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A bridge too far: UK wine lovers battle Germans

Matthew Campbell

BRITISH wine critics are at the forefront of a campaign to halt construction of a bridge in Germany's Mosel valley, which they claim would damage some of the world's most celebrated vineyards.

Work has begun on a four-lane mile-long bridge across the Mosel river but British protesters, including Hugh Johnson and Jancis Robinson, the wine writers, hope outrage will force Angela Merkel, the chancellor, to intervene.

The area under threat includes some of the most famous riesling vineyards that cling to the steep banks of the river. Producers worry that apart from creating a blight on the landscape, the construction will throw a delicate ecosystem out of balance, affecting the quality of the much-vaunted wine.

"It is likely to cause unpredictable changes to the microclimate and a massive increase in pollution," Robinson wrote on her blog. "From the look of it, it also seems likely to threaten the tourism that is so important to this, one of the most beautiful wine areas in the world."

David Motion, a record producer turned wine merchant who imports from the region, called the 500ft-high bridge an example of "state vandalism" that would damage "the most legendary vineyards in Germany" by disrupting water distribution to the slopes where grapes grow.

"Local people say it is only thanks to us outsiders that the 'stop the bridge' campaign is gathering steam," he said.

One of the leaders of the protest is Sarah Washington, a British artist living in the Mosel valley. She has written to Merkel complaining about the threat hanging over "the absolute best stretch of first growth-quality riesling vineyards in the world".

"I hope you will visit the bridge site at your earliest convenience," Washington wrote, "to satisfy yourself that this is a sane project which leaves a sensible and desirable legacy for future generations — as opposed to a foolhardy and scandalous disruption of an ancient craft in its natural environment."

The aim of the bridge is to shorten the trip from Belgium and Holland to Frankfurt-Hahn airport, helping to turn it into a regional cargo hub. Some see it as an attempt by Kurt Beck, the Rheinland-Pfalz state leader, to leave his mark on the landscape. Motion said that Beck "wants to have the tallest bridge in Germany and a monument to his career".

Despite protests, construction has already begun on a 12-mile road to include the Mosel High Bridge, costing £250m. Bulldozers are just two miles from Ürziger Würzgarten, a hillside vineyard by a bend in the Mosel. After crossing the river the road, the B50, will run above other cherished vineyards such as Zeltingen, Graach, Wehlen and Bernkastel.

"The possibility that these charmed plots of land may suffer lasting damage should alarm oenophiles everywhere," said Mike Steinberger, the American wine critic.

