

Clean in, clean out

Ensuring machinery and equipment is clean when it arrives at a vineyard, and that it's cleaned again before it leaves the site, is an important part of a good farm-gate hygiene system. Leading vineyard contractors are calling for washdown facilities to be set up on every vineyard, as **Cindie Smart** reports.

Leading vineyard contractors, with the support of Vinehealth Australia, are calling for all vineyard owners to set up washdown facilities on their properties.

“Cleaning machinery of all dirt and plant material before it enters a different vineyard is an important step in reducing the risk of spreading phylloxera or other pests, diseases and weeds,” said Vinehealth Australia CEO Inca Lee.

“But vineyard contractors are telling us that many vineyards are not set up to effectively washdown machinery.”

In an ideal world, every vineyard in Australia would have an area dedicated to washing down machinery and equipment, consisting of a concrete slab, a water source and tank, pump and hose to effectively clean machines.

Jan O'Connor, from O'Connor Harvesting, who has 35 harvesters working across three states – South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales – says contractors should refuse the work on vineyards unless a washdown area can be provided or an alternate has been organised.

“When we started the business 30 years ago, we were initially concerned about spreading weeds between properties, so we developed a ‘clean in, clean out’ policy,” O'Connor said. “This meant we couldn't have a finger pointed at us for moving weeds around.”

“These days, we're concerned about pests and diseases much worse than weeds, like phylloxera. So, we insist that all vineyards we work on provide washdown facilities. The bonus for us is, if we can keep our machines clean – especially the belts, rollers, fans, buckets and fishplates – we're going to get better longevity from these machinery parts and therefore less downtime, and for the grower, this cleanliness hopefully translates into a cleaner grape sample. So, washing down machines is important for three reasons: good biosecurity, preventative maintenance and grape quality.”

Sami Gilligan, from Gilligan Contracting in McLaren Vale, agrees that individual vineyard properties must have a washdown facility for contractors and others to use.

“Growers need to understand the risks involved by not having washdown areas. Contractors have to be strong and say, if you don't have one, I'm not coming to your vineyard,” Gilligan said.

“In my business, we make sure we arrive at properties clean and leave properties clean. But it's not easy. A lot of the larger vineyards have wash down pads. But smaller vineyards don't. We have to use whatever facilities they have, and they can be insufficient – a garden hose with inadequate water pressure makes it very hard to clean a machine effectively.” ▶



O'Connor Harvesting's Jan O'Connor (left) with Gitte Fraser and Melissa Eaton



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O'Connor Harvesting partner Chad Vernon washing down a self propelled machine

Barriers to cleaning

O'Connor and Gilligan agree that access to water is the biggest barrier to growers providing effective washdown facilities.

“The closer we get to the end of the growing season, the more issues we tend to face with low dam and bore levels. A 3,000L water tank has been used at various times, but the clean will not be up to scratch. In some cases where there isn't a washdown facility set up, but there is a dam with water, we'll bring a fire fighter pump and hose and use that,” O'Connor said.

“Occasionally, we may have to washdown a harvester three times a night. Our booking schedule is very tight. We allow a set time for washdown, travel time and then set up at the next vineyard. Staff, trucks and wineries can all be affected if the harvester is not on time. We do not want to find out at 3am that the vineyard has no water for washdown.

“We won't go onto a property with a dirty harvester. If we're working within a 3-5km radius of our base, we may take a machine back there to wash and will charge the vineyard for that time and water. That way we can control the process. We also try to have at least one other 'off vineyard site' washdown facility that we can go to in an emergency, say for example, if a washdown pump shuts down.”

With good water supply and pressure, Jan says an experienced driver can wash a tow harvester in 45 minutes to an hour, while self-propelled machines can take up to 1.5 hours.

Communication is key

Before vintage, O'Connor sends a newsletter to her customers reminding them about vintage processes including the need to provide a washdown area.

“Washdown facilities need to be sorted before we arrive. Sometimes it's about no water pressure, a hose that is too short or has leaks in it, or we struggle to access the washdown area due to new tree growth,” O'Connor said.

“It's all about having a conversation and working together to solve the problems. Good communication is the key.”

O'Connor says it's also important to train staff in biosecurity protocols, including washing down machines.

“If operators understand why we spend all this effort on keeping gear clean, they are more likely to buy in and work with us to meet required standards. They are representing our company and biosecurity is a vital part of our company policy,” she said.

The future

O'Connor and Gilligan agree the Australian wine industry needs to improve its farm-gate hygiene practices.

“Our paperwork states that we're a 'phylloxera aware company'. Because we've been around for 30 years, we know what we're doing, and we are continually sharing information with growers about biosecurity issues,” O'Connor said.

“But we know there are other contractors out there who move around from vineyard to vineyard without washing down between properties. That's just not good enough – by the contractor or the vineyard owners.

“We do not want a disastrous outbreak event to occur before people wake up to the reality of a pest or disease outbreak and its consequences.”

And while Jan only operates in Phylloxera Exclusion Zones, she said it was important that contractors who move machines out of Phylloxera Infested Zones or Phylloxera Risk Zones also comply with state quarantine standards, which involves thoroughly cleaning the harvester first and then sterilising through heat treatment.

Gilligan said while most vineyard owners and contractors want to do the right thing, time pressures and costs often get in the way.

“Perhaps some incentives would help – for vineyard owners and for contractors,” he said. “And perhaps as an industry we could do a bulk purchase of items to set up washdown facilities, such as tanks and water pumps.

“As an industry, there is a tremendous opportunity for us to collaborate to ensure we minimise the threat of pests and diseases entering our vineyards.”

Inca Lee said there was huge room for improvement in the way wine businesses embedded farm-gate hygiene facilities and activities into their standard operating procedures.

“We know from surveys we’ve conducted that the uptake of farm-gate hygiene activities needs to be improved in the wine industry, which is surprising when you think about how much

vineyard owners have to lose in the face of a significant pest or disease outbreak,” Lee said.

“It gives us great hope that contractors are joining the conversation about cleaning machinery. We can work together to make good farm-gate hygiene the industry standard.”

For more information about washdown facilities and heat sheds visit <https://vinehealth.com.au/regulation/heatshed/> 

Weeds, sheep and bins

Sami Gilligan, from Gilligan Contracting in McLaren Vale, says washing down machinery and equipment between properties is also critical to prevent the spread of weed seeds.

“The cost of weed control is astronomical. And with more people going organic and biodynamic, we need to think carefully about how we’re going to control the spread of weeds in regions,” Sami said.

“That brings into question the risk of sheep bringing in weed seeds. Agisting sheep in vineyards is a great thing, but the biosecurity risk has to be assessed and managed properly.”

Gilligan said there also needs to be more emphasis placed on grape bin cleanliness in the wine industry.

“In the transport arm of my business, we move a lot of grape bins around the state and they are often covered in grape material and soil. It’s a matter of everyone in the supply chain taking responsibility for biosecurity; growers need to have a place to adequately clean machinery, contractors need to train staff to clean machinery before leaving each grower’s vineyard and winery staff need to ensure they clean bins sufficiently,” Gilligan said.

Minimum requirements for a wash down area

- Set up area away from vines
- Set up on a hard pack surface
- Provide a hose 8-10 metres in length and one inch in diameter
- Ensure adequate water pressure
- Ensure a sufficient quantity of water
- Channel water and waste to a collection point away from vines. A well-drained pad is required
- Ensure area is clear of overhanging structures or trees

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