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Foundation protects Carneros ecosystem

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Winery owners and residents in Carneros are pulling together in an effort to protect the unique marshlands of the Napa/Sonoma border.

The newly formed Carneros Land Stewardship Foundation was designed to fund small projects aimed at protecting the environmental landscape of the region.

"This is a way to really pull ourselves together for something we feel is really important," said Phyllis Gillis, one of the founders of the organization.

The foundation will officially launch during the annual Carneros Heritage Festival, set for May 31, where a portion of the proceeds will benefit foundation projects. Proceeds will also be derived

from the Carneros Wine Alliance's annual trade show, Pinot Plus, happening March 29.

Gillis said the foundation is first looking to partner with the California Department of Fish and Game to enhance the wildlife territory. Specifically, Gillis said they hope to reintroduce species of bats and owls by reviving habitats that have been destroyed over the years. Bats and owls make up a vital piece of a winery's ecosystem by providing natural pest control through eating the insects and rats that feed on the grapes.

"We are delighted that the foundation has chosen the California Department of Fish and Game as its first partnership and we look forward to working with them on projects that will benefit wildlife habitat," said Karen Taylor,

associate wildlife biologist for the Napa-Sonoma marshes and the Petaluma marsh wildlife areas.

"Over time, these combined efforts will improve the wildlife habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, small mammals and marine and aquatic organisms."

In addition to wildlife, Gillis said the foundation hopes to sponsor projects that promote sustainable growth, such as investigating ways to manage the area's water resources with more efficient agricultural practices.

"I just feel it's the right thing to do, to preserve this natural marshland that we all grow our grapes on," said Steve Sangiacomo, a founding boardmember of the foundation and proprietor of Sangiacomo Vineyards.