

## Big chill costs vineyards

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A freak late freeze is expected to slash grape yields in the Sonoita/Elgin vineyards of Santa Cruz County, and at one of the higher elevation vineyards in nearby Cochise County.

Overnight May 1, the temperature in Elgin, just south and east of Sonoita, hit 28 degrees and stayed there for four hours, said Kent Callaghan, of Callaghan Vineyards.

"Anything that was green was basically toast," Callaghan said.

In one case, at nearby Dos Cabezas WineWorks' vineyards, the sap froze in a variety that was already in an advanced state of growth, splitting the woody vines.

But even without that, the expected result for Callaghan is a 60 to 70 percent crop reduction, Callaghan said.

Some of that yield loss will be made up with grapes purchased from Cochise County growers to the east in Willcox, Kansas Settlement and Sulphur Springs Valley, Callaghan said.

But paying to replace the damaged grapes isn't the only cost, Callaghan said.

Of the varieties damaged the most, some must be cut back and won't return to their yield level for a couple of years. And labor costs for "additional passes" - trimming and retraining the damaged plants - will also add to the year's labor costs, Callaghan said.

Viognier, a white grape, was particularly hard hit. Callaghan said he will have virtually no crop from that variety this year.

Petit Verdot "got hammered hard," he added.

Then, after the recovering plants sent out delicate shoots, they were blown off by strong winds.

Not all varieties were as badly damaged as those already in an advanced state of budding. Callaghan added 5 acres of new vines in 2007 and expected the 25 acres total would yield enough grapes to make 80 to 90 percent of their output this year, the rest purchased from nearby Cochise County growers.

But now, Callaghan said, he'll have to buy half the grapes he uses this year, and still won't make as much wine as last year.

"Frost is always an issue for us because of elevation (nearly 5,000 feet)," said Todd Bostock, of Dos Cabezas WineWorks and president of the Arizona Wine Growers Association.

Tempranillo, typically a late-budding variety, is planted in the coldest part of Dos Cabezas' Elgin acreage.

But the four hours of cold took a toll, in some cases splitting the woody vines.

"The important lesson for us is looking at the varieties that did well," Bostock said. "We have varieties - Mourvedre and Roussanne - that weren't damaged at all.

"But yield? It's pretty significant for us," Bostock added. "We probably lost one third or a little more of our crop this year."

While most of the growers in Cochise County escaped heavy frost damage this year, Rod Keeling, co-owner of Keeling-Schaefer Vineyards with wife Jan Schaefer, wasn't as lucky.

Just three miles to the south, Keeling said, the acreage he works for Lawrence Dunham Vineyards escaped any damage.

"It's such a micro (climate) thing," Keeling said. "We were just a couple degrees cooler."

Keeling plans to put in some orchard fans or ground-level recirculators that may hold off the next frost, or make it less damaging.

The projected yield for its 21 acres will make 2,000 cases of 12-bottle cases, compared with the 3,000 cases it got from that acreage last year.

"So, the ultimate loss, one thousand cases, is a lot of money," Keeling said.

Still, there's no whining or sour grapes.

"Any time you grow fruit at 5,000 feet above sea level you're going to have frost as your No. 1 problem," Keeling said.

Callaghan, too, is somewhat philosophical about the frost.

"Some years you have a great yield. Some years you have bad weather. And some years with bad weather may produce some great wine," he said.

"Critics don't care about your profitability. They care about what's in the bottle," Callaghan said.  
"Ironically, when this happens you tend to produce your best wines.

"Maybe it's a silver lining. You tend to forget about it if in 15 years you can sit down and have a great bottle of wine."

But the year 2010, he said, "certainly won't be a very profitable one."

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Kent Callaghan of Callaghan vineyards in Elgin

*Contact reporter Dan Sorenson at [dsorenson@azstarnet.com](mailto:dsorenson@azstarnet.com) or 573-4185.*