Voracious insect brings disease to county's mountain vineyards

Wineries

By TERESA JIMENEZ
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A bug that usually makes its meal of forest shrubs is carrying a disease that sucks the juices from nearby grapevines, causing crops at some vineyards to dry up.

The bug, a blue-green sharpshooter from the leaf hopper family, is picking up the bacteria from forest plants and then transferring it to the grapevines. UC Berkeley researcher Alex Purcell says he doesn't know why it's taken so long for the infection, called Pierce's disease, to hit local vineyards.

"The curious thing in Santa Cruz is why the disease hasn't been there sooner," Purcell said. "We really don't know what we can do — there's no chemical control."

Purcell said that for many of the small vineyards in the Santa Cruz mountains, it won't be profitable to grow grapes.

"The bigger vineyards can grow less sensitive varieties, and maybe use chemical treatment. Sometimes growers can cut down plants the bugs live on, but in this case it's the forest," he said.

The insects move in from surrounding vegetation in the spring, Purcell said. The bugs then act as transmitters, since the bacteria sticks in their mouth, he said.

Some of the more popular grape variations are most susceptible to the disease, including the Pinot Noir, Purcell said.

The climate of the Santa Cruz Mountains produces some of the best wine grapes around, winery owners say, and the vines being lost to the bacteria aren't easily replaced.
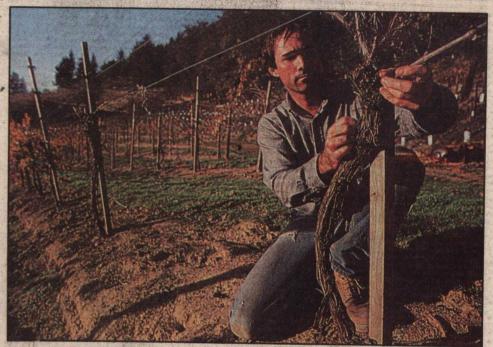
"We purchase grapes from a number of vineyards, but every vineyard is unique," said Bob Roudon of Roudon-Smith Winery. "There are no other Pinot Noirs in Santa Cruz that we can buy, and they're not the same elsewhere."

Among growers hard hit is Ralph Cox in Bonny Doon. His plants, on one and a half acres, didn't produce enough grapes to sell to Roudon-Smith Winery, his regular customer. And Cox said his neighbors aren't doing very well, either.

The infected grapevines take from one to five years to die, and most stop producing grapes within two or three years, Jason Brandt Lewis, Sentinel wine columnist, said.

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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Greg Stokes of David Bruce Winery checks an infected stalk.

Vineyards

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Greg Stokes, vineyard manager for David Bruce Winery, said the insects are all around the grapevines, but there's no way to stop the spread of the infection.

"I'm not sure how the bacteria got here. It has probably been here all along," Stokes said. "I don't know why it's coming out now."

Lynea Davis, a vineyard consultant, said some vines that have died from the disease were planted up to 30 years ago.

Stokes said growers began to notice a decrease in the number of grapes being produced by the vines last year, and have recently begun looking into solutions to the problem. Winery owners in the county said they're not sure how the disease will affect the amount of wine they produce.

But either way, Stokes made it clear that wine quality won't decline.

Purcell said spraying the vineyards wouldn't help because the bugs live in the forest.

"We have no plan of attack to control this thing," Stokes said.

"There are no hard-fast, proven solutions."

But Davis said she doesn't expect the disease to spread through the county's 110 acres of wine grapes, which have a crop value of $262,000.

"It's just one of those things. It's not going to sweep through the county and knock out all the vines," Davis said, because she thinks those affected so far are just isolated cases.

Purcell said the same disease wiped out 30,000 acres of grapevines in Southern California's Anaheim Hills in the 1880s, which is why the disease has been called "mysterious disease," "Anaheim disease" and "California Vine Disease."

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