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WineAmerica launches a member survey to rebuild ties with U.S. wineries

The trade group plans policy briefings, listening sessions and hemp issue updates to deepen member engagement.

Thursday, September 24, 2026



WineAmerica used its September newsletter to outline a broader effort to reconnect with wineries, expand member services and sharpen its advocacy work in Washington as the trade group responds to concerns from producers around the country.

In the message, sent Thursday by Michael Kaiser of WineAmerica, the association said its board of directors met on Sept. 16 and focused on how to strengthen the organization's role as a resource, advocate and national voice for U.S. wineries. The group said the discussion centered on listening more closely to wineries, keeping members informed about policy issues that affect their businesses and creating more ways for wineries to connect with the association and with one another.

Board Chair Dana Huber said in the newsletter that the organization wants members to play a larger role in shaping its next steps. Huber, who is vice president of distribution and public relations at Huber Winery and Starlight Distillery, said WineAmerica's strength comes from the wineries it represents and the perspectives they bring.

The message reflects a period of internal repositioning for the Washington-based association as it tries to show members what practical value it can provide at a time when wineries face pressure from shifting consumer demand, changing regulation, rising costs and a more complex alcohol market. WineAmerica described itself in the newsletter as the only national grassroots organization representing the American wine industry in Washington, D.C.

A large part of the group's new outreach effort is built around a recent member survey. WineAmerica said the survey is intended to help it understand how wineries want to connect with the association, what information and resources are most useful to their businesses and what they want more of from a national trade organization. The group said wineries that have not yet completed the survey still have time to do so.

According to the newsletter, members should expect several new or expanded forms of communication in the coming months. Those include updates from Washington on federal policy issues that affect wineries and their finances, regional spotlights on developments in wine areas across the country, harvest recaps with perspectives from member wineries, post-election analysis on what changes in Congress could mean for the industry and industry data meant to help members understand market trends and policy issues affecting American wine.

WineAmerica also said it plans to continue a series of “Listening Sessions,” which it described as another way for winery owners and staff to raise questions, discuss conditions in their businesses and bring industry concerns directly to the association. The sessions appear to be part of a larger attempt to create more regular contact with members beyond legislative alerts and annual meetings.

The newsletter put special emphasis on federal advocacy. WineAmerica said that although Congress is in recess, its work on policy issues affecting wineries is continuing. The association said it is monitoring a range of federal issues that could affect the competitiveness and profitability of American wineries, including what it called emerging issues.

One of those issues, the group said, is intoxicating hemp products and the changing federal regulatory framework around them. WineAmerica told members it plans to provide a closer look in the coming weeks at what is happening on that front, why it matters to wineries and how the group is responding in Washington. The newsletter did not provide a detailed policy brief, but its decision to spotlight hemp suggests the association sees the issue as a growing concern for alcohol producers as lawmakers and regulators grapple with products that can compete with beer, wine and spirits while operating under a different legal structure.

The organization is also using programming focused on marketing and business operations to deepen engagement with members. WineAmerica announced that its next Listening Session will be held on Nov. 10 at 1 p.m. Eastern and will focus on social media strategy for wineries. The session is expected to examine how wineries are using platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn at a time when digital marketing has become central to direct-to-consumer sales, brand building and tourism.

The association said four WineAmerica members will take part in that discussion: Jen Cossey, general manager of Brooks Wine in Oregon’s Willamette Valley; Garrison Kuhl, marketing director at Fox Run Vineyards in New York’s Finger Lakes; Ian Consoli, director of marketing at Tablas Creek Vineyard in California’s Paso Robles region; and Evan Falbaum, director of marketing at William Chris Vineyard in the Texas Hill Country. WineAmerica said the session will be free for members and open to a limited number of

guests on a first-response basis.

Beyond policy and webinars, the group is also promoting what it calls its Resource Hub. In the newsletter, WineAmerica said the online hub brings together information from federal agencies, industry organizations and sources covering sustainability, winery startup issues and other operational topics. The message framed the hub as a central place for wineries to find basic industry information and outside resources.

The newsletter also served as a direct membership appeal. WineAmerica said membership allows wineries to share information with peers in other regions and across other beverage alcohol categories, compare strategies on common business problems and come together around broader industry issues. It said the association can provide valuable information, answer questions, advocate on policy matters and help members find savings that affect their bottom line.

WineAmerica said membership starts at $500 a year or $42 a month. The organization’s mailing address, included in the newsletter, is 1380 Monroe Street NW, No. 742, Washington, D.C. 20010.