New 'virtual' geofences launched in south Australian vineyards to prevent pest and disease

A new state-of-the-art cyber monitoring system has been introduced in South Australia's vineyards to help keep its industry free of disease and pests.

Funded by the government and Vinehealth Australia, Project Boundary Rider creates a virtual fence – or geofence – to ringfence vineyards, and employs smartphone app technology to monitor the movement of anyone entering the vineyards.

Owners are alerted whenever anyone crosses over the virtual boundary, which is crucial as pests such as phylloxera can be spread on shores and clothing worn by people, as well as machinery travelling between infected and non infected areas.

The system is being rolled out to 30 of the state's winegrowers in the Barossa and McLaren Vale. The innovative system is a first for biosecurity for the wine sector in Australia, according to agriculture minister Leon Bignall.

"It will protect vineyards from pest and disease threats and provide critical intelligence about the movement of people coming in and out of properties," he said. "Wine is one of South Australia's key export industries, and we grow about 50% of Australia's grapes. It's vital we do everything we can to protect the industry's future and South Australia's reputation as the producer of premium food and wine from our clean environment.

"Historically we have an enviable reputation globally for the strength of our biosecurity systems and Project boundary Rider will take it to another level."

The new technology is able to provide instant information in the event of a pest or disease outbreak to enable the vineyard owner to react quickly to contain the spread and minimize loss.

The geofencing technology will enable growers to improve their farm gate hygiene practice. As soon as someone enters the vineyard, growers receive an immediate alert to inform them of this.

“It means growers can remotely record the arrival and departure of visitors as part of their day to day management, which is essential in preventing damaging pest and disease incursions in our vineyards,” said Vinehealth Australia chief executive officer Inca Pearce.

Wineries taking part in the pilot scheme include Henschke Cellars, Chapel Hill Winery, Charles Melton Wines, Hallett Wines and Wirra Vineyards

“We view this groundbreaking project with much anticipation and excitement because the health of our vines is paramount and we are always looking for new and improved ways of ensuring their longevity,” said Henschke Cellars’ viticulturist Prue Henschke.

Gemtree Wines’ viticulturist Melissa Brown is also taking part in the initiative. “Being certified organic and biodynamic, as well as owning a number of different vineyards, means having an effective monitoring system is a really important tool for managing security and protecting our precious resource,” she said.

The pilot is being supported by the McLaren Vale Grape, Wine and Tourism Association and Barossa Grape and Wine Association.