

## Wine region designation eyed for north central Idaho

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Published: July 8, 2010

Time posted: 8:49 am

Tags: [American Viticultural Area](#), [City of Lewiston](#), [Colter's Creek](#), [Wine](#)



Colter's Creek's largest plot of grapes is Chardonnay and is located in the Clearwater River Valley of north central Idaho.

The Clearwater River Valley of north central Idaho is one step closer to becoming a federally recognized wine region known as an American Viticultural Area. The Idaho Grape Growers and Wine Producers Commission recently received a federal Economic Development Administration grant of about \$25,000 to perform a feasibility study.

Colter's Creek Winery, in Juliaetta, is among businesses that could benefit.

"We think it's a unique area," and an AVA designation "allows you to market based on that uniqueness," said co-owner Mike Pearson. For example, Colter's Creek would be able to note on its wine labels that its wines are produced from its own grapes grown in an AVA.

American Viticultural Areas can be large or fairly small, he said. A Clearwater AVA, at several hundred square miles, would be considerably smaller than the Snake River Valley AVA designated three years ago in southern Idaho and eastern Oregon - in part because valleys in north central Idaho are smaller and narrower, he said.

By mid-July, the Caldwell-based Idaho Grape Growers and Wine Producers Commission aims to select someone to perform the feasibility study, Executive Director Moya Shatz said. Starting with a land survey, the study would help determine if the proposed Lewiston-area AVA has the natural boundaries, climate and distinct growing conditions to warrant the designation. Each AVA in the country must be unique, she said.

North central Idaho's grape-growing industry dates from the 19th century, but Prohibition "killed grape growing in that area," she said. Now, "they are growing some really amazing grapes up there."

A Lewiston-area wine region would complement the Snake River Valley wine region to the south and “show that Idaho has a lot to offer,” she said. Getting an American Viticultural Area designation from a unit of the U.S. Treasury can take two to five years, she said.

“It’s really good grape-growing country,” said Pearson of Colter’s Creek Winery. “We are just trying to re-establish the grape-growing industry in this valley.”

Steep canyons and a variety of microclimates are among features that distinguish grape growing areas in north central Idaho, known as the state’s lowest, warmest region, he said. The Northwest saw some vineyard damage last winter, but “we were lucky,” Pearson said. “It really only affected new plantings and not all that badly, which kind of makes us happy about our site.”

Pearson and his wife, winemaker Melissa Sanborn, own Colter’s Creek Winery. The winery, tasting room and vineyards are on the Potlatch River near its confluence with the Clearwater River. The steep, south-facing slopes of the river canyon and the cooling effect from the river “make this a perfect site for growing grapes,” they say on the Web site [colterscreek.com](http://colterscreek.com).

They purchased longstanding 5- and 3-acre vineyard blocks about three years ago and subsequently made improvements. They planted an additional 3 acres in the spring of 2009. All of the vineyards are contiguous to the main property. They intend to plant 3 to 5 additional acres next year, Pearson said.

Colter’s Creek’s largest plot of grapes is Chardonnay. Colter’s Creek also has Riesling, Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc, and Merlot. Owners last year planted some Tempranillo and Viognier.

“Our goal is to remain a small, family-owned winery and sell most of our wines locally or at least within the state of Idaho,” Pearson said. They released four wines in time for the annual Savor Idaho event in Boise in June.

“We are just entering the market, so we don’t really have comparisons as far as the difficult economic times right now,” he said. “But we are definitely looking forward to helping reestablish some winemaking up in this area.”

Colter’s Creek owners plan to fund and construct a bridge across the Potlatch River to their property. Pearson said in June that they were in the middle of permitting.

He operates Anatek Labs in Moscow.

~From *Idaho Business Review*.