

Two Bonny Doon associations go head-to-head

Battle of words accuses both sides of working against the mountain community's needs

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**
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BONNY DOON — A new property rights group is challenging the venerable Rural Bonny Doon Association for the right to be the "voice" of the iconic mountain community.

"We don't think they represent the majority of people, and we're going to find out," said Sammy Watkins, a founding member of the new Friends of Bonny Doon.

"We think (association members) are a small, vocal minority that just says no to everything."

But Ted Benhari, chairman of the 40-year-old Rural Bonny Doon Associ-

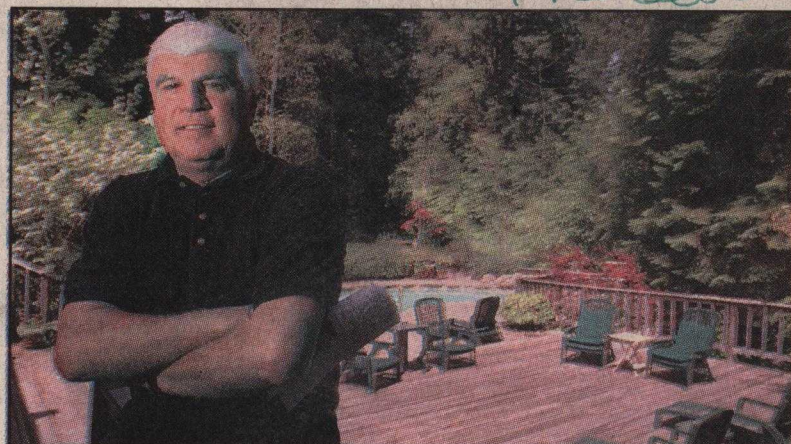
ation, said Watkins has no basis for his assertion.

"He's never polled the community," Benhari said.

Watkins contends the Rural Bonny Doon Association works in lockstep with Santa Cruz County Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt, who represents the Bonny Doon and North Coast area. Together, they have opposed and "micro-managed every facet in the lives of their constituents," he said.

In the Friends of Bonny Doon's first newsletter, which will be sent to some 1,070 Bonny Doon households this week, Watkins outlined the group's

Please see **BONNY DOON** — BACK PAGE



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Sam Watkins is polling his Bonny Doon neighbors to see if they support the Rural Bonny Doon Association.

Bonny Doon

Continued from Page A1

property rights platform.

"We believe that home or property owners should be able to do pretty much anything, within reason, on property that they own, ... as long as it's not onerous or outrageous."

Residents, he said, should have the right to "build a fence, cut a few trees, add a garden, grow and cultivate crops, stable a few horses, keep a llama, plant a vineyard, have a wedding in their back yard. Anything within reason. We are not talking about major developments."

"We also feel very strongly that we need to send a message to our present set of supervisors that we can get by with a lot less help from them and their minions," said the group's newsletter.

Wormhoudt said the new group sounds pro-development.

"My sense is that most people in Bonny Doon care a lot about the rural character and are very concerned that there be county policies to protect it," she said.

Watkins said the new group is focusing on property rights, not the Rural Bonny Doon Association. But several January e-mails from Watkins to Benhari make his views clear.

"You are nothing more than a group of self-important, petty, would-be bureaucrats," Watkins wrote. "Find something else to do with yourselves and leave the rest of us alone."

A few days later, Watkins wrote, "You and your organization are a minority. A mean, petty, selfish minority

that believes they have the right to impress their ideas of utopia on their less informed and ignorant neighbors."

Indeed, Bonny Dooners are well-known for their ability to engage in rousing debate over any proposal, and the politically potent Rural Bonny Doon Association is usually on the winning side. The association was formed to fight a proposed mobile home park.

Benhari said the association's role is to support slow-growth policies and plan for reasonable, examined development while opposing commercialization in Bonny Doon.

The association is the oldest, longest running environmental group in the county, said Bruce Bratton, a former Bonny Doon resident and longtime member.

"It's not really left leaning or right," he said. "It's just very solid. To my knowledge, it's never been challenged before."

The association, which has about 250 members, has taken stands against a country store, a proposal to expand a Bonny Doon Winery in 1989, and a recreational vehicle park that was proposed in 1995 to be built next to Wilder Ranch State Park. It also has fought plans to build a golf course and homes at the Bonny Doon Ecological Reserve, opposed plans for a strip mall at Bonny Doon Airport and fought a nuclear power plant proposal in Davenport.

Recently, the association has scrutinized plans for the Redwood Meadows Ranch Vineyard, county logging regulations and a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. tree-cutting project along its power

lines.

Not surprisingly, the group wants the size of the winery and number of events cut way back; opposed the PG&E plan and supported more restrictive logging regulations.

Friends of Bonny Doon disagrees with those stands. The newsletter accuses the county, "with support from a few local individuals, of pursuing a vendetta against local individuals, service groups, and businesses," including PG&E, Big Creek Lumber and the Redwood Meadows Ranch Vineyard.

The first newsletter also includes a questionnaire for readers. The questionnaire will be a standard feature of the newsletter, which will be published every other month, Watkins said.

Watkins said the group is "absolutely not" pro-development.

"We want to preserve our rural nature of the community as much as anyone else. We love the environment. We live here because of the environment," Watkins said.

In a mission statement, the Friends of Bonny Doon members say they "respect the rights of home and property owners," "believe the magnitude of laws, restrictions and petty ordinances are excessive, and in many cases, oppressive and abuse."

"We intend to develop a greater sense of community, communication and fellowship among the residents of Bonny Doon," Watkins said.

In addition to Watkins, other members are Kim Laughlin, Nick Riefsteck, Mike Tickvitz and Marcella Allingham.