

# Lack of moisture threatens El Dorado vineyards

By Kathryn Reed

PLACERVILLE – Brittle brown. That's what the El Dorado County wine country looks like.

While the vines are normally dormant this time of year, the ground between them is usually a lush green. Instead, it's barren.

Rick Wickham has never seen it so bad in the 30 years he has been in the vineyard management business. Meyers Ranch Vineyards Services Co. based in Somerset manages nearly 800 acres. Most are in El Dorado County, with some in Amador County. The acreage covers 34 vineyards for about a dozen wineries.

"In El Dorado County our aquifer is recharged from snowpack and that doesn't look good. Most in El Dorado County are on well water and well water is affected by the gallons per minute you can pump," Wickham told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Vineyard managers in El Dorado County are worried because of lack of rain this winter. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Eldorado Irrigation District supplies many vineyards with water. A drought stage has not been enacted – yet. But with Gov. Jerry Brown declaring last week that the state is in a drought, water districts are apt to follow suit. This could be especially troubling in the heart of the summer when Mother Nature could decide to unleash a heat wave.

In a meeting of vineyard managers on Jan. 13 the talk was about how everyone is worried about water.

Lynn Wunderlich, a UC Cooperative Extension farm advisor, is giving a drought seminar for farmers on Feb. 20 at UC Davis. Wickham is sending several of his people to it.

January 2014 is set to go down in the books – for many locations in California – as one of the driest and warmest on record.

Charlie Jones, owner of Lava Cap Winery in Placerville, said in a normal year about 38 inches of rain falls. Last year about 25 inches fell. To date about 5 inches have accumulated. He, too, has been in the business for 30 years and has never seen it so bad.

Soil in El Dorado County is alluvial and granitic so it does not hold water well. This is the opposite of Amador County where it is more like clay and traps water better.

One way to test the soil for water is with a neutron probe. Usually this is done in early June, with the presumption irrigation will start in mid-June if need be. But Wickham started probing this month and is finding alarming results.

“It’s as low as it normally would be in September,” Wickham said.

Jones knows of people who are watering the vines so the water will freeze to the plants. This forms an insulation.

It’s not just El Dorado County vineyards that are threatened

by the lack of rain. Paso Robles has an ordinance that bans planting of new crops that need irrigation.

The soil is also warm. This is a prelude to bud break. One way to combat that is to water now so the soil gets colder.

"We are very fearful they are going to start sprouting," Davell Hays of Chateau Davell in Camino told *Lake Tahoe News*.

As a micro-winery with less than 5 acres, there is even less wriggle room for Chateau Davell if winter never comes.

If buds start sprouting now or in the coming weeks, it's likely the fruit would be damaged or wiped out with a hard freeze. Freezes often come to the foothills as late as May.

One thing Jones has going for his vineyards is that the slope allows for a great deal of air movement, which helps prevent frost.

Deciding when to prune is on everyone's mind. Typically pruning is done later in El Dorado County because of the threat of a hard frost.

Jones is considering a double prune, which could buy him two weeks.

"The other thing that affects us is weed control. It requires rain within 22 days of application," Wickham said. "We should be doing weed control now and we are holding off for a little better precipitation in the weeks to come."

But the forecast is not looking like anything different than what has been the norm for weeks – sun and warmth.