

## Vineyard Views By Cliff Ohmart<sup>1</sup>

On September 17, 2002 an important event for the California Wine Industry will take place. A press conference is being held in San Francisco to launch *The Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Workbook*, a voluntary self-assessment workbook for the Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices Project (SWP). The SWP is a project of the Wine Institute (WI), a statewide vintner organization, and California Association of Winegrape Growers (CAWG), a statewide grower organization. In the next few paragraphs I will describe the history of the SWP project, its goals, and the purpose of the self-assessment workbook.

### *History of the SWP Project*

The California winegrowing community with a 150-year-old wine industry is committed to social responsibility and cultivating and producing world-class wines. The industry recognizes the importance of the environment in and around vineyards and wineries, respects their neighbors, and makes positive social and economic contributions. Therefore the winegrowing community has come together to establish voluntary high standards of sustainable practices by the entire wine community. The SWP program will promote winegrowing and winemaking practices that are compatible with the environment, responsive to the needs and interests of society-at-large, and are economically feasible in practice.

As California's population grows, land will become an increasingly precious commodity. The winegrowing community will demonstrate and communicate that they are stewards of the land and strive to sustain their industry for generations to come. Furthermore, the California wine community intends to create a win-win environment for everyone by embracing progressive attitudes and raising cultural and community awareness and maintaining California's standing as a world-class competitor in the global wine marketplace.

The SWP project builds on the impressive work in sustainable practices by many regional winegrowing and vintner associations, private companies, individual viticulturists and winemakers, university researchers, government agencies and innovative regulators involved in the California wine community. Two groups, in particular, provided inspiration for the project, the Lodi-Woodbridge Winegrape Commission (LWWC) and the Central Coast Vineyard Team (CCVT). The CCVT were pioneers in developing the first vineyard self-assessment, the *Positive Point System*<sup>2</sup>. Subsequently, LWWC combined elements of the *Positive Point System*, new winegrowing content, and a four-category self-assessment format developed by Farm\*A\*Syst<sup>3</sup> to produce the *Lodi Winegrower's Workbook: A self-assessment of integrated farming practices*.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources for the SWP project description are *The Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Workbook* and [www.wineinstitute.org/communications/SustainablePractices/vision.htm](http://www.wineinstitute.org/communications/SustainablePractices/vision.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Information about the Central Coast Vineyard Team and the *Positive Point System* can be found at <http://www.vineyardteam.org>.

<sup>3</sup> Information about Farm\*A\*Syst can be found at <http://www.wisc.edu/farmasyst/>

Overall leadership and guidance for the SWP project is provided by a committee between the WI and CAWG known as the Sustainable Winegrowing Joint Committee. This committee includes more than 50 members from the Wine Institute and CAWG, along with representatives from the California Environmental Protection Agency and independent consultants. The Joint Committee contracted with *RealToolbox*, a sustainable agriculture and resource conservation professional services firm, to direct the SWP project.

### *Project Goals and Workbook Description*

The overall purpose for the Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices project includes:

- Establishing voluntary high standards of sustainable practices to be followed and maintained by the entire wine community;
- Enhancing winegrower-to-winegrower and vintner-to-vintner education on the importance of sustainable practices and how self-governing will enhance the economic viability and future of the wine community; and
- Demonstrating how working closely with neighbors, communities and other stakeholders to maintain an open dialogue can address concerns, enhance mutual respect, and accelerate results.

The principal purpose of the SWP workbook is to provide winegrowers and vintners with a tool to voluntarily:

- Assess the sustainability of current practices;
- Identify areas of excellence and areas where improvements can be made; and
- Develop action plans to increase an operation's sustainability.

It is important to note that the SWP workbook is a voluntary self-assessment tool. The workbook is not a "how to" manual for winegrowing and winemaking, a set of "rules" that must be followed, or an external rating system to be used by others to judge one's vineyard or winery operation.

The primary audience for the SWP workbook is California winegrowers and vintners. It is intended that the workbook content also be useful to a wider audience inside and outside California, including employees, suppliers, winegrape and wine buyers, neighbors and local community members, members of the environmental and social equity communities, policy makers, regulators, media and consumers.

