Drought impacting El Dorado County vintners



An early bud break will mean an early harvest in El Dorado County. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

FAIR PLAY – Wells in El Dorado County's wine country continue to drop because the minuscule snowmelt from the Sierra is unable to recharge the aquifer.

Vineyards relying on surface or ditch water are in tougher shape because of the severe cutback in allocations. However, even those on wells are wondering what will become of their vines if the drought, which is now in its fourth year, extends beyond this season.

There is no Plan B for most of them. It's not like there is an unlimited supply to tap.

“If the wells dry up, what do you do?” Jonathan Pack, winemaker for Gwinllan Estate, asked. He doesn’t have the answer.

His vines have received 75 to 80 percent of water they normally would in mid-April. He has heard of years when water was trucked in for irrigation.

The good thing about grapes is they don’t need a ton of water to survive. Still, the lack of rain in the region is changing how vineyard managers do business. They are at the mercy of Mother Nature, and as she changes, they must change.



Growth on vines is two months early in some instances.

“I’m less worried about the drought and more about the time of the year for harvest. I look at the vineyard and I’ve never had leaves on vines this time of year,” Elliot Graham of Busby Cellars told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Chardonnay vines started to bud in February. Usually it’s April when they do. This could mean harvest will be in July — not August or September.

While dry farming has been around for years, this method still

requires Mother Nature to provide moisture – something she has not done in any great measure lately. This style means there is no supplemental water added.

Single Leaf Winery went to this style five years ago when its well stopped producing water. Their Zinfandel has been dry farmed for 54 years.

Zinfandel – California's oldest varietal – is extremely hearty. This is a good thing since El Dorado County boasts some of the best Zins in the state.

Shadow Ranch had planned to plant an acre of Zin just outside the tasting room two years ago. The drought changed those plans because it takes so much water at the get-go.

Many vintners are relieved their acreage is planted with Rhone varietals – like Syrah, Viogner and Grenache – that do well in this granite, rocky soil. This soil doesn't retain water. Those using drip irrigation are able to get the water deeper to the roots.



Shadow Ranch staked out an area for Zin across the pond, but drought delayed those plans.

MV Vineyard is the smallest winery in Fair Play, producing 1,200 cases. Their 600-foot-deep wells have water at 300 feet, so they aren't worried about this year. It's future years that Kristi Mayhew, tasting room manager, said could be problematic.

Fire is her other concern. The July 2014 Sand Fire, which destroyed 20 homes, came close to their property and would have wiped out the vineyard had the winds changed. Last week a smaller fire erupted in the same area.

Stress – as in lack of water – is normally good for wine grapes. The flavor profile is enhanced, though the yield is less.

"We are getting some serious extraction. It's pretty amazing what we are getting out of the grapes," Scott Miller with Single Leaf Winery told *Lake Tahoe News*.

So, while the tonnage of grapes is likely to decline during this time of drought, the quality is destined to increase. Winemakers have always manipulated a certain amount of stress on the vines by cutting back the water so sugar content would increase, which in turn produces more robust flavors. Mother Nature is now doing that in a more extreme manner.

However, it's not just irrigation water that is needed.

"There is a certain amount of water required in the winemaking process. The only thing to clean oak barrels is hot water," Stephanie Simunovich with Skinner Winery told *Lake Tahoe News.*

A sign in the tasting room says, "Save H20 drink Rose."

According to the Nature Conservancy, it takes 31 gallons of water to make one glass of wine.