

WSU Wants Wine Industry to Know it Can Help



By Mai Hoang
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PROSSER — As wine grape buds start to bloom during the early spring, many growers prepare wind machines to battle overnight frost.

But operating those machines drives up fuel and power costs.

So Washington State University researchers spent several years measuring the cold hardiness of wine and Concord grapes. That research provided a model that can help growers determine precisely when to implement frost-prevention measures.

Markus Keller, a WSU viticulture professor, and others involved in the research often get calls from people in other wine regions wondering if the model could be replicated. But he said it's not unusual to hear from Valley growers who are unaware of the research.

"There is some kind of disconnect," said Keller, who has worked at WSU's Irrigated Agriculture Research & Extension Center in Prosser since 2001. "How do we tell that story so everyone is aware of it?"

Keller hopes a new Washington Wine Commission initiative will improve awareness of viticulture and enology research and how it can improve wine grape growing and wine production.

"We are doing all this stuff and not a lot of people know about it," said commission President Steve Warner.

Communication challenges

Past attempts to bring research to those in the wine industry have been fractured.

Legislation in the 1980s, which established a liter tax on wine sales to fund research, also created a group of winery owners and grape growers who were to determine industry research priorities.

Dick Boushey, a longtime grape grower and owner of Boushey Vineyard near Grandview, admits the group, which he was part of, never was able to fully communicate with industry stakeholders. That challenge has only grown as industry growth has exploded.

Other industry organizations such as the Washington Association of Wine Grape Growers publicize research efforts through annual conferences and courses. But there remain parts of the industry unaware of research efforts.

“We had such growth in the last 10 years and the growth has come from nontraditional agricultural (business people),” said Melissa Hansen, who was hired as the Washington Wine Commission’s new research program manager after two decades at Good Fruit Grower.

“They are just not clued in to the WSU cooperative extension. They don’t know they have this research.”

Consolidating efforts

The industry already contributes to research, she said, pointing out nearly 25 percent of the commission’s annual budget, which is funded by an assessment on wineries and wine grape growers, goes to research.

That includes funds for a \$7.4 million pledge for a \$23 million, 40,000-square-foot wine science center that opened last year at the WSU Tri-Cities campus.

But there is more to be done.

Warner said research plays directly into the commission’s mission to promote Washington as a leading wine region.

“If you want to be taken seriously as a global competitor in the world of wine, you’ve got to make those investments,” Warner said.

Boushey, now a member of the commission’s new research committee, said it’s important to have a single organization like the Wine Commission promote and help expand wine research. “Every grower and every winery is part of the Wine Commission,” he said.

In 2014, the commission hired a consultant to develop best practices for promoting research efforts. The report showed a clear need for a liaison to connect researchers and the industry.

That led to the newly created position of research program manager and Hansen’s hire.

Hansen is working on a designated research section on the Washington Wine Commission website that will be launched soon. She also plans to provide information about new and ongoing research efforts in other ways, including social media.

And she is organizing a conference this summer where grape growers and winemakers can learn about the latest research. She said a similar conference for cherries has attracted hundreds.

Funding is critical

Hansen and others involved in the initiative hope that increased awareness brings greater buy-in to generate additional research funding.

The hope is that once the commission finishes paying the pledge for the wine science center at WSU Tri-Cities, the industry will agree to keep paying an assessment that was increased for that donation to generate additional research money.

The current \$850,000 statewide budget for wine research includes the contribution from the Washington Wine Commission, proceeds from the Auction of Washington Wines event, money set aside by WSU for wine research and the state liter sales tax.

However, most of that funding is spent each year, and with just one-year funding commitments, researchers doing multi-year research must go back to get funding each year.

And there's no room to leverage that money to take advantage of opportunities such as federal grants or to fund research to respond to potential industry crises, Hansen said.

Research goals

Keller, the WSU viticulture professor, is excited to see the Wine Commission boosting research efforts.

"We've been spread extremely thin trying to help the industry out with few resources," he said.

Keller said there's a great need for localized research. Many times, he said, winemakers and grape growers simply use techniques adopted from more established wine regions in Europe.

Boushey said growers who have sought out the information have benefited from research and thereby been better able to respond to challenges like water shortages and pests. But he said the research is meant to be publicly available, and there is no reason for any grower or winemaker to be unaware of the information.

"We have a competitive advantage," he said. "But we want to take that further."