



VineBalance:

New York State's Sustainable Viticulture Program

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Jamie Hawk, Sustainable Viticulture Community Educator since February 2006, coordinates state-wide grower outreach, project reporting and educational material development for the New York Farm Viability-supported sustainable viticulture program. His background in sustainable development spans the globe from Alaska to Zambia.

In 2004, industry groups from throughout the state asked regional Cooperative Extension grape programs to develop an outreach and education program to promote the adoption of sustainable viticultural practices in New York vineyards. New York State's sustainable viticulture program, thus established through a cooperative effort between the Finger Lakes Grape Program, Lake Erie Regional Grape Program and Long Island's grape extension program, is designed to both document sustainable grape growing practices already in place and promote sustainable practices throughout the industry. The foundation of the program is its grower self-assessment workbook – 134 questions in 8 sections covering the multitude of management decisions faced by New York State grape growers.



The workbook sections evolved from materials of two separate programs in New York: NYS Agricultural Environmental Management (AEM) worksheets and a similar workbook developed for Long Island growers by the Long Island grape program. A steering committee composed of extension, research, industry and grower representatives (from National Grape Cooperative, Centerra Wine Co., and Finger Lakes and Long Island vineyards), tackled the task of reviewing and developing questions that encompass the practices and challenges found in the varied growing regions of New York. The workbook acts as a roadmap for evaluating viticultural practices, addressing the diversity of the state's grape growing industry with a broad range of questions.

Five growers from each of the three cooperative program areas volunteered to field-test the workbook and provide feedback on possible improvements with the content, format and style of the first draft. Unanimously, the growers saw no need for major revisions.

Continued outreach has been funded through a grant from the New York Farm Viability Institute. Through June 2007, a total of fifty-two growers from the Finger Lakes, Lake Erie Region, Long Island, and Hudson Valley have completed the workbook. The next step with these growers is the development and implementation of an action plan based on the results of their self-assessment. Thus far, sixteen growers have completed action plans detailing the adoption of 144 specific sustainable practices including the safe storage and handling of

fertilizers and pesticides (40% of the proposed practice changes), monitoring and improving soil health (19%), and modifying sprayers to increase deposition and reduce drift (5%). The workbook has been adopted as the AEM worksheets for viticulture, so Soil and Water Conservation District personnel are active in the action plan stage, educating the growers on any cost-sharing opportunities available to them.

Complimenting the workbook is an educational newsletter, *Sustainable Viticulture in the Northeast*, that provides an in-depth examination of the economic, environmental and social implications of specific practices and includes interviews with growers who have put the principles described in the newsletter into practice on their farms. Three newsletters have been published thus far, "Optimizing Nitrogen Use in Vineyards", "Soil and Water Conservation Practices for Vineyards", and "Alternate Weed Management in New York Vineyards", and future topics will include spray technologies, reduced risk pesticides, scouting and biofuels, among others. The program will publish six newsletters per year, which, taken together, will create a valuable resource as a compendium of sustainable viticultural practices.

A website dedicated to the program (www.vinebalance.com) will be launched this summer, which will contain an interactive version of the workbook and links to program newsletters and other viticultural sites. Growers will have the ability to create an account and password to complete the workbook online at their own pace, and one-on-one assistance from program personnel will continue as desired. The 52 growers participating thus far manage 4,325 acres of grapes. Our goals are to have 35 growers active in the program by mid-2007 and 100 in the program by the end of 2008 (based on the average farm presently active with the program, these 100 growers will represent about one-third of the vineyard acreage in NYS).

The potential benefits to participating growers are numerous and include: 1) in-program collaboration with state and federal agencies will open cost-sharing opportunities for farm improvements; 2) increased product marketability for the grapes and grape products produced through sustainable means; 3) economic and environmental savings through efficient use of fertilizers and agri-chemicals; and 4) improved neighbor relations and industry reputation. Grape production is a high-profile agricultural enterprise, and by making it an industry-wide goal to produce grapes, juice, and wine utilizing practices that minimize environmental impacts and are economically viable and socially responsible, growers will help themselves and New York State by reducing risks and moving the industry toward improved production practices.

For information about these resources, please call James Hawk at (315) 536-5123.