

Biosecurity state of play: national effort needed

For last month's Top 20 special feature, we invited Australian wine industry leaders to share their views on the state of the sector with an eye on the sector's business prospects. Here, Vinehealth CEO **Inca Lee** approaches the state of the industry from the crucial perspective of national biosecurity.

We've entered a period of great biosecurity opportunity as we learn from the examples of COVID and pest outbreaks in other agricultural sectors.

We can see that investment in digital technology to improve surveillance and response is critical for minimising the impact of pests and diseases.

Are we doing enough as a national grape and wine industry to keep key pest threats out of our vineyards?

It is pleasing to see growing value placed on biosecurity along the grape and wine supply chain, but there are weak links that must be addressed.

Our recent 2021 Vineyard Owner Survey shows that for many small to medium growers, farm-gate hygiene activities are out of reach – either too expensive or too time consuming or both. In the survey, ensuring safe footwear, keeping a visitor log and restricting access with fences were identified by approximately 30 percent of respondents as activities that won't be done.

Barriers to adoption need to be addressed. As an industry, we must ask ourselves:

what are the incentives for practicing good biosecurity on farm? And why should growers prioritise biosecurity amongst competing demands?

It's clear that we need more practical, cheap and easy biosecurity solutions for vineyard owners, contractors, winemakers, suppliers – and consumers – to help keep our vines safe.

While we're working on those solutions, we need to do more collectively and nationally as an industry to achieve better biosecurity outcomes.

We must focus on preventing and detecting key pests that could severely impact our wine industry – pests that are here in Australia, and those that haven't arrived yet, but likely will.

A good example of our lack of national action is the National Phylloxera Management Protocol (NPMP), which

was put in place in 2009 to reduce the risk of spread of this pest in Australia.

The NPMP has not been reviewed or updated since 2009 and is out of date.

It has long been Vinehealth Australia's position that the NPMP must be urgently reviewed and updated, based on current scientific information on phylloxera biology, detection, surveillance and contemporary biosecurity principles. This requires a commitment by all state jurisdictions and viticulture industries to undertake this work in a timely manner.

Until that's done, there is an increased risk that phylloxera will continue to spread. Currently, an estimated 70% of grapevines in Australia are planted on their own roots, making them susceptible to phylloxera.

We need collective national effort to get this protocol up to date.



But phylloxera isn't our only concern. There are many pests, including *Xylella fastidiosa* (Pierce's Disease), that could enter Australia and severely impact our industry.

The cost of a Pierce's Disease incursion on the Australian wine industry is predicted to be up to \$7.9 billion over a 50-year period. In California, this disease causes more than \$100 million in yearly losses to the grape industry. We need to keep asking ourselves, are we ready to face this significant disease should it enter Australia?

And we must focus more funding and energy on delivering high health planting material to support the sustainable development of our national grape and wine industry and preserve our vine genetics.

How can we keep pests out of our vineyards? If we've learnt anything from COVID, prevention and surveillance is key. We must continue to work with the Australian Government on surveillance for priority pests to the grape and wine industry.



And as an industry, we must fight to improve our digital biosecurity capability.

Transformation of Vinehealth's Register to a Digital Biosecurity Platform is part of this, which will deliver the South Australian wine industry significant benefits in biosecurity management, surveillance data capture, data sharing, curation and coordination.

In recent years, it has been pleasing to see more people in the industry talking about biosecurity. We now need to translate this into action on the ground and have a stronger voice into government as to what we need and expect to protect our vines from significant pest threats.

Established in 1899, Vinehealth Australia is an independent statutory authority in South Australia with a single-minded focus on grape and wine biosecurity. www.vinehealth.com.au



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