growers want to be farmers, they need to go by the rules," he says.

No place to stay

A third challenge for local winemakers is lodging for tourists. Although the Rogue Valley and Grants Pass have plenty of hotels and campgrounds close to Interstate 5, more guest lodgings are needed closer to wineries off the beaten path, as in the Applegate.

Joe considers the Applegate Valley the jewel of the Rogue region. "We have one of the highest concentrations of rural wineries in the US—*Sunset* magazine called it 'wine country as it should be,'" Joe said. "If visitors had someplace to stay nearby, they could spend more time exploring the wineries, the organic produce—everything the Applegate Valley has to offer."

Looking forward

In order to make the Rogue Valley wine appellation indicative of a premiere wine region, it will be essential, Joe said, for area vintners and community partners to create and implement a shared vision, not just promote

themselves individually. It's equally important, he said, for the Rogue Valley AVA to distinguish itself from other southern Oregon wine regions.

Toward this mission, Rogue Valley Vintners (RVV) was formed in May 2018 with dual goals: first, to work together to attract travelers to the Rogue Valley, where RVV can provide a distinctive wine and culinary experience, and, second, to raise awareness about the quality of wines produced in the Rogue Valley.

So far, RVV has elected officers and a board of directors, hired a marketing and business consultant, and established bylaws. More information about RVV is available on its website at RVV.wine.

"This is quite an exciting movement," said Joe, who is one of eight members on the RVV board. "Developing a strategic plan that projects a unified voice for Rogue Valley vintners will take this region to the next level of greatness."

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