

Spring frost nips Oregon vineyards; growers uncertain of yield decrease

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

NEWBERG, Ore. — Willamette Valley winegrape growers are assessing what they fear could be significant losses in their vineyards after an unseasonable spring frost nipped vulnerable buds that were just beginning to emerge from dormancy.

Temperatures dipped below freezing April 14-15 across the region, which produces nearly three-quarters of the state's winegrapes. Cold weather can kill buds or stunt vine growth, reducing crop load come harvest in September and October.

However, producers say the frost's impact varies by location, making it hard to determine the full extent of the damage.

"As much as we all want to know right now what is the estimated (yield) decrease for the whole region, we just don't know yet," said Jessica Mozeico, owner of Et Fille Wines in Newberg and president of the Willamette Valley Wineries Association.

Mozeico said whether a particular vineyard was affected depends on two factors — if the vines had reached "bud break," and if it was cold enough locally to damage them.

Bud break typically happens during mid-April in the Willamette Valley, and refers to the period when vines "wake up" from winter. The buds eventually grow new shoots and flowers, which develop into winegrapes as the season progresses.

Mozeico said vines had not reached bud break at her estate vineyard in the Chehalem Mountains, which is at a higher elevation. She does not expect to see a major impact there, though Et Fille Wines does manage blocks at eight other vineyards that could see reduced yields.

"The question becomes, How much less?" Mozeico said. "That's the stage we're all in. We're trying to get some estimates and calculate that."

Harry Peterson-Nedry, who founded Ridgecrest Vineyards near Newberg in 1980, said spring frost is unusual in the Willamette Valley. The last time he remembers it happening was around Mother's Day in 1985.

Ridgecrest Vineyards sits atop Ribbon Ridge and was on the cusp



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Time will tell the extent to which Willamette Valley vineyards were damaged by frost in mid-April, growers say.



The emerged shoots of Pinot noir show signs of frost damage, including browned tissues.

of bud break in some blocks, though Peterson-Nedry said it is still too early to draw any firm conclusions.

"You really need to wait until the buds push out before you find out what you got, and what you don't have," he said. "That is the key to this ... patience and not making a judgment until they have made it themselves."

Kim Bellingar, of Bellingar Estates in Newberg, said that unfortunately she is seeing "pretty significant" damage in her 5-acre vineyard, particularly among Chardonnay grapes, which is typically the first variety to reach bud break.

As for Pinot noir, the Willamette Valley's signature wine, Bellingar said more secondary buds are starting to emerge.

"We're optimistic those will continue to develop, but we are expecting lower fruitfulness from the entire

vineyard just because of the damage we saw," Bellingar said.

Bellingar and Mozeico emphasized that frost damage is an issue of winegrape quantity, not quality. Mozeico said there is no reason to believe any wines from the 2022 vintage will experience a dip in quality due to the cold snap.

"What we know is it is very likely we will have lower crop loads than we had hoped for," she said. "What we don't know is how much lower."

Sam Tannahill, co-founder of A to Z Wineworks in Newberg, said that while some vineyards were undoubtedly impacted, the frost did not appear to cause widespread or catastrophic damage statewide. A to Z buys grapes from 70 vineyards across Oregon, south to the California border and as far east as Umatilla.

Tannahill said cooler weather this spring may have delayed bud break in some areas, protecting more grapes from frost damage.

"If all the buds had broken, we could have seen significant damage," he said. "The fact is, we dodged a bullet."

Unlike the Willamette Valley, vineyards in Southern Oregon and the Columbia River Gorge also typically have frost protection, such as windmills that pull warmer air from higher altitudes and push it down to the vineyard floor.

At first blush, Tannahill said it appears the crop load for A to Z Wineworks may be down 10%, though that will likely change.

"We've got a long way to go before harvest," he said. "There's a lot that can happen."

Northern California farmers facing water cutbacks band together

By **SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN**
Capital Press

FORT JONES, Calif. — Farmers and ranchers in the rural Scott Valley of Northern California are banding together to advocate for farms as the area faces the potential loss of 100% of its irrigation water this summer.

They call their new group the Scott Valley Agriculture Water Alliance, or Scott Valley AgWA.

The group formed to educate the public about what it calls "unfair" water regulations issued by the State Water Resources Control Board — drought emergency regulations for the Scott River, a tributary of the Klamath River, that would halt all irrigation if the river dips below new minimum levels.

A potential cutback this year would be aimed at protecting coho salmon.

In a letter to the water board last summer, Karuk Tribe chairman Russel "Buster" Attebery wrote that water users in the Scott Valley "are de-watering the last stronghold of coho salmon in the Klamath Basin, driving them to extinction."

Sari Sommarstrom, a retired watershed consultant and local nursery tree owner who helped found the new farmers' alliance, disagreed with Attebery's assessment.

"The river has not met the board's new flow requirements in nine out of the past 11 summers," she said. "Yet the data show that coho returns have nonetheless increased over the past 20 years. We're seeing population levels that haven't been since the 1960s. Sadly, it's evident that these curtailments are based on a false narrative."

If the board cuts the water allocation this year to protect the salmon as expected, it won't be the first time. Last Aug. 30, the water control board halted all irrigation in the Scott Valley



Scott Valley AgWA

Scott Valley farmers in Northern California have formed a group to advocate for the local agricultural community in the face of potential water curtailments.

because the river didn't meet the new flow requirements.

The board has taken public comments as it considers re-adopting those curtailments.

The alliance of farmers is mobilizing to educate the public, including officials, in the lead-up to the board's decision.

"The No. 1 goal (of this group) is to tell our side of what's happening in this water crisis in Scott Valley," Theodora Johnson, spokeswoman for the group and a sixth-generation Scott Valley cattle rancher. "It's an existential threat to farming."

The group is comprised of about 15 major area farms, and Johnson said another 15 or more are preparing to join.

Johnson said farmers in Scott Valley have few resources available to them in the case of another shutoff because growers in the valley have no reservoirs and face limits on groundwater pumping.

"Our third-generation dairy, organic since 2016, is our livelihood," Scott Valley dairy farmers Connor and Cricket Martin said in a statement. "It is important for us to be able to share it with the next generation. If the water curtailments continue, that won't be an option."



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