

Growers: Late-season rain may affect quantity, not quality of harvest

Vineyard workers are busy hedging and removing leaves and laterals from the vines as grapegrowers cope with a wet, cool late spring during bloom resulting in shatter — or grapes that fail to develop properly in many vineyards.

While tonnage is expected to be down significantly, quality should be excellent, said Andy Beckstoffer, chief executive officer at Beckstoffer Vineyards who owns 1,000-plus acres of vineyards in Napa County. Jim Verhey, a Big Ranch Vineyards owner and board president of Napa Valley Grapegrowers, also expects fruit quality to remain high.

“We have no reason not to expect that this is going to be an excellent quality year,” he said.

Randy Heinzen, vineyard manager for Beckstoffer Vineyards explained that shatter will probably define the 2011 vintage. Shatter occurred because rains inhibited the fertilization of many flowers and hindered the conversion from ovary to berry.

“We could smell the bloom in the field and see the flowers opening up ... but this was all taking place while we huddled under umbrellas and walked around in our muck boots, Heinzen said.

Still, Heinzen remains optimistic.

“While it is likely a down year in terms of production, I’ll take the rain events in June if it means we can have a dry, pleasant, even-paced harvest this year,” he said in an email.

While there have been rains late spring during bloom, Verhey said, the weather since last week has been “wonderful.”

The season is about 10 days behind schedule, said Verhey, whose 20-acre vineyard is in the Oak Knoll District. But if the weather stays like this, the vines will catch up, he said. “The vines are growing 1,000 miles an hour.”

Tony Truchard, who owns Truchard Vineyards with his wife, Jo Ann, and others stressed the importance of proper canopy management, referring to the removal of excessive leaves and laterals that improve air flow and allow sunlight to reach the clusters.

Paul Goldberg, vineyard manager at Bettinelli Vineyards, said canopy management greatly improves the flavor of the grapes — and leads to better wines.

Truchard also said he stays vigilant about powdery mildew, which he’s controlled with sulfur dust.

Vic Motto, chief executive officer of Global Wine Partners LLC in St. Helena, said it’s still too early to tell how this year’s weather will affect yield and prices.

“We do know that it’s going to be less. What we don’t know is how much less,” he said, referring to the yield.

During the recession, prices were soft, he said. “But for the past 1 1/2 year, demand has picked pack up. And so prices have firmed up,” Motto said.

Overall, Verhey called the growing season “good news, bad news.”

Workers spend more time on canopy management, weed control, mowing cover crops, contributing to the cost of farming increasing by as much as 15 percent this year.

“There is a lot of work to be done and there is a lot of money to be earned,” he said, referring to vineyard labor.

Yet, he’s had to water less. And with shatter, grape clusters are looser. More air goes through the clusters, thus reducing the risk of botrytis, the fungal disease that leads to rot.

Napa received .90 inches of rain on June 28. That added up to a total of .92 inches for the entire month, a record amount since June 1967, said National Weather Service meteorologist Steve Anderson in Monterey.

Temperatures should remain in the 80s Thursday and Friday, and in the 70s this weekend through next Wednesday, he said. No rain is expected, he said.