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Wine Industry

Napa grape growers say the late rain should not be a major problem

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Recent rains should not have a major impact on this year's grape crop since vines are just beginning to flower, according to growers.

Dreamstime

The rains that dropped 3-5 inches of rain on Napa County vineyards in the last week should not be a major problem for this year's grape crop, farmers are saying.

Fortunately, Pinot Noir and Chardonnay grapes are in the early stages of flowering, while Napa Valley's dominant grape, Cabernet Sauvignon, is yet to flower, they say.

"Rain is not the end of the world," said Garrett Buckland from Premier Viticultural Services and a member of the board of directors of Napa Valley Grapegrowers. "We don't anticipate problems. We always have one eye on the weather, but as farmers, we never worry. We have a lot of tools and we just design a program to deal with whatever we get."

The rains could affect the fertilization of the new flowers that produce the summer's grapes — the process called "set" — and potentially reduce the yield.

"Bloom is just started and in a few weeks we'll see what kind of set, we have," Buckland said.

"Luckily for us, we've seen very little bloom in Carneros and Rutherford," said Raf Llamas, Jr., assistant vineyard manager for ZD Wines. "In Carneros, the Pinot Noir has slightly more bloom than the Chardonnay, but we are confident that the rain was not enough to greatly impact our yields."

While the rains might affect Pinot Noir and Chardonnay, "Cab will be fine," said Marc Mondavi, a long-time vintner and winemaker. Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, the most widely planted variety in Napa Valley, bloom later. "We'll know in three weeks."

Mondavi said what happens next will be a telling factor. Ideally, the stormy weather will give way to warm, but not hot, sunny days.

“What we like to see for a good bloom is not a lot of variation,” Buckland said. “Not too hot, not too cold. (Temperatures in) the 70s are great for bloom.”

Michael Beaulac, a veteran winemaker from Pine Ridge Vineyards, said, “Right now, I’m not too worried by the rain. Bloom was just starting in our vineyards so it shouldn’t be a serious problem, as we’re keeping a close eye out and managing canopy appropriately. That being said, if all the ground water heats up, the vines could start growing too fast and be an issue for a good fruit set.” Pine Ridge makes wines from Oakville, Rutherford, Howell Mountain, Carneros and Stags Leap districts.

The rain and wet grounds might keep farmers out of the vineyards for a short time, Buckland said. “But what’s been nice so far is it’s been mild weather. We’re caught up on most of the early work in the vineyards.”

The late spring rain might lead to “early intervention,” like cutting back on too-vigorous growth, but on the other hand, he said, “we’ll see a decrease in water use and more dry farming.”

“It’s not normal, but it’s something we’ve seen,” Buckland said, adding that spring and summer rains “are common in a lot of other grape-growing regions around the world. Northern France, Oregon, Washington, and they make great wines.

“We’re happy with whatever we get.”

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Update: Napa Valley rainfall totals since Wednesday

Sasha Paulsen

Features Editor

Sasha Paulsen has been features editor at the Napa Valley Register since 1999. A graduate of Napa High School, she studied English at UC Berkeley and St. Mary's College and earned a Masters in Journalism from the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism.

