

Yarra Valley: wine supply will drop

The cost of replanting to phylloxera resistant rootstock in Victoria's Yarra Valley will represent an enormous expenditure, but failing to do so could have a considerable effect on the region's future grape yields, as **Cindie Smart** writes.

The low level of replanting to date of phylloxera infested vines in Victoria's Yarra Valley will likely see a drop in Yarra Valley wine in years to come.

Speaking at the Phylloxera Immersion Tour, organised by Vinehealth Australia and Wine Yarra Valley in November 2019, Rob Sutherland, viticulturist at De Bortoli Wines in the Yarra and member of the Yarra Valley Technical Committee, said only 14-15 percent of vines in the Yarra Valley are planted on phylloxera resistant or tolerant rootstock.

There are 2,500 hectares of vines in the Yarra Valley and more than 1,000 hectares of these have been confirmed as infested with phylloxera.

"That will create a problem for the Yarra Valley," Sutherland said. "Grape prices are up, there's a bit of an upswing in the whole wine industry. So, nobody wants to pull out their vines and replant."

"It looks like the Yarra Valley is going to miss out on that export wave this time because our tonnes will just slowly decrease as our vines die and we won't have any grapes to sell. And even planting now will have a lag of several years until full production."

"Add to that the high costs of replanting, which is off-putting. The difference between an own-rooted vine and a vine grafted onto tolerant rootstock is about \$1.20 compared to between \$5-\$6."

"You can see the car crash happening."

Rob said an additional barrier to replanting was the general low volume of rootstock material available to the wine industry.

"You have to order grafted vines two years out from when you want them. And then the supply isn't guaranteed," he said. "As an example, we ordered 6,000 vines and when we were ready to plant, the nursery said I've only got 1,200. Bad luck. That's the loss of that vineyard's production for a year."

Franco D'Anna, owner/winemaker from Hoddles Creek Estate and President of Wine Yarra Valley said dealing with phylloxera had been a theme of his working life. "It is as bad as it seems," he said.

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Slowing down the spread

“As an association, our main goal is education about farm-gate hygiene and disinfestation to slow down the spread. And we’re working with Agriculture Victoria to try to declare all of the production area of the Yarra Valley as the PIZ, to make life easier for those inside and those outside the current Phylloxera Risk Zone (PIZ) to trade.

“For the Yarra, we know the horse has bolted. We can’t stop it within the Yarra Valley, but as an association, we really want to stop it spreading to other regions.”

It has estimated that the financial cost to industry of phylloxera in the Yarra Valley region is \$1 billion, based on replanting nearly the whole region to rootstock and accounting for losses due to production lag.

Vinehealth Australia CEO Inca Lee said there was significant work and investment needed nationally, by both industry and government, to understand

how to better manage phylloxera and to prevent its spread into new regions and states.

“This is particularly critical now that phylloxera is spreading beyond the borders of current infested zones into the Phylloxera Risk Zone (PIZ), as we saw last year with the St Andrews and Seville detections and as we have just seen with the new Yarra Junction detection this year,” Lee said.

“Four important areas of work needed with phylloxera are developing an early detection method, effective and practical sterilisation treatments, ensuring access for growers to phylloxera-tolerant rootstocks and development of a national strategy for the management of phylloxera.

“And growers really need to get serious about farm-gate hygiene. If growers assume that every person and machine coming onto their vineyard is a risk, and they manage those risks accordingly, they’ll be in a good position to avoid an outbreak.” **GW**



A Yarra Valley vineyard in the process of replanting.



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