

Responding To Smoke Events: Know Your Insurance, Know Your Contract, Value Your Relationships

In 2017 repeated smoke events impacted much of Washington State and devastating fires hit California wine country. These events follow a seeming trend in significant wild fires in the west and are resulting in questions about the impact of smoke on grapes and wine making.

Research has established that 'smoke taint' is created by volatile compounds in smoke that have characteristic aromas associated with smoke. If grapes are tainted, the wine produced from them may have unpleasant smoke related aromas and flavors. This can negatively impact the salability of the wine which, in turn, can impact winery revenue. These compounds can also bind with sugar molecules to form glycosides. Glycosides don't smell like smoke in grapes, but the acids in wine break down the glycosides over time releasing the original volatile smoke compounds. As a result, wines which seemed fine at first may develop smoky aromas over time. This can also negatively impact grower revenue when wineries, wary of taint, seek means to avoid purchasing potentially tainted grapes.

But, how much smoke does it take to taint grapes for wine? When, during ripening, and for how long, is exposure to smoke a factor? More research is needed to answer these questions definitively. Until then, the industry must work with available information.

Know Your Insurance

- Growers should talk to their agent about how smoke taint is covered and how to report a claim. For crop insurance, provide proper notice of loss within 15 days after end of insurance; submit a claim within 60 days after insurance period.
- The policyholder must prove that grapes are tainted. If smoke taint is suspected, have your grapes tested for elevated levels of guaiacal (G) and 4-methylguaiacol (4MG) by an independent/certified lab.
- Wineries must keep potentially smoke-tainted grapes/juice completely separate. Do not mix production before appraisal has occurred.

Know Your Contract

- Have a contract.
- Pay attention to each contract you have and what is/is not included.
- As smoke taint language begins to appear in contracts, understand how it can affect you.

Value Your Relationships

- Although recent years have seen a number of smoke events, smoke taint is not, yet, a high frequency occurrence. Consider the impact of short term responses to long term business.

What is Winegrowers Doing for You?

Washington Winegrowers is networking with Washington State University researchers and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency to explore indicators and set benchmarks for smoke taint detection and to develop information and procedures to improve grower and winery decision-making and responses to future smoke events.

More Information:

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USDA RMA Crop Insurance Agent Locator
<https://www.rma.usda.gov/tools/agent.html>

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