

Australia's grapevine germplasm collections under threat

Vine improvement groups call for more transparency and engagement on germplasm future.

Kellie Arbuckle

THE FUTURE OF some of the world's most unique grapevine material is being put at risk due to a lack of funding from Australia's wine industry.

This was the key finding from a six-month review into the status of Australia's germplasm collections, commissioned by the Grape and Wine Research and Development Corporation.

The review found that current maintenance of collections, some of which contain pre-phylloxera heritage material that is probably unique to Australia, was unsustainable.

It found a lack of industry funds was likely to result in the closure of collections, less accessibility to high-health varieties and more

private importation.

Discussions between the GWRDC Board and Scholefield Robinson Horticultural Services, who conducted the review, have led to recommendations for the establishment of two collections: a germplasm repository of all varieties, and a high-health collection for in-demand varieties and clones.

Both collections would be developed through the amalgamation and/or consolidation of existing collections.

The report also outlined options for future funding of the collections, such as the introduction of a nursery levy (or raising the existing nursery pot levy), or through the implementation of the biosecurity levy (if applicable).

KEY FINDINGS

- There are about 900 different grapevine varieties in Australian collections
- About half of these varieties are present in two or more collections; the other half exists only in a single collection
- Some of the varieties are pre-phylloxera heritage material and probably unique to Australia
- The most valuable collections, in terms of content, are those held by CSIRO, SARDI, the Australian Vine Improvement Association and the Riverland Vine Improvement Committee
- Current resourcing for grapevine germplasm in Australia relies on cutting sales and government agency support and is not sustainable.



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A freshly cut bundle of vine cuttings ready to go to the processing depot at RVIC.

The recommendations are now being considered by the Winemakers' Federation of Australia and Wine Grape Growers Australia.

The GWRDC said it will consult with "selected key industry" stakeholders before deciding how Australia's grapevine germplasm will be maintained.

While both WFA and WGGGA have welcomed the review, a number of vine improvement groups and nurseries have expressed frustration at what they say has been a lack of engagement and transparency throughout the review process.

"This review did not meet with or ask for input from any vine improvement body – state or national – nor did they discuss it with the nursery industry," said Kym Ludvigsen, executive committee chairman of the Australian Vine Improvement Association.

"You'd think they would consult with the people in the industry, especially when they're being asked to fund it."

Riverland Vine Improvement Committee manager David Nitschke said the recognition of germplasm maintenance had been an "industry weakness".

"The necessity for the industry to identify its germplasm pool in Australia is essential and not knowing what it's had until now is more than an oversight – it's neglectful," Nitschke said.

"At the same time, the review is a welcome step forward."

The most valuable collections currently, in terms of content, are those held by CSIRO, AVIA, SARDI and RVIC.

Nitschke said the current lack of access to collections, including those at SARDI and CSIRO, was already a burden on

the wine industry.

"That we've been shut out as an industry has made for more frustration," he said.

WGGGA executive officer Lawrie Stanford said the review was a step in the right direction.

"The report is definitely welcomed by WGGGA. The germplasm collections are highly vulnerable, so this report was a necessary first step to understand what is required," he said.

"At the end of the day we all know it's going to be a costly activity, so the key problem will be to do with funding."

Australia's grapevine germplasm currently relies on funding from cutting sales and government agency support – both of which have been declared unsustainable in the review.

The total number of different varieties within Australian collections is about 900. About half of these varieties are present in two or more collections, while the other half exists only in a single collection.

Nitschke said more consultation was needed before a final decision is made.

"All stakeholders need to have an opportunity to have input into what they would like to see and what level of commitment they are prepared to put towards maintaining the collections," he said.

The GWRDC defines 'grapevine germplasm' as "the genetic diversity that is captured in the different cultivars of the classic European species, *Vitis vinifera* (everything from Albariño to Zinfandel), the American species *V. labrusca*, *V. rotundifolia*, and their hybrids (such as Chambourcin), and in the species used for rootstocks, *V. riparia*".

GW