

Vineyard View



Lessons from Down Under

During the month of August, I had the great fortune to travel to Australia, courtesy of funding from the Australian Grape and Wine Research and Development Corporation (GWRDC), as well as from local winegrape grower groups. The purpose of the trip was for several speakers—myself included—to present a series of workshops for winegrape growers focusing on vineyard IPM and sustainable winegrowing. The workshops provided me a wonderful opportunity to meet with Australian growers and learn about issues that are important to them, some of which we can learn from here in the United States.

Without a doubt, the most immediate and serious problem facing most Australian wine regions is the continuance of the worst drought on record. The time for the most effective rainfall to occur was just about past when I was there, and while some rain had fallen in the major cities like Sydney and Melbourne, nowhere near enough rainfall has occurred in the water catchments that supply most of the water for people and crops. For example, growers in the warm winegrowing regions of Sunraysia, the Riverina, and Riverland in the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, where about 60% of the national winegrape production occurs, have already been told they will receive zero water allocation for irrigation this coming growing season. Vineyards in these regions receive their water from the Murray-Darling River system, which drains most of southeastern Australia.

It turns out that over the last several decades, water from this system for agriculture as well as for city use has been over allocated by up to 20% of the flow in a normal year. Superimpose the drought on

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GRAPE GROWING

this situation, and you can get a sense of the magnitude of the problem. To make matters worse, well water in most regions is too saline to be used for irrigation.

While there is no direct lesson for us from this unfortunate situation, it is very likely the amount and quality of our irrigation water will become a critical issue over time, particularly in the Western U.S., as climate change takes hold. We therefore can probably learn a lot from how the Australians handle their current water crisis.

I am sure all of you are well aware of the impact imported Australian wine has had on the American market. In fact, my guess is that many of you have an ambivalent feeling about Australian winegrape growers. They are great people, but they are eating our lunch at certain wine price-points, so to speak. You may be interested to hear that they are also being significantly impacted by the global wine market. The eight wine regions I visited are primarily concerned with producing wines in the premium category and higher. Guess what the most commonly expressed concern was in these regions: How can I differentiate my wines from those from other Australian regions?

Sound familiar? There was a general feeling among many of the growers with whom I spoke that only one region, the Barossa Valley, is well known outside of Australia and that the other regions need to begin to differentiate themselves, too. It is clear to me that in the presence of global competition, differentiation from other regions, whether domestic or foreign, is one of the major keys to the success of any wine region.

Funding research

One program that I was particularly interested in finding out more about was the

Australian Grape and Wine Research and Development Corporation (GWRDC). This is the organization that manages the funds created from a national levy on winegrapes and wine, as well as from Australian federal matching dollars. The combined funds amount to more than AU\$20 million (AU\$1 = US\$0.85) annually for research and development in viticulture and enology. This dwarfs the amount of money available annually in the U.S. for wine and grape research, and merits major credit for the Australian wine industry's great success in the global market.

The advantages of the GWRDC are obvious. It generates a large research fund each year, which supports some of the best viticulture and enology research in the world. It also provided funds for market development and strategic planning. As I mentioned above, one cannot deny the success the Australian wine industry has had in the export market.

Room for improvement

However, no program is perfect, and I feel compelled to point out some of the problems with the GWRDC, as related to me by some of the Australian growers and members of the research community.

The biggest issue for the people with whom I spoke was a lack of transparency in terms of how the GWRDC Board operates; they felt that this situation has gotten worse over time. For example, the growers I talked to seemed unclear on how board members are chosen. They also were not sure how decisions are made regarding what research projects were funded. Some of this uncertainty could be attributed to the growers' lack of initiative to find out more about these topics. However, it was my impression that communications on both sides could be improved.

Another issue is that the levy program is indefinite, meaning there is no point in time the grower and winery community can vote whether to continue it or not.

Some researchers commented that they had been trying to obtain research funds from GWRDC for years without success, but talked about others who, once they obtained funding, were able to get funds

year after year. One researcher said in frustration, "I have not been able to break into the system." To me, these words reinforce the feeling that the system is non-transparent.

One of my biggest surprises was to find out that the grant proposals going to GWRDC are not peer reviewed as a part of the grant approval process. Apparently a committee, overseen by a director of research, determines who gets funded. I know of other organizations that determine research funding in this way, some of them in the U.S. However, I personally think peer review is an absolutely critical part of any grant funding process, to maintain third-party independence.

Outreach needed

Because of the lack of transparency from the grower's perspective, some are questioning whether they are getting their money's worth from what they pay as a levy. As a result, local grower groups funded by local levies have formed in some regions, in South Australia in particular, so they can fund research of local interest. In other regions without local groups, there are moves to form them.

I think there is a lot to be said for the success of the GWRDC model. However, as with any successful program, there are always improvements that can be made.

I will end with observations on the outreach and extension of information and research results to Australian winegrape growers. It is not very good. The irony of the situation is that they have wonderful research being funded by the GWRDC, but very little funding is devoted to extending it to the growers. Since I did not talk to any winemakers, I cannot comment on the level and quality of outreach to them.

Many years ago, outreach and extension in Australia were done by federal and state agencies, and also universities. Funding cutbacks dating back to the 1980s decimated these programs, and what is left are a few agents in each state with virtually no national coordination. Growers are left to get extension information from wherever they can, such as winery reps, product sales people (called chemical resellers in Australia), state agents if available, or paid private consultants. The only "independent" advice is from the few state agents. The need for extension also inspired the formation of the local groups I mentioned, in order to try and create their own outreach and extension, partnering with state agents. However, in most cases there are not enough funds to adequately staff the

programs devoted to extension, so what little money is available is focused on marketing.

I left Australia convinced more than ever that the U.S. has the best agriculture outreach and extension system of any Western country with which I am familiar. That said however, as many of you know, the effectiveness of this system has eroded due to budget cutbacks over the last decade or so, in some states more rapidly than others. Canada, New Zealand and Australia have basically eliminated extension programs like ours, and history has shown that nothing equal to its value has replaced them, despite the best of intentions. Extension is absolutely critical to the success of our grape and wine industry and we must do everything we can to reinvest in it to build its capacity. If any national check-off program is developed for the U.S., we must invest a major part of the funds into extension and outreach programs. [W&V](#)

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Highlights

- Lessons learned by their Australian counterparts in the current drought may be of use to U.S. growers as climate change encroaches.
- Australian research on the grape and wine industry financed by industry levies and government matching funds dwarfs U.S. programs.
- Lack of transparency and extension from the Aussie programs are causing localized groups to form for mutual support.