



California Wine Industry Establishes New Green Certification

Voluntary statewide program will give sustainability claims more credibility

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Consumers trying to figure out if a winery lives up to its "green" claims now have a little extra help: The new statewide Certified California Sustainable Winegrowing (CCSW) program, introduced Jan. 13. The CCSW program helps define the concept of sustainability, with the goal of giving it much the same weight as organic and biodynamic certification. Third-party auditors will visit participating wineries and growers to verify that they follow a broad range of environmentally friendly practices.

The voluntary certification was initiated by major California winery and grower organizations to demonstrate their industry's commitment to environmentally sound, socially ethical and financially viable business practices. The new certification gives wineries and vineyards "a means of credibly sharing their progress with customers," thereby encouraging them to adopt best practices, said Bobby Koch, president and CEO of the Wine Institute, which participated in the program's creation, along with the California Association of Winegrape Growers.

Over the past three years, the two groups' nonprofit California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance worked with consultants to develop a flexible framework that would address sustainability issues facing businesses of all sizes and in all of the state's diverse wine regions. After participating in a pilot program to test the requirements, 17 wine companies ranging from small family farms to the world's biggest wine producers have earned the certification for some or all of their operations. (*See the full list at the end.)

"Do we need more regulation as a winery? No, we already have the feds, state and county," said Michael Honig, owner of Honig Vineyard & Winery, one of the pilot participants. "But the average consumer feels better knowing there's some certification, versus people saying they are doing one thing and really doing another."

Besides, Honig noted, the new certification allows winegrowers to demonstrate that sustainability isn't just a cop-out that allows them to occasionally use chemicals while saying they are "green;" a truly sustainable business may surpass the requirements of organic certification. "Where organic talks about pesticide use, sustainability goes to the next step and allows us to address things that don't get addressed in organic [certification]—such as wind power, water conservation, employee benefits, materials handling and providing natural habitat for birds and predators."

The CCSW certification grew out of the Sustainable Winegrowing Program, launched in 2002 by the Wine Institute and the California Association of Winegrape Growers to teach their members about best environmental practices and encourage them to assess the need for improvements within their own businesses. So far, 1,566 vineyards and wineries have conducted self-assessments using the extensive Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices workbook, which provides the basis for the certification. In

all, the assessments account for 46 percent of California's 526,000 vineyard acres and 59 percent of the state's 240 million-case production.

Even with the certification, communicating the message of sustainability—which hasn't had as clear an identity as organic in many consumers' minds—may still be a challenge. To start, the U.S. government does not currently permit use of the CCSW logo and related claims on wine bottles. So for now, those may only appear on certified participants' websites, secondary marketing materials and on information displayed in wineries or vineyards. "This is not a consumer-facing program yet; this is not about putting a label on a bottle," said Chris Savage, senior director of global environmental affairs for E. & J. Gallo Winery and current chair of the alliance. "This is to buoy the entire industry's sustainable profile."

Second, the certification program is based on a "process of continuous improvement" that can be complex to explain. Rather than requiring that all participants stick to the exact same set of practices, the CCSW program allows participants to concentrate on the goals that best address the specific environmental and community issues faced in their region.

A one-size-fits-all model might have excluded many people, said consultant John Heckman, director of FiveWinds International. A winery and a vineyard don't have the same energy needs, for example. And for a producer in the Central Valley, air quality may be the biggest issue, while for one in Northern California, located near a salmon-spawning stream, erosion and water management might be more important. "We have a broad and diverse industry," Heckman said. "It was a real challenge to maintain that inclusivity but have an objective way to communicate that to the public."

Wineries and vineyards start by evaluating their operations against the 227 best practices in the Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices Self-Assessment Workbook; for each criteria, they score themselves on a scale of 1 to 4. To be eligible for certification, they must meet 58 prerequisites including criteria related to air and water quality, water conservation, energy efficiency, reduced pesticide use and the preservation of ecosystems and animal habitat. An approved third-party auditor, paid by the company, then must verify the accuracy of the scores and the practices.

However, except for five of the prerequisites, the participants don't need to meet a minimum score. For most of the criteria, they can earn a 1, as long as they develop an action plan for improvement; for 14 of those prerequisites, they must improve their score the following year. For the others—which may have major financial costs or require more than a year to implement—there is no set timeline to achieve a higher score. Nonetheless, the audits are conducted annually—onsite the first year and then every third year—to ensure that improvement is demonstrated each year, with objective evidence supported by documentation or photographs.

While some people may question whether the certification is stringent enough, just going through the 227-point evaluation shows a lot of commitment, says Honig. "It took a lot of time, but it was valuable, because it gave you that broad perspective ... This opened our eyes to 'Hey, we could be doing this better,' or 'Hey, we're doing something really well and other people can learn from this.'"

As the program moves forward, CSWA will be measuring and tracking performance across the industry for water and energy efficiency, greenhouse gas emissions and other areas. Once a baseline is set, these metrics will be tied into the certification, so that participants will need to consider industry-wide targets when creating their action plans.

The third major challenge in earning acceptance is that there's still no national standard for sustainability, unlike the National Organic Program. California's wine industry isn't the first to introduce its own sustainability certification, and the approach and details of CCSW vary from others out there—potentially confusing consumers. The Oregon Wine Board, for example, [introduced Oregon Certified Sustainable Wine in 2009](#), but chose to recognize organic, biodynamic, Low Input Viticulture and Enology (LIVE)

sustainable and Food Alliance certification under its umbrella, while requiring that 97 percent of the grapes come from certified sources.

In addition, wineries and vineyards already certified under regional programs in California—such as Lodi Rules, the Central Coast's Sustainability in Practice and Napa Green—may be reluctant to go to the trouble of getting another certification. To address that, the alliance is working with the regional groups to cost-effectively pursue multiple certifications and avoid duplication of effort where there is overlap between the programs. It's also collaborating with international organizations to ensure there is consistency among global standards.

"I feel like this is giving birth after 10 years," said Honig, who chaired the first committee to develop the original sustainability code and still serves on the Wine Institute board. "We've come up with something we can be proud of. It's not perfect, but we'll make it perfect. We're not going to change things overnight, but we're getting people thinking about it. I'm still naive enough to think we can make a difference."

* The companies that earned certification for some or all of their winery or vineyard operations are:

Clos LaChance Wines
Concannon Vineyard/Concannon Winery
Constellation Wines U.S.
Cooper-Garrod Estate Vineyards
Diageo Chateau & Estate Wines
Fetzer Vineyards/Bonterra Vineyards
E. & J. Gallo Winery
Goldeneye Winery
The Hess Collection
Honig Vineyard & Winery
J. Lohr Vineyards & Wines
Kunde Family Estate
Meridian Vineyards/Taz Vineyards
Monterey Pacific, Inc.
Roberts Vineyard Services
Rodney Strong Wine Estates
Vino Farms