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Virginia Grants Waivers to 169 Wineries After Spring Frost Ravages Grape Crops

The temporary relief lets affected producers source more outside grapes after freezes damaged buds, killed vines, forced some growers to skip harvest.

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Grape growers across the United States moved deeper into harvest this month under sharply different conditions, with some regions reporting unusually early picking and others coping with crop losses from spring freezes and storm damage, according to the National Grape Research Alliance’s September industry update.

In California, the 2026 season began earlier than usual for several parts of the grape sector. The alliance said the state’s table grape harvest started April 28, about 2.5 weeks ahead of normal. California winegrape picking began June 30, which the group described as one of the earliest starts in memory, and raisin harvest also opened early in late July. In Washington State and the Lake Erie juice grape belt, harvest for Concord and Niagara varieties began in mid-September, roughly on schedule.

Conditions were harder in the East. As crush started for eastern growers this month, a nor’easter hit the East Coast, adding pressure to a crop already reduced by severe spring weather. The alliance said a deadly frost earlier this year damaged buds and killed whole vines from Ohio to Virginia, forcing some growers to sit out this harvest.

In Virginia, state regulators responded with temporary relief for affected producers. The Virginia Alcoholic Beverage Control Authority granted automatic waivers to 169 wineries and vineyards that suffered severe crop losses from spring frost and freeze events. The waivers allow those producers to source a higher share of grapes from vineyards they do not own or lease so they can continue making wine this year. The Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services submitted the joint exemption request on behalf of growers and wineries.

The monthly update also highlighted a federal effort to change how agricultural data is collected and used. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke Rollins this month announced the USDA Data Modernization Plan, which is intended to improve the timeliness, accuracy and usefulness of the department’s farm data. USDA said the information supports crop and livestock estimates, disaster aid, risk-management tools and business decisions made by producers, researchers and policymakers.

Under the plan, USDA said it will try to reduce the reporting burden on farmers by expanding the use of administrative data, improving mobile access to surveys and increasing the use of prefilled information. The department also plans a pilot program

to test satellite imagery, geospatial tools, crop models and other technologies alongside producer-reported information to improve acreage and yield estimates. USDA said it will modernize technology systems, expand secure data-sharing and evaluate artificial intelligence and machine learning tools, while also emphasizing privacy protections and clearer explanations to producers about why data is being requested.

For grape growers, disease management remained another major focus. In a research article featured by the alliance, scientists with the University of Utah and the FRAME Networks team described how airborne spores from pathogens such as powdery mildew, downy mildew, black rot, botrytis and phomopsis move through vineyards. The researchers said the process is shaped by plant and pathogen biology, vineyard topography and microclimate, and by four main stages: liberation, escape, dispersion and deposition.

The researchers said spores first have to break through the thin layer of slow-moving air around a leaf, known as the leaf boundary layer. That can happen when leaves flutter or when turbulent air enters the canopy. Some spores are mainly released by wind, while others are helped by rain or mechanical disturbance, including tractor passes.

Once a spore leaves the leaf, its next challenge is escaping the canopy. The researchers said dense vine growth lowers wind speeds inside the canopy and weakens turbulence, which can trap spores near the original vine or move them only short distances along a row. Eddies that form between rows also affect where spores travel. According to the article, spores released from the middle or upper canopy are more likely to reach the air above the vines and travel farther, while spores from the trunk or lower canopy are often pushed downward toward the ground.

Spore size and shape also matter. The researchers said a 1-micron particle in still air can remain aloft for about 10 hours, while a 20-micron particle may settle within one or two minutes. Many plant pathogen spores are larger than 20 microns, making the first minutes after release critical for determining how far they move. Non-spherical spores can generate lift and drag that help keep them in the air longer.

Once above the canopy, spores move downwind in what researchers described as a wedge-shaped plume. Its width and direction depend on wind, terrain, row orientation, canopy density and nearby obstacles such as buildings, trees and windbreaks. As that plume passes through a vineyard, vines filter spores out of the air through deposition. Denser canopies lead to more deposition, which reduces the number of spores that continue moving and shortens the distance they can travel.

The practical value of that work is in vineyard management. Researchers said most spores released from a leaf are likely to travel only three to five rows before settling, meaning spores caught in traps are usually coming from nearby vines. That can help growers decide where to place traps, how to interpret trap counts and where disease pressure may move next.

California also saw several policy and funding actions tied to the grape and wine sector this month. Gov. Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 1991, a measure sponsored by Wine Institute and authored by Assembly Majority Leader Cecilia Aguiar-Curry, a Democrat from Winters. The new law allows licensed wineries and other alcoholic beverage producers in the state to conduct sensory research under defined safeguards, including a requirement that participants be at least 21 and restrictions intended to keep tastings limited to legitimate market research.

At the same time, the Consolidated Central Valley Table Grape Pest and Disease Control District committed up to $1.7 million to support California Department of Food and Agriculture work on Pierce’s Disease and the glassy-winged sharpshooter after a funding shortfall of about $1.7 million emerged in the current program. The district said the spending came from reactionary funds generated through the California table grape industry and was consistent with its authority to help control or prevent pests and diseases that threaten table grapes.

Industry groups also pointed to broader changes affecting grape production and farm management. A new crop robotics survey by consultancy The Mixing Bowl found that more than 400 companies now make up the 2026 crop robotics landscape, an increase of 25% from 2024, with more than one-third identified as new entrants. The report said solutions aimed at permanent crops such as grapes are growing, along with tools for

spraying and weeding and rising use of UV light treatment.

Other research highlighted by the alliance reflected pressures on labor, pests and product development. USDA’s Economic Research Service reported that labor made up about 15% of total cash expenses across all U.S. farms in 2024, but specialty crop farms such as vineyards had the highest labor share, with labor accounting for roughly 40% of cash expenses. By comparison, labor represented 4% of cash expenses on corn farms and 6% on farms focused on other commodity crops.

On pests, the alliance noted that spotted lanternfly sightings have now been confirmed in 21 states and Washington, D.C., according to Cornell Integrated Pest Management mapping cited in an AccuWeather report. In plant breeding and disease detection, it pointed to Cornell-led work on a hyperspectral imaging platform called HyperBird that researchers say can detect grape diseases before visible symptoms appear, potentially speeding breeding work and improving crop management decisions in vineyards.

The alliance’s update also listed a series of grant opportunities and upcoming industry meetings, including FIRA USA in Yakima, Washington, next month, the Sustainable Ag Expo in San Luis Obispo in November and the Unified Wine & Grape Symposium in Sacramento in January.