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Napa County Escalates Fight Over Winery Tastings

Small producers face lawsuits and possible multimillion-dollar penalties as officials press a stricter reading of a 1990 land-use ordinance.

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Napa County’s long-running fight with small wineries over tasting-room rules is intensifying again, with several producers facing lawsuits and the possibility of multimillion-dollar penalties tied to how a 1990 ordinance is being interpreted.

At issue is whether wineries in Napa Valley can decide for themselves how to host tastings, or whether county officials can enforce stricter limits on those activities under land-use rules meant to protect agricultural land. The dispute has become one of the

most closely watched legal battles in California wine country because it could affect how small wineries operate across the region.

The cases center on what rights wineries had before the ordinance took effect and whether those rights were preserved, or grandfathered, under county law. Wineries argue that they should be allowed to continue tasting-room practices they have used for years. Napa County has taken a narrower view, saying some of those activities fall outside what the ordinance permits.

The conflict has drawn attention from winery owners, lawyers and local officials because it touches on a broader question in Napa Valley: how to balance the county's effort to preserve farmland with its support for small wineries that depend on direct-to-consumer sales and hospitality revenue. For many producers, tastings are not just a marketing tool but a central part of their business model.

The legal uncertainty has also raised concerns about financial exposure. If the county prevails, some wineries could face steep penalties, adding pressure to businesses already dealing with high land costs, labor expenses and a competitive market for premium wine.

The dispute has been building for years, but the latest round of litigation suggests there is still no clear resolution. As the cases move forward, winery owners are watching closely to see whether Napa County's interpretation of the ordinance will stand or whether courts will side with producers seeking to preserve their existing tasting-room operations.