

## Vineyard operators are committed to farming sustainably

By Bob Johnson

Thousands of acres of winegrape vineyards on the Central Coast have gone through the rigorous third-party review process to receive the Sustainability in Practice certification that verifies that farmers meet strict standards for environmental stewardship, equitable treatment of employees and business sustainability.

“A lot of these things we were already doing, but the SIP certification helps a person keep the records to document it. Sure Harvest has put together a program that makes it easier to integrate and document our practices,” said Scott Williams, who is one of the partners in Pacific Vineyard Co., which manages vineyards in the Edna Valley, just south of San Luis Obispo.

Nearly all of the 2,000-plus acres of vineyards managed by Pacific Vineyard are SIP-certified, and wineries produce thousands of cases of SIP-certified wine from that harvest every year.

The Central Coast Vineyard Team has information for winegrape growers anywhere in the state who are interested in the Sustainability in Practice certification program ([www.vineyardteam.org/sip/index.php](http://www.vineyardteam.org/sip/index.php)). The program defines sustainability in terms of treatment of employees as well as treatment of the earth.

Williams and other vineyard managers and researchers discussed certification—and the challenge of finding sustainable responses in times of extreme disease pressure like 2011—during the 7th annual Sustainable Ag Expo held at the Paso Robles Event Center.

The certification is an outgrowth of the Central Coast Vineyard Team Positive Points System, which has emerged over the last 15 years as a model for helping growers evaluate their practices to see where they are doing well and where they should concentrate their attempts to improve their operations.

“It’s been a big benefit to look at our routine practices



*Scott Williams, who manages San Luis Obispo County vineyards as one of the partners in Pacific Vineyard Co., checks an Edna Valley vineyard that has received Sustainability in Practice certification.*

and see where they can be more efficient. It also gives everybody outside the farming operation a benchmark to measure what we’re doing,” said Jim Stollberg, who manages 450 acres of Santa Maria Valley vineyards as Maverick Farming Co. Four hundred of the 450 acres he manages are SIP-certified.

There have already been 300,000 cases of SIP-certified wine produced statewide to date.

“I can’t say I’ve seen us get better contracts, but hopefully we’ll get there. As much as we want to be exclusive and do things better than our neighbors, if we get on the same page it will make it possible for the larger wineries to do something with this,” Stollberg said.

The cool and wet weather on the Central Coast in 2011 made for extraordinary powdery mildew pressure that tested the ability of even the most committed growers to find sustainable answers.

“I thought 2010 was the most difficult vintage I had been part of until 2011 came around. We had measurable rainfall every month since October 2010, except July and August of

this year. We had that marine layer that would not go away. It just sat on us and we had mildew costs that went through the roof,” said Williams.

Pacific Vineyard employees pulled leaves to open the canopy and improve mildew control, and still made many more mildew-control applications than usual to control the disease.

Despite extensive and expensive efforts to protect the crop against mildew, most Central Coast winegrape growers still suffered reduced yields in 2011.

“These higher costs for disease control have to be amortized over a smaller crop,” said Don Ackerman of Ackerman Vineyards of Paso Robles.

Pulling leaves to open up the canopy is recommended for managing powdery mildew, both because it lets the wind blow over the fruit, and because it makes it far easier to get good coverage with materials. But the answer is not as simple as just pulling leaves, because that can expose the fruit to sunburn if the weather turns hot.

“People were reluctant to pull a lot of leaves because they got burned in 2010. It was extremely cool. There was an absence of any heat waves. The mildew got started early; we had a lot of it all around the state,” said Larry Bettiga, University of California Cooperative Extension viticulture farm advisor in Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties.

There is an element of guesswork in deciding how much to open the canopy, and the best guesses come from experience with particular vineyards.

“You always have to know your vineyard. In the coolest weather you want more openness to heat your fruit. In the hotter areas you have to be careful to avoid cooking your fruit. The greatest challenge for us is the warmer areas where we don’t always have mildew pressure. It’s hard to anticipate when you have to open up the canopy,” Bettiga said.

Pulling leaves early in the season, before mildew gets off to a robust start, may also toughen the fruit enough to withstand the heat, he said.

“With a more open canopy you get better coverage with

your materials. If you wait too late to open it up you’ll spend the rest of the season trying to catch up with mildew. When the clusters open up early, they toughen up and can handle the sun,” Bettiga said.

Even experienced vineyard managers find when and how much to open up the canopy a challenge.

“There was definitely burn in the Santa Maria Valley on chardonnay and pinot in 2010 because of the heat. We need to adjust our leafing schedule to open it up right after fruiting, rather than waiting. In 2011, we tried to get ahead of powdery mildew by pulling a few more leaves than we usually do, but we were unable to. We still had a lot of inputs in labor and material. We also knew we were protecting a small crop,” Stollberg said.

Another sustainable method of managing mildew is applying oil.

“We employ stylet oil early in the year, and I started tank mixing it with copper. I don’t like to use it later in the year, or use too much, because of the suffocating effect. I like stylet oil, just not too much,” Williams said.

Maintaining sustainable vineyards in the coming years will depend on fitting practices with the challenges created by the weather, he said.

“You have to ask if the weather has been the start of a trend the last couple of years, or if we will go back to more normal patterns,” Bettiga said.

Bettiga was one of the main technical advisors during the creation of the Positive Points System, the precursor of the growing program of third-party verification of sustainable vineyard practices.

“The beauty of the Positive Points System is it gave you a plan to evaluate what you were doing,” he said.

And a growing number of vineyard managers have faith that this commitment to sustainability fits with the story more consumers want to hear.

“It adds a value because there’s a story to be told, and it’s a real story. You want to stay ahead of the curve here, and I think the benefit will come,” Williams said.

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