

GRAPEVINES HIT HARD BY BIG SPRING CHILL: UNUSUALLY COLD TEMPERATURES WREAK HAVOC WITH NORTH COAST VINEYARDS SUSCEPTIBLE TO FROST

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Dave Faloni's grapevines are dark, gnarly and colored by 40 years of weather, but the shoots now breaking out for the 2008 vintage are green, tender and susceptible to what is being described as the coldest spring in three decades.

"For the last 15 years, we have not had much frost up here," said Faloni, whose family has been farming the West Dry Creek Road ranch since 1925. "This is like going back to the 1970s."

The deep chill has devastated some North Coast vineyards especially susceptible to frost, causing as much as a 10 percent to 15 percent loss to Sonoma County's \$400 million crop.

"I have had one individual say it would cost him \$400,000, based on the contracts for his fruit," said Chris Maloney of Petaluma, who sells crop insurance. "That is huge." She said a quarter of her 400 policyholders, mostly from Sonoma County, have called her with crop damage reports within the past two days.

Similar reports are coming out of Mendocino and Lake counties, where damage is expected to be 20 percent. Although cold, Napa County has had little damage because almost all growers have adequate frost protection, said Terry Hall of the Napa Valley Vintners. "I have heard of a little damage in Pope Valley, but that's all," Hall said.

Grape growers should see some respite from the near-freezing temperatures of recent days. The forecast through the weekend includes overnight lows in the low 40s with daytime temperatures heading into the upper 70s on Saturday and Sunday. Showers are expected to subside this morning, then there's no more rain in the forecast until the middle of next week. Because of the cold, growers had to rely more than in past years on frost protection systems, either wind machines or sprinkler systems.

"There are some vineyards that haven't had frost protection ever, there are some people who aren't accustomed to frost," said Nick Frey, executive director of Sonoma County Grape Growers Association. "The people who had frost protection have had a lot of sleepless nights and spent a lot of money, but they came through it."

Faloni, who has a wind machine to protect much of the 52 acres he farms, said he has lost about 3 percent of his crop of zinfandel and chardonnay. Dennis De La Montanya of De La Montanya Vineyard and Winery in Healdsburg said the winery's Dry Creek and Alexander Valley vineyards were not damaged, and damage at the Russian River vineyard is 25 percent.

But at their 52-acre Petaluma vineyard, they lost all of the pinot noir and chardonnay shoots, probably reducing the yield by half, even with secondary buds providing fruit. He puts the loss at between \$200,000 and \$300,000. The countywide damage is probably 10 to 15 percent, said Lisa Correia, Sonoma County's agricultural commissioner. "We are not talking about devastation. For individual growers the damage could be high, but countywide, we are not looking at that," Correia said. Frey said it may not be until June that the damage is fully known. "Until we get through flowering and set, it is hard to know if the secondary fruit will get clusters and fruit on it," Frey said. "I haven't seen anything that damage is to the point that is total loss. It is spotty. Some people have lost 20 to 30 percent of yield potential, some worse, but until late June we won't know where it is."

The frost damage for Sonoma County growers follows a 2007 crop of 3.2 million tons, which was an increase over 2006, but short of the record 3.8 million ton harvest of 2005.

Cecil DeLoach of Hook & Ladder Vineyards and Winery said the winery has taken frost protection measures 30 times this year, compared to just a few times last year, and there is the possibility of frost for another two weeks. A grape grower for 35 years, DeLoach said that he hasn't yet assessed the damage to his 400 acres of grapes on Olivet Road.

"A lot of the stuff that looks OK now, but you won't know what you got until you get the bloom," he said. In Mendocino and Lake counties, grape yields could be down as much as 20 percent, wine industry officials said.

"It's a major setback because the local grape economy was just showing some signs of improvement," said Mark Welch, a Potter Valley grape grower and vineyard manager. The weather has been freezing overnight since March, dipping as low as 25 degrees in Potter Valley and some areas of Lake County.

Charlie Barra, who's farmed in Redwood Valley for more than 50 years, said growers typically rely on overhead sprinkler systems to keep their freshly budded vineyards from freezing. "But there's no protection if the temperatures get too low," said Barra. Frost fears in the spring are part of every growing season, but Barra and other growers said the extended string of cold nights this spring is unusual. "Usually, we have two-three nights that we have to deal. So far this year, there's been 16-17," he said.

The unusually long string of cold nights over the past month has also drained growers' reservoirs, which are the mainstay of local irrigation systems. "If you don't have water, you don't have frost protection," Barra said. Lake County Agricultural Commissioner Steve Hajik said the county's walnut orchards also have been hit hard. Staff Writer Randi Rossmann contributed to this report.

Photo: 2 by JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

1. Frost-burned chardonnay clusters from the Dry Creek Valley won't produce fruit this season. 2. Dave Faloni, whose family has been farming in the Dry Creek Valley for 80 years, inspects frost-burned chardonnay vines that suffered in the recent unusually cold weather. Faloni lost about 3% of his crop, mostly in low-lying areas, while nearby vines (the green in the upper right) survived.

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Note: It should be noted that many times in recent years reports of frost damage were made when temperatures did not reach the freezing night temperatures needed to produce crop damage to leaves and blooms. High and Extreme UV and Infrared Radiation Levels are also being associated with burned or crisped leaves when night temperatures are too high for frost damage.