

Yarra Valley latest

18 Feb 2009 by Dr Tony Jordan

Dr Tony Jordan of the Yarra Valley Winegrowers Association sends the following report.

Since the [statement](#) we released on 13 Feb 2009, more details have come to hand which sadly indicate that two families associated with the wine industry have perished. Further information has also indicated more damage to vineyards and wineries than previously known.

This is our best assessment as of today, 18 Feb 2009.

Even though weather conditions are milder, there remains the threat of further fires spreading from fires burning in the forested mountain areas to the north, east and south of the Yarra Valley. As stated in the report of 13 Feb, about 25% of the Yarra Valley viticultural area (GI) has been directly impacted by grass or bushfires.

Deaths

Wine business proprietor Greg Leonard and his wife Gail died in the fires that swept through the Steels Creek area. Wine distributor Rob Davy, his wife and their two children perished in the Kinglake fire. Their deaths are part of the horrifying and rising toll of over 200 people killed on Saturday and Sunday 9/10 Feb. The deepest sympathy of the YVWGA members goes out to the relatives and friends of Greg, Rob and their families.

Vineyard damage

So far we have had information that 29 vineyards have been damaged or destroyed, wholly or partially, by fire and this corresponds to an area of 154 ha (385 acres). This represents about five per cent of the planted vineyard area in the Yarra Valley GI. Thus the impact on the total grape crop in 2009 is not large. In saying this, the YVWGA recognises the considerable personal and financial loss to individual vineyards that have been damaged.

Property and asset damage

Three small wineries - Roundstone, Yarra Yarra and Calders - have been destroyed. Tomlinsons lost winery equipment, Immerse winery lost three accommodation buildings and a barn, Punt Road winery lost a machinery shed, Domaine Chandon suffered fire damage to two warehouses and Punch some damage to the winery. 35 wineries and vineyards have suffered some asset damage.

Smoke taint

The potential for smoke taint is increasing. Because there was a wind change from northerly to southerly only hours after the fires commenced on Saturday 7 Feb, the valley was largely clear of smoke until 13 Feb. However since then the wind has moved to the east, which is pushing smoke from back burning fires in the Yarra Ranges into the valley, increasing the risk of smoke taint in later- maturing varieties. Harvest is proceeding and whites and reds picked so far have not shown smoke taint even from vineyards close to where the fires occurred.

Crop loss due to other factors

Crops harvested so far are much smaller than expected. Many are 30 to 50% below estimates. In some parts of the valley this is due to the effect of the late January hot spell which caused vine stress and sunburn (other areas were not significantly affected) and there are also impacts from poor fruit set and even spring frosts in some pockets.

Quality of wines is still expected to be good.

Business back to normal

Harvest has started and most wineries are operating normally and are open to visitors. Wineries are concerned that the public will have the wrong picture of the valley after the fires and not visit. Much of the valley is unaffected and wineries are looking for their support and hoping to welcome them.