

Giving Tours

Conducting Tours: "Hear It Through the Grapevines"

Background: The Central Coast Wine Growers Association chose to take a proactive approach with neighbors, politicians, regulators and environmental advocates. "We're a high profile industry," CCWGA President Kevin Merrill said. "People want to know what we're doing."

Issues: Central Coast growers face concerns ranging from pesticide use and run-off to preserving endangered species and oak woodland habitat.

Program: CCWGA conducts "Hear It Through the Grapevines" vineyard and winery tours to enhance communication and understanding. The tours usually include three vineyards or three wineries and cover topics ranging from sustainable farming and endangered species to traffic and noise.

Craig Macmillan of Royal Oaks Winery has these thoughts on putting together a successful program:

- Make sure the invitation list includes the right people: Invite your biggest detractors (environmental activists, irate neighbors, skeptical politicians) — don't just preach to the choir. Invite County Supervisors, State Legislators, Members of Congress and their staff. Include the news media. Don't forget local business leaders, chambers of commerce. Include your neighbors.

- Open the dialogue before a problem emerges. Meet often and regularly.

- Use qualified, well-prepared speakers who have anticipated concerns and issues. Pair growers with outside experts (University of California, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, etc.)

- Pick the hottest issues and face them head-on.

- Follow up with seminars and forums on issues that the public perceives as problems.

- Co-sponsor events with other stakeholders (Environmental Defense Center, County Agricultural Commissioner) for

more credibility.

Results: The tours have generated a lot of favorable news stories, gained the understanding of local, state and federal officials, and forged constructive relationships with environmental leaders. "We've found common ground and mutual goals," Macmillan said.