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Two Napa Wineries Ask a Federal Judge to Halt County Restrictions

The motions challenge a $2 million road upgrade demand, event approvals and private tasting limits before a Nov. 20 hearing.

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Two Napa Valley wineries have asked a federal judge to stop Napa County from enforcing disputed limits on their operations while a broader lawsuit over county winery regulation moves forward, setting up a legal fight that could affect how wineries in one of the country’s most important wine regions handle tastings, visitors and events.

Summit Lake Vineyards & Winery and Smith-Madrone filed three motions for preliminary injunction on September 30 in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California. According to the filings described in a news release published Thursday, the wineries want temporary court protection from what they say are new county restrictions involving a road improvement requirement, approvals for winery gatherings and limits on private tastings by appointment. A hearing is scheduled for November 20 at 10 a.m. before U.S. District Judge Charles R. Breyer in San Francisco.

The motions are part of a larger federal case, Hoopes Vineyard LLC et al. v. County of Napa, Case No. 3:24-cv-06256-CRB, which challenges several parts of Napa County's winery regulatory system. The latest filings focus on whether the county can enforce certain requirements now, before the broader lawsuit is decided.

In the first motion, Summit Lake argues that Napa County is trying to make the winery pay more than $2 million to rebuild a shared private road to commercial standards even though, according to the winery, the traffic problem cited by the county is caused by many properties that use the same road. The winery says its day-to-day operations would not add more vehicles and argues that it is unconstitutional to require one small business to bear the cost of a larger shared problem. That argument comes from the winery's court filing; the county's full legal response was not included in the material released Thursday.

The second motion challenges how Napa County regulates winery gatherings. Summit Lake and Smith-Madrone say county rules already allow them to hold activities that are part of normal winery business, including harvest celebrations, winemaker dinners and food-and-wine pairings. They argue that the county has been applying the same approval process used for larger commercial events to smaller routine gatherings, creating what they describe as an unnecessary barrier to hosting visitors. The motion also contests the county's process for approving larger business events, with the wineries arguing that the system gives officials too much discretion over which events may go forward.

The third motion centers on private wine tastings, a major issue for smaller wineries that rely on direct-to-consumer sales. Smith-Madrone argues that Napa County had previously told two federal courts, and also stated in sworn discovery responses, that the winery's 1973 permit allows private tastings by appointment without a visitor cap. According to the motion, the county has since changed course and now says it does not know exactly what the permit allows. Summit Lake argues that its 1984 permit prohibits tastings open to the general public but does not bar scheduled private appointments, which it says it has offered for decades.

Summit Lake also disputes the county's reliance on an old estimate in its original 1984 application that referenced "2" visitors per week. The winery says that number was never described as a maximum and should not now be treated as a permanent cap. In the filings, both wineries say the county's current interpretation threatens them with fines or operational limits based on standards that were either never clearly written or have shifted over time.

A central part of the wineries' argument is that key county rules are too vague to enforce fairly. According to the motions, county officials have acknowledged in court filings that they do not have formal definitions for terms at the center of the dispute, including "public tasting," "private tasting," "winetasting," "advertising" and "unsolicited." The wineries say county officials have instead relied on what they call the ordinary meaning of those terms, without written guidance or regulations that businesses can follow with confidence.

The filings also cite county records that, according to the wineries, show long-running internal concerns about ambiguity in the rules. They point to a 2009 warning from Napa planning staff to the Board of Supervisors that the county's winery rules could be reinterpreted and could be seen as arbitrary. They also cite a 2015 memo that described the same rules as imprecise and lacking meaningful guidance. In addition, the motions refer to a 2025 Napa County Civil Grand Jury report that found winery owners had expressed confusion over what qualifies as a tasting or an event under their permits and that permit conditions vary significantly from one winery to another.

The wineries say they are not asking the court to approve new business models. Instead, they argue that they should be allowed to continue practices they say have existed for decades while the larger lawsuit proceeds. Their lawyer, Joseph Infante, said in the release that the case is about requiring Napa County to follow positions it has previously acknowledged in writing and under oath.

The dispute is being closely watched because Napa County's land-use and winery rules often influence how businesses across wine country think about compliance, hospitality and direct sales. Private tastings, appointment-only visits and small events are important revenue channels for many wineries, especially producers that depend on wine tourism rather than large-scale public traffic. A court ruling that limits or upholds Napa County's enforcement approach could shape how wineries in the county, and potentially elsewhere, interpret old permits, plan visitor experiences and manage the legal risk around events and tastings.

The case also highlights a broader tension in the beverage industry between local land-use regulation and the way modern wineries operate. Many producers combine agriculture, manufacturing, hospitality and tourism in a single business model. When permit language is old or unclear, disagreements over whether a tasting, pairing or dinner is allowed can have direct effects on staffing, visitor revenue and long-term investment.

For now, the immediate question before the court is narrower: whether Napa County should be temporarily blocked from enforcing the contested restrictions against Summit Lake and Smith-Madrone before the larger lawsuit is resolved. Judge Breyer is scheduled to hear that request in November.