

Idaho wine grape growers concerned about cold's impact

By SEAN ELLIS

CALDWELL, Idaho -- While most farmers in southwest Idaho are thinking about the relentless heat, wine grape growers are still wondering how cold spells in January and late spring will impact yields.

Industry experts say the state's overall wine grape crop looks good but some areas sustained significant damage as a result of a deep freeze in January and then a spring frost in late May.

"There could be 20 percent damage on certain blocks, but the damage is spotty and in really small areas here and there," said winemaker Martin Fujishin, who teaches viticulture at Treasure Valley Community College.

Most vines that sustained cold damage are bouncing back but there are some areas where they are not fully covered with foliage like they should be, said professor Essie Fallahi, University of Idaho's project leader on fruit crops.

"The damage is quite variable from location to location," he said. "In some places, it's worse than others."

Bitner Vineyards owner Ron Bitner said he will have about a 15 percent loss on his 3 acres of syrah grapes this year, "but my other 12 acres of grapes are fine. Overall, my crop looks good this year."

Bitner said he has had more wineries ask him for grapes this year and "I get the feeling the shortage of grapes in Idaho is more than normal this year."

A deep freeze that blanketed the Treasure Valley for much of January came perilously close to reaching temperatures that would have wiped out a lot of vines, Fallahi said.

Wine grapes commonly grown in Idaho can tolerate temperatures down to 10 degrees below zero but some locations in the valley got even colder than that.

The fact that the cold snap came when the plants were in deep dormancy prevented widespread damage, Fallahi said.

"The positive thing is that when that cold came, the vines were at their deepest point of dormancy," he said. "Otherwise, we would not have any vines left now."

The May frost, and an earlier one in March, did most of the damage, he added, because plants had emerged from dormancy and growth activity was occurring.

"A spring frost can be more detrimental to vines than a winter freeze," he said. "Those are the ones that hurt us pretty bad."

Wine grapes have three buds and while the deep freeze killed some plants' primary buds, the secondary or tertiary buds survived.

"Sometimes the second and third bud do not produce as high a quality of cluster as the first one does, but it does produce a crop," Fallahi said.

Bitner said he has seen more growth from secondary and tertiary buds than normal this year. Secondary and tertiary buds take longer to ripen, he said, which can push harvest in Idaho into November, making them susceptible to a fall frost.

The good news about the cold is that it resulted in virtually no disease or bug pressure this year, Bitner

said. **Idaho wine grape growers concerned about cold's impact**