

Valley wine grape growers cope with drought

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Wine grape growers, who have enjoyed good times in the past couple of years, could have to dig in to endure the drought.

Literally. One piece of advice is to plunge a moisture sensor into the soil before irrigating, to be sure that the scarce water is truly needed that day.

“I’d go down 3 or 4 feet,” said Maxwell Norton, a farm adviser at the University of California Cooperative Extension. “I’m interested in what’s happening down there.”

He took part in a meeting Thursday at a Stanislaus County vineyard hosted by the Kingsburg-based San Joaquin Valley Winegrowers Association. Its members help supply the region’s wineries, including some of the world’s largest.

The California industry has been thriving thanks to strong demand around the world and bumper grape crops the last two years. This has meant more dollars per ton for grape growers and plenty of work for the thousands of people employed at wineries and related companies. Wine drinkers have had plenty of choices at various price levels.

The 2014 harvest is almost certain to drop because of water restrictions, which range from mild in a few places to drastic in others.

Grapevines have one advantage over many fruit and nut crops. They can survive a year without any irrigation, thanks to deep roots that seek out traces of water in the soil. “They don’t die easily,” Norton said.

But the vines can have greatly reduced yields in a year when water is short, and this could keep growers from benefitting from the overall strong market.

Norton said this is a good time for growers to take out vineyards nearing the end of their productive lives so more water can go to younger plantings.

He also urged growers to reduce fertilizer use, to prevent excessive leaf growth that sucks up much of the water.

Grape growers already are making widespread use of drip irrigation, which reduces waste by directing the water to the roots.

Even in years with adequate water, growers like to put their vines under a little water stress to improve the grape quality. Norton said they should be careful this year, because a summer heat spike could slow the development of the sugars. That's the stuff that turns into alcohol once the grapes are fermenting at wineries.

Peter Vallis, executive director of the grower group, said the California industry has boomed in part because of the weak dollar, which makes U.S. products cheaper to foreign buyers.

“Overall, we can't complain,” he said, “but the water thing is problematic.”

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