



Media Release

\$3.7 Million Settlement Reached Following Multi-agency Probe of Vineyard Development that Threatened Mendocino County Watersheds *Agreement Includes Funding Two Crucial Habitat Restoration Projects*

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SACRAMENTO – Following a civil liability settlement, Rhys Vineyards, LLC, has agreed to pay \$3.7 million in penalties for committing multiple violations of the federal Clean Water Act while developing a hillside property that straddles the South Fork Eel River and North Fork Ten Mile River watersheds in Mendocino County, the State Water Resources Control Board announced today.

“The illegal and permanent loss of wetlands and streams caused by the vineyard construction was an egregious violation of state and federal law,” said Josh Curtis, assistant executive officer of the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (North Coast Water Board). “This settlement demonstrates our commitment to protecting and restoring our region’s waters and maintaining a level playing field for the vast majority of the region’s vineyard operations who work proactively to meet or exceed environmental regulations.”

A multiagency inspection team discovered a series of illegal activities on the 20-acre vineyard, including the permanent fill and loss of a half-acre of wetlands and 2,148 feet of a stream channel buried beneath the property. The development also involved the improper construction of roads and stream crossings – causing irreparable harm to already fragile wetlands – and was conducted without the required permits or authorization from state agencies.

The Rhys Vineyards, LLC property spans 4,591 acres over 41 parcels in and around the [North Fork Ten Mile River watershed](#) and nearby outlying areas of Mendocino County.

In addition to the Clean Water Act, the infractions violated the state’s Water Code, North Coast Water Quality Control Plan, and Fish and Game Code. The investigation, and ensuing settlement negotiations, involved the State Water Board, North Coast Regional Water Board and Department of Fish and Wildlife, and stretched over four years. The settlement represents a substantial and unique agreement involving multiple agencies and Water Board programs, and a significant penalty coupled with required corrective actions.

The settlement requires Rhys Vineyards to pay approximately \$1.89 million of the \$3.7 million penalty to fund two habitat restoration projects: One is a supplemental environmental project (SEP) in the nearby South Fork Ten Mile River, overseen by the Nature Conservancy, to restore aquatic habitat to support resident fisheries and wildlife. The other is a project to



enhance instream habitat in Dutch Charlie Creek managed through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

The agreement also requires the vineyard to correct the entire road network on the property, mitigating or eliminating future sediment impacts. This kind of soil erosion, from the hillside to the watershed below, is a major source of pollution on properties throughout the region. Excessive sediment negatively impacts the migration, spawning, and reproduction of salmonid species, such as endangered Chinook and Coho salmon and steelhead trout, found within the impacted watersheds.

“The extraordinary coordination of enforcement actions among the agencies was instrumental in bringing Rhys Vineyards into compliance and results in significant downstream fisheries restoration,” said Julé Rizzardo, an assistant deputy director in the State Water Board’s Division of Water Rights. “We believe the extent of the cooperation is a road map for future joint actions that will protect California’s precious environmental resources.”

The settlement resolves the vineyard’s violations with two stipulated orders, [an order addressing water rights violations](#) issued by the State Water Board and [an order addressing water quality violations](#) issued by the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board. The [settlement agreement](#) is available on the North Coast Water Board’s website.

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