The first five chapters of this self-assessment workbook (*Viticulture, Soil Management, Water Management, Pest Management, and Wine Quality*) have been directly adapted from LWWC's *Lodi Winegrower's Workbook*. The remaining eight chapters (*Ecosystems Management, Energy Efficiency, Winery Water Conservation and Quality, Material Handling, Solid Waste Reduction and Management, Environmentally Preferred Purchasing, Human Resources, and Neighbors and Communities*) were developed for this project by gathering input from the Sustainable Winegrowing Joint Committee, conducting an extensive literature review, and drawing upon the expertise of the *RealToolbox* consulting team. Particularly useful sources of information on sustainable winery operations included the Sonoma County Green Business Program<sup>4</sup>,

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<sup>4</sup> For more information see <http://www.sonoma-county.org/eservice/Cklist.htm>.

Winery Eco-Efficiency Assessment Guide, and the California EPA's Environmental Management Systems pilot project<sup>5</sup> on wineries.

### *SWP Project Implementation*

Although putting the SWP workbook together was a prodigious task, getting it into the hands of winegrape growers and vintners and having the workbook put to use in the vineyard and winery is even more challenging. There are several reasons for this. One of the biggest is best described as fear of the unknown on the part of some growers and vintners. Growing winegrapes and making wine is a very expensive and risky business. Anything that comes along that suggests changing the way some things are done is understandably a scary proposition. Another reason is that everyone is already too busy and asking a vintner or grower to take time to evaluate their winery or vineyard using the SWP workbook is asking a lot. The last reason I will mention is the 'I have been doing this for years and you can't tell me how to do it any better' syndrome. We all are proud of what we do and feel like we are doing a good job at it, otherwise we would have changed the way we do things already. When someone comes along and suggests a different way to do things it is sometimes hard to accept. However, because the SWP workbook was developed with the help of vintners and growers when the user gets past the resistance reactions they will most likely discover a document that will help them in many ways.

The SWP project implementation will benefit from previous experience of similar programs. For example, LWWC staff have implemented the *Lodi Winegrower's Workbook* program by convening small workshops of 5-10 growers at a time, sitting down with the growers and helping them go through the entire workbook evaluating one of their vineyards. Usually a grower will invite several neighbors over to their house and the workbook workshop will be held there. Over the last 2 years LWWC has convened 37 workshops attended by 254 growers and these growers farm about two thirds of the acres in the district (> 56,000 acres). This experience demonstrates that, in time a large number of growers can be introduced to self-assessment.

An intense implementation program as described above is not cheap. Therefore WI and CAWG have formed a joint non-profit organization, (name here), whose mission is to raise money for SWP project implementation and oversee its execution.

### *Why is the SWP Project Important?*

Agriculture is a conservative industry and for good reason. It is an expensive, risky business and a change in the wrong direction can mean financial ruin. As a result agriculture historically has been resistant to change. When something new comes along, such as regulatory issues that require change, the general attitude is to resist the change and hope the issues will go away. However, many of the sustainability issues confronting winegrape growers are not going to go away and the industry, in general, has recognized this fact. The SWP project demonstrates to people inside and outside the industry the desire of vintners and growers to be proactive in the face of these challenging issues.

Sustainable farming is difficult to define and not well understood by a significant portion of the agricultural community. Ask 10 people for a definition and you are likely to get 10 different answers. This lack of understanding was graphically brought to my

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<sup>5</sup> For more information see <http://www.calepa.ca.gov/EMS/Publications/pilots/wine0600.htm>

attention recently when one grower said they were not interested in the SWP project because they were already 'way past sustainability' in their vineyard operations. The reason sustainable farming is difficult to define is that it is very complicated and we are still learning about it. The SWP workbook helps vintners and growers define sustainability in very specific terms relative to their own operations. Moreover, it helps them measure their current level of sustainability and if used over time will help them track their improvement. Improvement is the key word because sustainable farming is about continual improvement.

I will end with mentioning what I think is the most important aspect of the SWP workbook. It helps the grower and vintner identify where they have problems and then develop action plans to deal with these problems. No matter how good of a farmer or winemaker someone is there is always something that can be improved upon. Whether we want to admit it or not, we all have problems on our farms or in our wineries. The SWP workbook helps identify those problems in very constructive ways and then can be used to develop actions plans to deal with them.

Someone might say I cannot afford to be sustainable in all aspects of my operation, I say as an industry we can't afford not to be.