Cape winelands under threat

4 Mar 2010 by Jancis Robinson

South Africa's wine producers, whose generic campaign is founded on the special nature of the Cape ecosystem ('a natural environment exceptional in its biodiversity'), are up in arms at the sudden proposal by the state-owned African Exploration Mining and Finance Corporation (AEMFC) to start prospecting on land that is home to some of the world's most beautiful wine farms. The proposed area is bounded by the city of Cape Town on one side, with pristine farmland and the Bottelary Hills Renosterveld Conservancy on the other.

The AEMFC, which plans to open its first mine in another province later this year, has applied for prospecting rights for tin, zinc, lead, lithium, copper, manganese and silver on land in Stellenbosch which includes Saxenburg, Jordan, Langverwacht and Zevenwacht wine estates and also, in a similar application, De Grendel in the Tygerberg/Durbanville area (shown here).

The Department of Mineral Resources (DME) provisionally accepted the application for these prospecting rights back in January, requiring AEMFC to notify in writing and consult with the landowners and submit the results of such application to the DME before 12 Feb 2010. Advertisements were placed in the *Cape Times & Argus* on 10 Feb 2010, just two days before the closing date. An advertisement was placed in the *Eikestad News* on 19 Feb, seven days after the closing date. No Afrikaans newspapers were advertised in, so that most farmers and farm workers remained in ignorance of the application. Of the 71 title-deed holders in the Stellenbosch region, only two interested parties who received the information in time were able to register: Zevenwacht wine estate and the Greater Cape Town Civic Alliance.

Gary Jordan of Jordan wine estate, a geologist himself, called a public meeting at Zevenwacht on Saturday 27 Feb. This was attended by more than 200 people, including farmworkers (who held a placard protest), conservationists, producer groups, city and local government officials and legal teams.

Geologists at the meeting suggested that tin deposits in the area are too meagre to even consider mining. It was further pointed out that the maps submitted to the DME by AEMFC are out of date.

Civic alliances, the Freedom Foundation and all conservation groups present declared the public participation process a miscarriage of justice and vowed to fight the application. Deputy Mayor of Cape Town Clarence Johnson, also head of the Great Wine Capitals of the World, insisted that the application process was flawed and should be stopped immediately. Legal opinion in the room from various advocates advised that the DME were unlikely to stop the application process.

The Cape Winemakers Guild has issued the following statement: 'The Guild vehemently opposes all prospecting and mining in the Cape winelands. Not only will the proposed mining activities destroy the UNESCO-registered Bottelary Renosterveld Conservancy and the vineyards that attract large numbers of tourists to South Africa every year; it will also result in the loss of employment and income for a great many families working on the wine farms in these areas.

'It is unacceptable that a government-owned mining company can get permission from a government department to prospect in highly sensitive and endangered plant biosphere. This is exactly what the wine industry is striving to protect. Pristine and unique terroir coupled with great winemaking skills are the usual credentials for great wines and mining in the winelands will damage the reputation of South African wines in the international market. The long term benefits of protecting the natural beauty of the winelands will far outweigh the short term advantages of mining.

'This action by a government agency may cause damage to the reputation of well established international brands that have been built up over many years by top winemakers. Such wanton destruction of South African brand assets will expose the government to substantial legal claims for damages.'

Gary Jordan points out, 'When you look at everything that's been spent setting up the Biodiversity in Wine Institute, when you look at everything that's gone into setting up conservancies to protect nature and the natural heritage of this area, this makes a mockery of everything we've tried to achieve.

'These mining plans seem bizarre as the government itself had actively encouraged and helped wine farmers, over many years, to restore and protect the natural environment on their farms.'

What is of particular concern to Jordan and other wine producers is that the state company appears to be exempt from following normal legal procedures. 'It's not morally right and it's not good for the industry, or for South Africa.'

Objections have to be filed by next Tuesday, 9 Mar. You can download a form on which to register a protest at this proposal here. Or you can email Renee Francis-Steele at reneef@gcs-sa.biz or Estie Retief at estie@gcs-sa.biz to express your concern. GCS is the environmental, water and consulting company engaged by AEMFC to advise on this project.

See also the STOP Mining our Winelands Facebook site.