

# *There and Back Again: A Vineyard's Tale of Enhancement Reclamation*

By Libby Morrison

*If Riverbench Vineyards were to be judged by its cover— or rather, by its label— it would fit the classic model of a boutique winery in California's popular Central Coast wine region. However, thanks to CalPortland's unique role with this winery, the story of Riverbench Vineyards' reclamation out to be uncorked and allowed to breathe so its complexities can be appreciated.*





### **From Quarries to Wineries**

Nestled in California's Santa Maria Valley between San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties, a symbiotic relationship has developed between aggregates producers and vintners, or "cork dorks," as they sometimes refer to themselves. The Garey Aggregate Plant, operated by CalPortland's Central Coast division, is blending rocks and wine by transforming a 40-acre quarry into a productive vineyard. Building on this success, they have plans to reclaim an adjacent 400-acre Riverbench property into a winery as well.

The story behind these two reclamation projects starts in the 1990s when Union Asphalt was looking to buy more sand and gravel resource land in the area, and California winery Beringer was looking to sell their Riverbench property, vines and all. Union Asphalt purchased the whole 440 acres in the early 2000s once they secured permits through two counties to allow quarrying operations. In

the mid-2000s, CalPortland acquired Union Asphalt, including both the 40-acre vineyard and nearby 400-acre Riverbench property.

The permits that Union Asphalt secured called for the operator to only quarry 12 acres at a time, after which the land must be returned to how it was prior to extraction. Therefore, when CalPortland begins work at the Riverbench property, they must sequentially quarry and reclaim 12-acre blocks back to vineyards – trellises and all – which will ultimately be tended by Riverbench Vineyards winery. "Looking back, the permitting process was a real headache sometimes, but it was worth it," said Steve Will, co-owner of Riverbench Vineyards and Union Asphalt. Permitting aggregates operations is challenging anywhere, but it is particularly challenging in places where popular community resources like vineyards exist and compromises like this concurrent reclamation plan must be made to secure permits.

Danny Deveraux, vice president and general manager of CalPortland's Garey Aggregate Plant, said that Union Asphalt could have planted an easier crop than grapes. "They [Union Asphalt] got the idea to reclaim to vineyards once they were in the vineyard business," he said. Row crops are common agricultural reclamation uses in the area because they're relatively inexpensive to plant and maintain. "With wineries, you spend a lot of money up front, then there's not a lot of return for four to five years," explained Deveraux. Though the overall benefits of a working vineyard balance the expenses in the long term.

### **Shaping a Winery from a Pit**

One of the foremost limitations on enhancement reclamation is pit depth because shallow pits provide more options than deep ones. CalPortland's operating permit did not allow mining below the water table despite the depth of the deposit and their average pit depth was 20-25 feet. Therefore,

it was feasible to fill in these pits, or in this case, add enriched topsoil and use the preexisting slopes to create a vineyard.

Rawley Hermreck, Riverbench winery's vineyard manager, could not pass up the chance to create the sloping hills of a winery from scratch. "You have an opportunity to change the entire configuration of a vineyard block. This can include opportunities to make changes to the grape varieties, row orientation and vine spacing."

### **It Takes a Village to Reclaim a Vineyard**

Santa Maria Valley residents and visitors alike greatly value the local vineyards and wineries and viticulture dominates the community's tourism and economy. Ironically, the innovative-yet-mandated 12-acre cycle reclamation plan turned out to be advantageous because it acknowledged this community value.

"I don't think we ever would have gotten the site permitted without it," said Will. Although concurrent reclamation is more expensive and labor-intensive than traditional reclamation, it was worth the effort in this case. The company secured access to valuable, non-renewable resources and the Riverbench property will ultimately be integrated with its surrounding environment. "The visual aspect is very important," Will said. "I think people appreciate Riverbench Vineyards more than others when they learn about the reclamation."

The 40-acre reclaimed vineyard provides a concrete example of what the Riverbench property will ultimately look like. "Folks have no idea a quarry was ever there, and that's pretty incredible," said Will.

The 40-acre vineyard demonstrates CalPortland's reclamation abilities and reflects the company's philosophy of extract and respect, being good environmental stewards the strive to be good environmental stewards and great neighbors. "I'm really proud of being good stewards of the environment and the area," said Bruce Mercier, CalPortland's division sales manager.



CalPortland's relationships throughout the region don't just stem from vineyards. They are close partners with California Polytechnic State University, whose students have worked on other reclamation projects creating habitat for endangered species and revegetating another quarry north of Santa Maria. They have improved agricultural land for a neighboring farmer with whom they share a lease. They contribute to local schools and take leading roles in events like the Elks rodeo. "We try to build one-on-one relationships with our neighbors," said Deveraux, "That way we can better explain our positions and understand where they're coming from."

### **Beyond Peaceful Coexistence**

It is clear from visiting CalPortland that the connections they have fostered throughout the community are vital to the company's success and outstanding enhancement reclamation. "We leave the land better than we got it. We do the right thing, always," said Mercier. The life of a quarry can span decades and as

resources become scarce, relationships and community integration are more important than ever. Enhancement reclamation that fits the character of the community can be a key factor in achieving local buy-in and obtaining an otherwise impossible permit. CalPortland's completed vineyard reclamation and long-term Riverbench operations and reclamation plan are perfect examples of how aggregates operators and local communities can not only peacefully coexist, but mutually benefit one another. The whole community has found a way to have their aggregates and eat (or rather, drink) them too, so to speak. ■

### **About the Author**

*Libby Morrison completed two master's degrees at Oregon State University focusing on the enhancement reclamation of aggregate quarries. She is the sole proprietor of a small mediation and facilitation business, Phase Vision, in Eugene, Ore and also works for Wildish Sand & Gravel as an Environmental Specialist. She is a writer and active education and outreach advocate for the aggregate industry.*