

Texas State Legislature
Senate Committee on Agriculture and Rural Affairs
Interim Committee Hearing May 24, 2010 at 9 a.m.

Charge: Study the impact of windblown herbicides on grape growing and other agricultural production. Make recommendations for improving the safety and quality of Texas agricultural products

Testifier: Greg Bruni
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Member, Texas Wine and Grape Growers Association

Testimony:

Bio back ground

For the record, my name is Greg Bruni. Before I discuss the impact that herbicide use is having on the Texas Wine Producers, I would like to take a moment to familiarize you with my professional background.

From 1929-1975 my family owned and operated the San Martin Winery located in San Martin California. From a very early age I grew up in the wine business. In 1977 I received a Bachelor of Science degree from the University of California at Davis in Fermentation Science, with the specialization of Enology (winemaking).

The California years: 19-years from 1974 – 1993

I served in various capacities in the California wine industry, with 13 years as a head Winemaker and 2 years as an international wine consultant. During the California years my experience ranged from large to small wineries giving me a special insight into many aspects of the wine and grape business.

The San Martin Winery is my example of a large winery, where as head Winemaker I directed the annual processing of +9,000 tons of grapes from 2,200 acres of contracted vineyards to produce 615,000 cases of wine. On the opposite extreme was Byington Winery, a boutique winery in the Santa Cruz Mountains where as head winemaker we processed 200 tons of grapes to produce 14,000 cases of high end wine.

During these years I would have an opportunity to; build and operate 2 wineries in the Central Coast, renovate and operate two wineries in the north coast, one in the Russian River Valley of Sonoma County and one in Santa Clara County. I also acted as a Sparking Wine Supervisor at the Mirassou winery in 1980.

From 1989-1990

I would earn my living as a Consulting Winemaker. Based in California, my business took me to New Mexico, Baja California, Chile and Argentina.

On the Viticulture side; I was directly responsible for planting and managing 950 acres of wine grapes in San Luis Obispo County and 12 mountain acres in Santa Cruz County. I negotiated grape contracts that would cover production from thousands of acres of grapes touching nearly every California County that grew wine grapes.

I also served on various grape grower and winemaking committees and have been a professional wine judge for over 25 years.

The Texas Years: 17-years from 1993-2010

In November of 1993 my wife and I moved to Lubbock, Texas to take the position of Vice President Winemaker at Llano Estacado Winery. Llano Estacado Winery is the second largest winery in Texas. During my tenure here as Winemaker, Llano grew from 47,500 cases of production in 1995 to 190,000 cases in 2009.

To keep in step with sales demand our appetite at Llano for grapes has grown from 700-tons in 1995 to 2,795 tons in 2009.

Define the wine grape crises in Texas and its impact on Texas Wine Producers both large and small wineries: supply and demand economics

The clear message I am to deliver today on behalf Texas wineries large and small, is that there is a shortage of wine grape production in Texas. It is my argument that this shortage has been at crises level since 1998.

For a Texas winery to be successful it needs to establish a Texas identity i.e. produce quality Texas appellation wine and be competitive in the market place. This success can only come as a result of strong and viable Texas grape growing. We need a grower base producing a range of grapes at a range of different prices.

A conservative estimate today is that Texas needs between 16,000-20,000 tons of grapes to meet the sales demands of all its wineries. In 2008 Texas production hit 4,000 tons, far short of needs and a disappointment to the Texas economy. At 4,000 tons the value of the crop was estimated to be 4.8 MD. In comparison an 18,000 ton crop would be estimated at 21.6 MD.

In this example an equivalent of 16.8 MD is going towards the purchase of out of state products.

Discuss the impact that the improper use of 2,4-D and Phenoxy herbicides is having in Texas with correlation

This brings me to the point of my testimony today. Within the state of Texas the improper use of herbicides (particularly those of the 2,4-D family) continue to cause economic damage (which in many cases are severe) to broad leaf crops such as, peanuts, cotton, citrus and grapes. Grapes are extremely sensitive to 2,4-D damage and depending upon their stage of development will result in deformed leaves, crop loss, long term weakening of the vine and even vine death.

Our growers cannot sustain economic viability if the irresponsible use of restricted herbicides like 2,4-D is allowed to continue.

With the proper regulation and enforcement Phenoxy herbicides can live side by side with Vineyards in Texas

When used responsibly 2,4-D can be used in the proximity of grapes and other broadleaf plants. It is the improper use of these herbicides that requires your attention.

A quick example:

We have a small grape grower in Garza County that also farms 1,500 acres of sorghum and 1,800 acres of cotton.

His 8-acre vineyard is surrounded on 3 sides by the grain and his cotton is contiguous to the grain. Jack uses a generic formulation of Banvil that is "heavier" and does not drift as easily as other forms. I have been associated with his vineyard for 15 years and have never seen herbicide damage to his vines. He is precise and inflexible when it comes to the timing of herbicide use, atmospheric conditions, temperature, the stage of vine growth and others.

Jack relayed a story to me regarding a cotton grower in eastern Garza County near Slaton Texas. In 2009 +1,000 acres of cotton were devastated by the use of 2,4-D. In this instance the use of the 2,4-D came late in the season. The herbicide wind drifted into a non target area and while the entire crop was not lost the cotton was severely down graded in quality diminishing the value of the crop. Sadly due to insufficient records there was no way to pinpoint the responsible party.

Grape growers and wineries are asking for the continued leadership from the state

The state of Texas has implemented many programs to promote grape and wine sales; including the implementation of related academic programs, TDA programs to stimulate vineyard development and the creating a free market economy for wine sale within the state. These efforts have effected change, resulting in tremendous and an excellent future for the grape and wine industry.

Texas has an environment where grape growers interface with grain producers, cattle ranchers, peanut growers, citizens and others using 2,4-D among other herbicides.

The diversity of Texas Agriculture represents strength and is an important building block in the foundation of its economy.

The time is now to generate more precise and enforceable legislation to better regulate the use and application of 2,4-D and other herbicides.