

Vineyard Views **By Cliff Ohmart**

Don't Ask, Don't Tell

My last column dealt with the very important topic of the recent spread of vine mealybug in California (*Wines & Vines*, November 2002). Since that time I have been reminded of a very bad policy that some growers and pest control advisors (PCAs) adopt when confronted with a pest that is new to their region and it may be happening in some areas in connection with vine mealybug. To borrow a phrase made famous by a recent presidential administration it is the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy. In the pest management world it is more like 'Don't Tell, Don't Ask'. A new pest arrives in a region and a grower and/or PCA suspects they have an infestation on their property but they don't tell anyone and they definitely don't want anyone to ask them about it. They then try and take care of the problem themselves. This is an extremely important matter, a very serious mistake to make, and I will devote this column to its discussion. Before I begin let me stress that this behavior is not restricted to winegrape growers but is exhibited by some growers and PCAs farming other crops, too.

To start with let's try and figure out what would motivate someone to hide a problem that could become devastating for themselves as well as their winegrowing region. One possibility might be due to a sense of shame. Growers are extremely proud of their farms and hiding a problem may be due to a sense of shame if it becomes public knowledge that they have an infestation of a new pest. This feeling arises not just with serious problems like vine mealybug, but also can come into play with ordinary pest problems. For example, some growers are concerned about what their neighbors will think if a leafhopper or mite problem gets out of hand or if their weed management program is less than desirable, leaving their vineyard looking scruffy in other people's eyes. Another possibility may be that if a new pest shows up in a grower's vineyard they worry that they will be perceived as having done something wrong in their farming practices and are therefore poor farmers. Both reactions are very human and very understandable.

Probably the most important thing that tempts some growers and PCAs not to report an infestation of a new pest is the threat some regulation will come into play in their vineyard operations. The fear is that this could result in the quarantine of their property, impoundment or destruction of their crop, endanger their winery contract, or maybe even require that their vineyard be destroyed. These threats are very real in some situations. For example, the Glassy-winged sharpshooter (GWSS) does not occur in most winegrowing regions of California at the moment. If GWSS is found in a previously uninfested county, county authorities may make an attempt to eradicate it and the shipment of grapes to non-infested counties would be subject to certain regulations.

I also think that denial, a very natural human response, plays an important role in these situations. One may suspect they have a new pest but denial takes over when one considers the potential financial and psychological impacts that would result if its existence became public knowledge. We want believe what we actually have it is just an ordinary problem. Since vine mealybug is very hard to differentiate from the other mealybugs on grapes it would be easy to say "Oh, this is just a grape mealybug

infestation”. It is sort of like when your truck engine starts making ominous sounds, indicating major engine problems, but you add a quart of oil and keep driving it, convincing yourself that it is nothing important.

I am not denying that all of the above responses are real and natural. However, not reporting an infestation of a new pest in a region has serious long-term ramifications. The vine mealybug is a classic example. Even though it is a relatively new pest to California vineyards, the University of California and the Statewide IPM Program have already done a significant amount of research on its biology and management. It is critical that this information be used if a vine mealybug infestation is discovered. If a grower or PCA adopts the ‘Don’t Tell, Don’t Ask’ policy and tries to handle the problem without help it is very possible they will not use the most effective management strategies resulting in a serious infestation which increases the risk of vine mealybug spread to other vineyards. For example, the vine mealybug occurs not only on above ground vine parts it also infests the roots. This behavior makes its management very difficult because sprays do not reach the individuals on the roots and systemic insecticides are not effective on root feeding stages either. Moreover, while biological control agents of vine mealybug are present in California, vine mealybug infestations are tended by ants, dramatically reducing the effectiveness of biological control agents. Several chemical management protocols have been tested for effectiveness, with one in particular proving to be the best so far. It involves a pre-budbreak spray with an insecticide with good residual properties and then an early season treatment using a systemic insecticide. A well-timed foliar treatment with another insecticide may be necessary if the infestation is particularly heavy. To be effective this treatment protocol needs to be followed in detail, using the right insecticides at the right time of the year. A grower or PCA dealing with vine mealybug on their own may not be aware of this protocol and use a less effect management program. Moreover, once vine mealybug is established in a vineyard the biggest potential for spread is on vineyard equipment. If a grower is not aware of this and uses equipment in other vineyards, then vine mealybug will surely be spread to new vineyards.

If you think you may have a vine mealybug infestation in your vineyard the need to notify the right people, such as your farm advisor and the Agricultural Commissioner in your county, must outweigh the desire to keep it secret in hopes that you can manage it on your own or that nature will take care of itself and the problem will go away. Once the insect is well established in a vineyard it will not be eliminated until the vineyard is taken out. The vineyard is therefore a focal point for possible spread to surrounding vineyards and if proper precautions are not taken this will certainly occur. Your own needs and desires must take a back seat to the needs of the winegrowing region in which you farm.

While on the topic of battling with the temptation to keep things secret another important situation that some growers must deal with is what to do when encountering endangered or threatened species on their property. Years ago the policy for handling this situation was called the three S’s; shoot, shovel and shut-up. Even though encountering an endangered species presents a very different situation to one involving a new pest, decision-making is often driven by the same fear of regulations coming into play on one’s property resulting in financial hardship. As with the introduced pest situation, the fears are based on reality. For example, in some situations farming

operations can be significantly curtailed or even halted by regulations that take effect in the presence of endangered species on a property. Moreover, some groups use these regulations as a strategy to accomplish their agenda of reducing or eliminating farming activities in an area. However, more and more regulatory tools are becoming available that allow growers to accommodate endangered species on their property without significant restrictions on farming activities, for example Safe Harbor Agreements and some types of Conservation Easements. We need to change our attitude from “Oh no, I found an endangered species on my property” to “Great, I found an endangered species on my property, I must be doing the right thing”.

There are times when we must look past our own needs and desires for the sake of the greater community. Hiding the occurrence of a potential serious introduced pest or applying the three S’s policy when encountering an endangered or threatened species on a property are two very important examples. Being a big fan of the original Star Trek series I am reminded of the movie where Spock enters the engine core room of the USS Enterprise and is exposed to a fatal dose of radiation while saving the ship and the crew. Captain Kirk finds him crumpled on the floor and asks him why he sacrificed himself for the ship. With his dying breath Spock tells him “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one”. Well stated, Spock!