

Vintners uncork push for wine origin protection

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By Missy Ryan

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - A group of vintners from some of the world's most famous wine-growing areas want U.S. officials to help stop rivals from diluting their brand.

Representatives from 13 wine-growing regions in the United States, Europe, and Australia will meet with lawmakers and trade officials this week in a campaign to heighten consumers and lawmakers' sensitivity to the places where the wines they quaff were actually grown and bottled.

"Unfortunately, there are indeed producers who are trading on other producers' place names. It's our hope that someday, and someday soon, that comes to an end," said Linda Reiff, executive director of Napa Valley Vintners of California.

Napa Valley growers say rogue producers from Germany to China have put "Napa" or similarly misleading labels on their wines.

The group coming to Washington to argue their case also includes producers from Italy, Portugal and the Champagne province of France, who make the wine they say competes against fraudulent bubbly in the United States.

George Sandeman, who represents a port producer in Portugal, is among those who wants to see an end to the use of names like port and champagne on beverages made from areas outside of Portugal and France.

For Sandeman and others, it's a patriotic as well as a financial issue. He wants the rest of the world to acknowledge that "port comes from Portugal." But he concedes his port sales could be boosted by tens of millions of dollars if other companies were forced to remove their "port" labels.

In a deal signed last year between U.S. and European officials, the United States agreed to keep new wine producers from using "port" and other semi-generic names such as sherry and burgundy. But the wine accord gave companies using the names up to March 2006 a loophole to continue the practice in some cases.

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According to one U.S. trade official, who asked to remain anonymous, this subset of U.S. wine producers has chosen to focus on geography-based property rights for their wine rather than trademark protection for their brands.

He said the difference in the two approaches basically falls to who pays. Under a European-style geographic indication system, the government bears responsibility for enforcing place names. Under the U.S.-style trademark system, the cost falls to individual producers.

Joe Rollo, international director for the Wine Institute, a major U.S. industry group, said he is satisfied with the current U.S. approach to protecting wine producers' rights.

"The U.S. has a robust regulatory system when it comes to protecting appellations and origins," he said.

The group lobbying Washington this week says it does not expect any direct action now, but it wants to make sure ongoing talks on EU-U.S. wine trade don't drag on for years.

The group also includes producers from smaller, emerging wine regions, like Paso Robles in California. California represents 90 percent of U.S. wine production.

In 2006, the United States imported \$4.2 billion in wine, mostly from Europe, and exported just \$876 million.