



## Fires take licks at Arizona winemakers

by Bonnie Lewis

As Rod Keeling of [Keeling Schaefer Vineyards](#) in Pearce, AZ, learned of Horseshoe 2 fire's encroachment into Rock Creek about three miles east of his vineyard late last week, he drove northwest to Casa Grande and picked up his brother's old fire truck. He filled the truck with water the next morning and set up extra emergency water tanks and generators for the water pumps, in case the power was shut off.

"Hope we don't need any of it," he posted. At a US Forest Services' meeting in Sunglow, AZ, he learned that had some time before they had to worry...or not.

Early the next morning, Keeling went up Rock Creek a mile or so to the fire line and discovered about 100 firefighters just finishing-up the night's operations. They had burned-back against the fire all along a 4-mile line and through the creek.

"Looks like the fire no longer has a direct fuel line to the vineyard. The mountain is black from the base to the top; lots of trees still green," he posted.

Another Willcox region winemaker was not so fortunate. Over at the [Colibri Vineyards](#), located near Portal, AZ, closer to the heart of the Horseshoe 2 fire, Bob Johnson, owner and past-president of the [Arizona Winegrowers Association \(AWGA\)](#), was examining the damage. Fire had swept through his vineyard in East Whitetail Canyon. The thirty-foot-high wall of flames spared the house and winery, but caused damage to the vineyard; they are still accessing other damages.

The outpouring of support from fellow winemakers is swift and sincere.

Meanwhile, other Arizona winemakers in the Sonoita/Elgin region keep a watchful eye on the Monument fire that is raging about 25 or more miles away, in and around Hereford and Sierra Vista, AZ. Like other major raging fires in Arizona for the past two months, this one is fueled by extremely low humidity, low dew point, high temperatures, bone-dry vegetation, and raging winds. Additionally, the Monument fire's path has been unpredictable, currently traveling through a more densely populated area and has destroyed many residents and buildings in its path.

According to Peggy Fiandaca, president of the AWGA from the Lawrence Dunhama Vineyards, "We are very concerned about the impact this fire has had on Colibri Vineyards and hope the damage is not great. It is my understanding that they are still assessing the damage. As a result of the current wildfires we must also be concerned about the debris run-off from the mountains when the summer monsoons begin that can impact vineyards in the Chiricahua foothills. Basically the grape growers are dramatically impacted by the weather and winemakers are impacted by the quality and quantity of grapes that they can get. There is not enough wine grapes being grown in Arizona to meet the demand so any crop that is damaged has a ripple affect. Let's hope that we have a perfect summer and wonderful harvest season. The Arizona wine industry needs one."

The Arizona winemakers are a hearty and heart-full bunch; growing grapes and producing wines in this terroir is not the most weather-blessed experience and there are continual challenges. But when times get tough, the entire community rises to the occasion and supports one another. In spite of it all, the good grapes grow, they are picked, processed, and produced to yield gratifying and amazing wines that rival any and all produced around the world.

Cheers to this genial bunch of grape growers; and please pray for rain in Arizona soon.